

‘A Strong Explosion in the Sky’
Stevie Smith, Reputation and Re-evaluation: A Creative Critical
Thesis
and
Fairoz
(A poetry sequence)

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Abstract

This thesis argues that Stevie Smith (1902–1971) was undervalued in her lifetime and beyond as an unconventional woman poet writing in a very male-dominated poetry world and this has adversely affected her current reputation. I show her to be a poet of stature who made a unique contribution to English poetry, opening it up in risk-taking, anarchic and subtle ways. She is a poet of contemporary relevance, with the complexity of Elizabeth Bishop and Sylvia Plath, her post-war contemporaries, in comparison with whom, despite increased scholarly interest, she is still under-recognised. Although her touch is often playful, her poetry is ultimately probing and serious. I address a biographical shortfall and show how childhood events, clinically defined as *traumatic*, contribute to an understanding of Smith and her poetry. Countering a reductive emphasis on her eccentricity, I consider aspects of her adult life and reveal the woman behind the myth. Via a study of her neglected work as a prolific book reviewer and its importance to her poetry, I underline her intellectual life. I assess her mixed literary reception in her lifetime and beyond, discussing both her critical reception and the anthologising of a large number of her poems in a wide range of anthologies. By charting the development of her poetry, I demonstrate that Smith was a rigorous artist, able to evaluate her own work.

The creative aspect of my thesis, a sequence of poems *Fairoz*, is a portrayal of human vulnerability involving a teenage girl susceptible to extremism: atrocities committed in religion's name. I drew inspiration from Smith's poetry, in theme and approach, prompted particularly by her blend of fairy tale, religion and morality in her poem 'Angel Boley'. In writing *Fairoz*, I aimed to keep a dark terrain buoyant through tonal changes, wry humour and a collaging narrative.

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Note

I have used the MHRA referencing system.

The numbering of the poetry sequence *Fairoz* starts at page 1, as in the original manuscript. *Fairoz* was published by Bloodaxe Books on 24 March 2022.

The 'Notes' placed after *Fairoz* are in the same format as within the published book and do not follow the MHRA referencing system.

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‘A Strong Explosion in the Sky’: Stevie Smith, Reputation and Re-evaluation

‘Poetry is like a strong explosion in the sky.’

Stevie Smith, ‘My Muse’¹

Introduction

I Stevie Smith, a poet in need of re-introduction

Stevie Smith (1902–1971), a poet of enchantment and disenchantment, risk and complexity, opened out English poetry in anarchic ways, and with an original relationship to the poetry of the historical canon, and to modernism. As an unconventional woman poet writing in an extremely male poetry world, praise for her poetry was often mixed with condescension in her lifetime, and she lacked the wholehearted advocacy of influential men poets. As an outcome, her poetry has been under-recognised in comparison with that of Elizabeth Bishop and Sylvia Plath, for example, her post-war contemporaries. The guarded, at times hostile, reception of her work has influenced her current status, despite the frequent anthologising in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries of a wide range of her poems in a very diverse selection of anthologies and the increased scholarly interest in her work. She has, as I shall show, been adversely affected in significant ways by ‘the patriarchal nature of the canon and the relative exclusion of women from literary history’.² Thus in advocating for the richness and complexity of her poetry, and affirming her as a poet of stature and one of contemporary relevance, I shall emphasise the changing status of women poets in the twentieth and early twenty-first century British poetry landscape and show how such a significant talent has been, and continues to be, comparatively overlooked.

In 1994, *Poetry Review* asked the ‘New Generation’ poets (twelve men and eight women, including myself) to each name three books influential to their poetry.³ Most of the books cited were by men. Poetry by women was limited to a handful of names including Stevie

¹ Stevie Smith [Smith], ‘My Muse’, repr. in *Me Again: The Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith* [*Me Again*], ed. by Jack Barbera and William McBrien (London: Virago, 1981) pp. 125–26. First published in *X: A Quarterly Review*, March 1960.

² Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore, ‘Preface’ to *The Feminist Reader* ed. by Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1997), pp. ix–x (p. ix).

³ *Poetry Review: New Generation Poets*, ed. by Peter Forbes, 84.1 (1994).

Smith (cited solely by me).⁴ Bishop was the only woman cited more than once. More recently, in 2018, the Poetry Book Society launched its ‘social media campaign to find the world’s favourite 100 women poets’.⁵ Smith did not appear on this list at all, while Bishop and Plath both featured in the top ten. Judging by this non-appearance, Smith is in danger of being forgotten. My thesis argues that Smith’s poetry warrants the kind of prestige and sustained critical attention that has been reserved for the two Americans.

I first encountered Smith’s poetry in the Penguin Modern Poets series as a teenager in 1970. The selection of her poems opened with the ballad ‘Fafnir and the Knights’, and I was drawn in by how the poem began with the enticing familiarity of legend, a sense of a safely distant past that was to be dramatically undercut. The softness, quiet and happiness of the dragon’s days slipped into foreboding and then there was the immediacy of a timeless human cruelty. Smith was both bluntly realistic and mournful:

Fafnir, I shall say then,
Thou art better dead
For the knights have burnt thy grass
And thou couldst not have fed.⁶

That Smith addressed the dragon directly, contributed to the poem’s piercing quality as did the biblical ‘thou art’ and the portrayal of Fafnir as having a soul, as a ‘Being’ with ‘a lofty spirit’. With ‘Fafnir and the Knights’ and several other poems in the group, Stevie Smith had made an indelible impression. Each poem created its own world, but the tones and undertones were distinctly that of the one poet. She was humane, as well as uncompromising.

Linguistically, and in mood, the ground was never stable under your feet.

There are many reasons why we should value Smith in the twenty-first century. These include her transforming of personal material through *dramatis personae*; her use of dialogue and monologue; her playfulness with dark themes; her probing thinking and her combative energy; her rewriting of classic texts, hymns and fairy tales; her mercurial changes of tone and irregular rhythms and rhymes; her ability to be at once idiosyncratic and of broad human

⁴ Moniza Alvi [MA], in *Poetry Review: New Generation Poets*, pp. 87-88, (p. 87).

⁵ Poetry Book Society: ‘PBS’ 100 Women Poets to Read Now’ (2018), https://www.poetrybooks.co.uk/blogs/news/pbs-official-a-to-z-of-100-women-poets-to-read-now?_pos=1&_sid=b2ef5acbf&_ss=r [accessed 11 October 2021]

⁶ Smith, ‘Fafnir and the Knights’, *Penguin Modern Poets 8: Edwin Brock, Geoffrey Hill, Stevie Smith*, 3rd edn, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), pp. 85-6. Poem repr. with the addition of a drawing in *The Collected Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith [Collected Poems]*, ed. by Will May (London: Faber and Faber, 2015), pp. 371-72.

relevance; and her ‘talking back’ to canonical male poets, rather in the sense that writers from a Black and Asian background, including myself, are said to ‘talk back’ to the Empire. Many of her themes have enduring relevance, such as personal and universal suffering, religious ambivalence and the difficulties of human relationships. Smith’s universality can be understood as her ability to capture what it means to be human. She was, as I shall show, to an extent on the margin, psychically, artistically and socially. This sense of alienation, of not being part of the group, and of vulnerability that she expressed through her poetry is, paradoxically, an aspect of being human that resonates with her readers. Portraying such feelings of estrangement, of being ‘other’, is an important part of poetry’s work, as pinpointed by Jed Rasula in his discussion ‘Gendering the Muse’ (see page 19 below): he calls it speaking “‘otherwise” (alieniloquium)’.⁷ The range and quality of Smith’s poetry, across a large output, is striking. I shall present her, in my study, as an integrated artist, giving attention to the drawings that accompanied her poems, which were often dismissed by earlier commentators on her work. I shall also consider the later popular performances of her poetry, which may well have created envy amongst other poets, contributing to her devaluation, as well as to her acclaim.

Smith’s poetry is now taken seriously by scholars. Numerous valuable articles and chapters have been published, as well as four books on Smith by Civello (1997),⁸ Severin (1997),⁹ Huk (2005),¹⁰ and May (2010).¹¹ Noreen Masud’s book *Hard Language: Stevie Smith and the Aphorism* is forthcoming in 2022.¹² Providing essential background to this critical work is Frances Spalding’s scholarly and widely encompassing *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography* (1988) which I’ll introduce in Chapter One of my study, and on which I’ll build.¹³

Catherine A. Civello, in her book *Patterns of Ambivalence* (1997), focuses on Smith’s conflicting desires towards, for example, romantic love, marriage and religion, as well as her

⁷ Jed Rasula, ‘Gendering the Muse’, in *Modernism and Poetic Inspiration* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), p.140.

⁸ Catherine A. Civello, *Patterns of Ambivalence: The Poetry and Fiction of Stevie Smith* (South Carolina: Camden House, 1997).

⁹ Laura Severin, *Stevie Smith’s Resistant Antics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997).

¹⁰ Romana Huk, *Stevie Smith: Between the Lines* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).

¹¹ William May, *Stevie Smith and Authorship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

¹² Noreen Masud, *Hard Language: Stevie Smith and the Aphorism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

¹³ Frances Spalding, *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988).

joy in life as opposed to a preoccupation with the release of death. For Civello, Smith's ambivalence reflects the turmoil and sense of alienation experienced by women in the 1930s, the post-war years and beyond. Her analysis of the poems, however, can tend towards the reductively schematic. She is more clearly illuminating of Smith's ambivalence as shown in her novels, analysis of which is informed by both Lacanian and feminist psychoanalytic literary theory.

Laura Severin's study *Stevie Smith's Resistant Antics* (1997) is informed by Bakhtinian concepts of cultural centralisation and decentralisation. Her analysis of Smith's early book reviewing, particularly for the magazine *Modern Woman*, has been especially useful to my thesis. Severin shows how Smith is concerned to resist society's repressive norms, such as the prevailing domestic ideology of the post-war period which curtailed women's freedoms. She emphasises Smith's secretarial work for Newnes, the publisher of women's magazines which promoted rigid gender roles, and, in doing so, she shows how this familiarity, along with her friendships with women editors and novelists, influenced Smith. Offering a historical and cultural reading of her work, Severin highlights how Smith combats, via such strategies as parody, the carnivalesque and the mixing of 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' forms of art, societal limitation of women's liberty and a sense of literary hierarchy which mitigated against women.

In her deconstructionist study *Stevie Smith: Between the Lines* (2005), Romana Huk both builds on Severin's work and gives a different emphasis. She demonstrates how Smith cannot always successfully resist incorporation into predominant ideologies and reveals how Smith is a product, as well as a producer, or creator, of her times. Huk asserts that Smith engages in the exposition of hidden ideologies struggling for dominance through language and with her own subjection to their influences, despite her many strategies of resistance including the panoply of voices, which are, simultaneously, her own and not her own. With breadth and depth of vision, Huk demonstrates how her reading 'between the lines' of Smith's poetry is achieved through a consideration of its wartime and post-war background, along with close study of the various literary genres Smith has produced.

William May's contribution to contemporary Smith studies has been immense. In addition to his study *Stevie Smith and Authorship* (2010) he has written numerous chapters and articles and edited the indispensable aid to Smith scholarship *The Collected Poems and Drawings of*

Stevie Smith (2015). In his monograph, May draws on his rich archival work, as well as on reader-response theory, to show how Smith shrewdly constructs aspects of her own identity, offering them to her readers. In doing so, she still, however, allows for a fluidity of interpretation. Her strategies include her curating of the drawings which accompany many of her poems, the inclusion of her poetry within her own novels, articles and literary reviews, her writing of book jacket notes and her performing and introducing of her poems. At the same time as exerting control, Smith also invites the reader to take an active part in engaging with her work. She is inside as well as outside the poems in which the written text, the visual component and the spoken, or sung, poem, overlap. My study builds on May's in the attention I give to the fine line Smith draws between influencing her readers and listeners and allowing them to actively make up their own minds. Where my reading of Smith differs most strongly from May's is in his view, expressed in the opening line of his first chapter: 'Reading Smith's poetry is often an exercise in bafflement.'¹⁴ I present Smith as a poet who, in her best work, speaks lucidly and directly to readers, as well as suggestively and playfully. I'll show how clarity was an attribute of her poetry that Smith valued highly and worked towards.

This wave of academic scholarship on Smith culminated in a landmark conference held at Jesus College, Oxford, in 2016. It followed the publication of *The Collected Poems* edited by May in the previous year, and was instigated and co-organised by Noreen Masud.¹⁵ I am not, therefore, rescuing Smith from academic neglect. My contention is, however, that this scholarly work and esteem of Smith has not sufficiently infiltrated the poetry world and the general poetry readership. Thus my critical intervention focuses on the complex area of Smith's reputation, and I aim to convince the poetry world of Smith's unique stature, power and resonance and her poetic principles and skills. While Smith, a recipient of the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 1969, remains a famous name, she is celebrated mainly for a single poem 'Not Waving but Drowning', and, beyond this, perhaps, for a small group of poems, rather than for the body of her work. I shall give a poet's re-evaluation of her poetry, significant in the light of the gap between the academic reappraisal of her poems and her status in the poetry world. In doing so, I shall assess her reputation in her lifetime and beyond, and present her as a poet of the stature of Bishop, Plath – and, indeed, Larkin. When

¹⁴ May, *Stevie Smith and Authorship*, p. 21.

¹⁵ 'We All Have These Thoughts Sometimes': A Conference on the work of Stevie Smith (1902-1971), Jesus College, Oxford, 11 March 2016. <https://steviesmithconference.wordpress.com/about/> [accessed 11 November 2022]

considering why Smith has been comparatively overlooked, I shall show how a general, sexist emphasis on Smith's 'eccentricity' and 'whimsicality' has been compounded by insufficient biographical appreciation of significant events in her early life. These events contributed to the emotional resonance of her poetry and necessitated Smith's lively and transformative approach in which the adult and the child self are simultaneously contained. I shall emphasise the under-estimated power of her poems, and highlight the undervaluing of Smith as a critical thinker.

The publication in 2015 of *The Collected Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith* makes my revisionist work timely.¹⁶ This volume collects all the poems and illustrations from Smith's original books, as well as forty-nine previously unpublished poems, bringing to attention previously unknown or little-known poems, some surprising in their force, such as 'To Carry the Child', which sheds light on the anarchic in her poetry.¹⁷ I shall discuss the mixed reception of this landmark volume, a reception that echoes the mixed recognition that Smith received in her lifetime and afterwards. This period in the early twenty-first century when notions of what is admirable in poetry are broader based, and diversity is welcomed, is a fitting time to re-introduce the unconventional Smith. As poet George Szirtes observed of contemporary British poetry in 2012: 'the older, more exclusive notions of what is good are more difficult to apply'.¹⁸ This observation has become increasingly applicable.

II Stevie Smith's powerful Muse

Stevie Smith's own illuminating and corrective view of her work in her article 'My Muse' (1960) is at variance with any perception of her poetry as lightweight.¹⁹ Through a portrayal of her female muse in the fiercest of terms, she underlines her work's serious core. The muse as a trope for poetic inspiration originates with the nine ancient Greek goddesses born of

¹⁶ May, ed., *Collected Poems*.

¹⁷ 'To Carry the Child', *Collected Poems*, p. 505.

¹⁸ George Szirtes, 'Editorial', *Poetry Review*, 102:2 (2012), p. 1.

¹⁹ Smith, 'My Muse', pp.125-26. The drawing that accompanies 'My Muse' in *Me Again* has been added by editors Barbera and McBrien. It does not accompany the original publication of the article in *X: A Quarterly Review*, March, 1.2 (1960), pp. 156-57. I have not, therefore, included it in my analysis here. The drawings seem to have been added at the discretion of the editors who write of Smith's drawings included in the volume: 'we believe none of them has been published before', 'Acknowledgements and Biographical Note' to *Me Again*, p. xvi. This constitutes a misrepresentation of Smith and indicates the tendency to view her as whimsical.

Mnemosyne, the personification of memory, part of whose work was to sing of the past.²⁰ Fittingly, the Muses were associated with wells and springs.²¹ The goddess Calliope was particularly associated with poetry. The idea of the muse has extended, as a trope, through the history of Western art and literature, with references to this source of inspiration traditionally involving a male poet and a female muse. Stevie Smith, a woman poet in the very male poetry world of her lifetime, was unusual, as a woman poet, in drawing on female power for her Muse. In doing so, she was to become an important forerunner of twentieth-century women poets such as the Americans Adrienne Rich and Sylvia Plath, who were also to draw on female muses or muse-like figures.

Like Smith's poetry, her portrayal of her Muse in prose makes, in itself, 'a strong communication', mirroring aspects of her poetic style and its original relationship to modernism. The surface of the writing is lucid, and may appear simple, but the underlying ideas are complex. There are the lightning shifts in tone, creating the instability of voice that appears to be narrating a fairy tale then suddenly refers to nuclear war. This myth-telling voice is impersonal, with the idiosyncrasy of the poet showing through, and, typical of Smith, a range of learning worn lightly. She writes of her Muse: 'she refuses to be neat'. Smith's poetry, influenced in part by the modernist prose and poetry she read, rejects neatness; it abounds in irregularities of rhyme and rhythm, of stanza form and line-length, of voice and tone, playing rebelliously with literary expectations.

For the opening of 'My Muse', Smith evokes 'the painting of the Court Poet and His Muse in the National Gallery'. The painting she alludes to here is almost certainly by the Ferrarese painter Dosso Dossi: 'A Man embracing a Woman' (1524-26).²²

²⁰ Gayle A. Levy, "Muse" In *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. by Roland Green and others, 4th edn (Princeton University Press, 2012). *Credo Reference*, <<https://search-credoreference-com.uea.idm.oclc.org/content/entry/prpoetry/muse/0?institutionId=1278>> [accessed 28 May 2019].

²¹ Philip Matyszak, *The Greek and Roman Myths: A Guide to the Classical Stories* (London: Thames and Hudson), p. 117.

²² The painting is catalogued as 'A Man embracing a Woman' 1524–26 by Dosso Dossi. Oil on poplar. 55.1 cm x 75.5 cm. National Gallery London, UK. Inventory Number NG1234 <<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/dosso-dossi-a-man-embracing-a-woman>>[accessed 11 October 2021].



Figure 1 'Man embracing a Woman', 1524–26, Dosso Dossi.

Here a female goddess-like figure is communicating urgently into the ear of a man who appears impervious, or indifferent. In Smith's imaginative interpretation of the situation, the man is not so much indifferent as fearful of his 'howling' and 'nagging' Muse. He knows there is somebody to whom he must listen and he fears her power. Smith's article begins and ends with the importance of listening – of listening to the Muse's 'strong communication'. This, she suggests, is the main task of the poet. The ability to listen to her Muse, Smith reveals, depends on her mood: '*I only listen when I am unhappy*'.²³ This unhappiness is likely to be, in part, a residue of the childhood trauma that fuelled her poetry, contributing to its underlying sadness (as I shall show in Chapter One). Suddenly, in a lightning mid-paragraph shift, Smith portrays her female Muse in the most serious and fiercest of terms. While she describes the poet as 'weak', her Muse is the opposite:

She makes a strong communication. She makes a mushroom shape of terror
and drops to the ground with a strong infection. Also she is a strong way out.
The human creature is alone in its carapace. Poetry is a strong way out. The

²³ 'My Muse', p. 125 (the original is italicised). In an earlier piece 'Too Tired for Words' (1956), in *Me Again*, ed. by Barbera and McBrien, pp. 111–18 (p. 111), Smith describes how 'the Muse complains endlessly' at the poet's tiredness and despondency, but can overcome it: 'One forces oneself, one gets a bit feverish (and much more tired) and eventually, out of the strain and exasperation, the words come headlong. A bit oddly too sometimes. Why the scene shifts wonderfully in the light of the words that are, by reason of their tiredness, just a bit off-beam.'

passage out that she blasts is often in splinters, covered with blood; but she can come out softly.

The atomic bombs that were dropped during Smith's lifetime made these mushroom shapes in the sky. Thus, this extract conveys the violence and urgency of her Muse's communication, while emphasising the isolating human condition to which poetry, as an act of communication, has the power to respond. This poetry is created 'at a cost', 'the passage out' is a bloodied one, even if the poetry can appear with a deceptive softness. The strength of feeling behind, and the expression of, this war-like claim for her poetry should dispel the notion that Stevie Smith's poetry is *light*.

Smith's Muse is many-sided like her poetry. In one of her manifestations, Smith likens her to the Greek god Hermes (fittingly for Smith's mercurial poetry, his Roman counterpart is Mercury), the watchful, agile, clever messenger, or herald of the gods. In *The Odyssey*, for instance, Hermes gave particular help to Odysseus on his long, treacherous return voyage to Ithaca.²⁴ Hermes, too, is many-sided; Smith calls her Muse 'light-fingered', allied to one of Hermes' roles as the patron of thieves. This may be a reference to Smith's frequent 'borrowing' from, or 'talking back to' canonical poets, as well as to her sometimes stealing from the lives of friends for material for her writing. It also hints at her poetic deftness of touch. Hermes is preoccupied with borders and one of his roles was that of conducting the dead to Hades. In her poem 'The Ambassador', quoted in full in 'My Muse', Hermes rides a dangerous horse 'through hell looking two ways'. Likewise, many of Smith's poems are poised on a metaphysical and emotional border between life, liveliness and the lure of death. Her boldness and belligerence as a poet are again apparent; amongst the implements Hermes has stolen in her poem are both trident and sword.

Smith also likens her powerful female Muse to the goddess Thetis. Thetis was mighty enough to influence the war and its outcome in *The Iliad* when she pleaded to Jove on behalf of her son, Achilles.²⁵ Smith in 'My Muse' alludes to how, in an assertive, although ultimately unsuccessful, attempt to resist Peleus, her suitor, she was resourceful enough to turn herself into 'first a fire, then a serpent, then a suffocating stench'.²⁶ In this way Smith alludes to the transformative power of her poetry. Peleus annihilated this fantastic power when he 'put sand

²⁴ Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. by Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 2006), Books 5 and 10.

²⁵ Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. by Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1991), Book 1.

²⁶ 'My Muse', p. 126.

on his hands and wrapped his body in sodden sacking', held Thetis, and eventually married her. Smith relates: 'an unhappy marriage it was'. The story of Peleus and Thetis, as told by Smith, indicates the poet's necessary pliancy or 'weakness' in relation to the art of poetry, and the loss if the poet tries to control the Muse.

As well as classical mythology, Smith's poetry (and her Muse as its embodiment) is informed by the Christian mythology of the religious upbringing of her childhood. One of the significant appellations of her Muse is an Angel. Stevie Smith's Muse-as-Angel is an evocation of strength. In claiming 'It is not poetry but the poet who has a feminine ending', Smith differentiates here between the strength of her female Muse and the ironically gendered 'a feminine ending', an unstressed syllable at the end of a word.²⁷ In doing so, she plays on the male-dominated language of literary criticism. Smith, with her preoccupation with the end of life, also implies, as a dark joke, that the Muse's poetry has a chance of enduring, while the poet's life will have an 'ending' in death. Dynamic angel-figures recur in Smith's work. Her poem 'Angel Boley', for example, which my study will consider in depth, features an avenging angel who attempts to counteract evil by means of an act of murder: "'She did evil that good / Might come'".²⁸ Christian cosmology and morality are also to the fore in 'My Muse' in Stevie Smith's bold statement: 'All the poems Poetry writes may be called, "Heaven, a Detail", or "Hell, a Detail". (She only writes about heaven and hell.)' Smith's acute visual sense is apparent here in her allusion to painting and its 'detail', a visual sense allied to the piercing, emblematic quality of her poetry. The capitalised 'Heaven' and 'Hell' suggest that Smith is ironically aware of the tendency of art and poetry to project and describe personal feelings in mythological terms, as in Blake's poetry, for example, where 'Heaven' and 'Hell' denote actual places. Her switch to the lower case 'heaven and hell' seems to suggest that her Muse is concerned only with the strength of human feeling, and human morality. *Heavenly* is frequently the term Smith associates with enchantment in her poems, an enchantment that jostles with disenchantment and a sense of ultimate release through death. In her introduction to her reading of the 'The Frog Prince', for instance, Smith mentions the idea of 'death as a friend' in connection with 'a feeling of hope in death'.²⁹ This is the feeling that the frog, in her nimble, complex, paradoxical poem, describes as 'heavenly'. Ironically, for Smith's frog prince such happiness can only be achieved through

²⁷ 'My Muse', p. 126.

²⁸ 'Angel Boley', *Collected Poems* (2015), pp. 610-15.

²⁹ 'The Frog Prince' by Stevie Smith', < <https://www.poetryarchive.org/poem/frog-prince> > [accessed 11 October 2021].

the longingly awaited disenchantment, the release from the spell, a release that will signal his mortality: 'Only disenchanted people / Can be heavenly'.³⁰ This concept demonstrates the intellectual strength and subtlety that Smith's poetry often achieves. Her words here are reminiscent of Donne's metaphysical combining of the earthly and the divine.

Memorably, Smith states of her uncompromising Muse: 'Poetry is very strong and never has any kindness at all.'³¹ This perception can be connected to the fierceness of her satire, the unsparing eye and ear she casts on the cruelties of life around her, her complete lack of sentimentality. It could be said that this ruthlessness is a part of the subjectivity that Smith was able to embrace as a poet. Mary deShazer, in her comprehensive study *Inspiring Women: Reimagining the Muse* (1986), comments of the woman poet and the muse concept:

Although the struggle for poetic affirmation is difficult for any poet, it is intensified for the woman, since this tradition of the objectified muse has made it hard for her to transcend her Otherness and thus obtain the subjectivity crucial to a strong poetic stance.³²

Smith *embraced* 'Otherness' and its power, a power Jed Rasula evokes in 'Gendering the Muse':

To be expedient with ecstasy has long been a primary labor of poetry – to incorporate the strange and the other into its procedures; to speak "otherwise" (alieniloquium) to be visited by Muses, those agents of otherness.³³

Rooted, for example, in the English poetic tradition of eighteenth-century satire, and in Blake's visionary poetry, Smith was able to turn her reading to her advantage, talking back to canonical male poets and forging her own subjectivity. Exploring nineteenth-century women poets Emily Dickinson, Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning and their muses, Joanne Feit Diehl describes the tensions and ambivalence inevitably produced by patriarchal male muse-figures.³⁴ Rather than calling upon the Muse as 'other', Smith *becomes* 'the other'; she is, in a sense, at one with her female Muse. Thus, she becomes part of her own

³⁰ 'The Frog Prince', *Collected Poems*, pp. 471-73.

³¹ 'My Muse', p. 126.

³² Mary. K. DeShazer, *Inspiring Women: Reimagining the Muse* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1986), pp. 2-3.

³³ Jed Rasula, pp. 140-57, (p. 140).

³⁴ Joanne Feit Diehl, "'Come Slowly: Eden": An Exploration of Women Poets and Their Muse,' *Signs*, 3.3 (1978), 572-87.

myth. Robert Graves's *The White Goddess* (1948), an exploration of the Muse and the source of poetic power in ancient myth that predates *The Odyssey* and the Bible, conjures a Muse that began in a matriarchal age. The invocation of Graves' Moon-goddess excites 'mixed exaltation and horror'.³⁵ He emphasises '*the strong pulling of her bladed mind*'.³⁶ Graves, however, always genders the poet as male. Smith, in her poetry, seeks to be at one with such fearsome female aspects, her Muse a partial mirror-self.

At the end of the article, Smith repeats: 'All the poet has to do is to listen.' Thus, the power of her Muse is celebrated even though Smith has indicated that listening to her is not always possible. She follows this assertion with an arresting, if casually expressed, claim: 'The poet is not an important fellow. There will always be another poet.' This final declaration is an example of Smith's shrewd thinking, important to her poems, which foster no illusions. She has the prescience to place herself in a historical line of poets from which her 'light-fingered' Muse has fruitfully 'stolen' and to whom she 'talks back' in poetry firmly her own, thus evoking, in Eliot's phrase, 'the present moment of the past'.³⁷

I shall indicate, in my study, what fuelled Stevie Smith's forceful Muse to include adverse aspects of her infancy and childhood, ignited by the circumstances of the two cataclysmic World Wars through which she lived, first as a child, and then as an adult. I am concerned, as well as with the more conscious aspects of her work and what nourished it, with the light the unconscious can shed on her poems and their emotional life, the fierceness that co-exists with the humanity and sad undertone of her poetry.

III Chapter outline

Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, in Chapter One I shall shed light on some important aspects of biography, particularly the traumatic childhood events that would have had an impact on Stevie Smith's inner life and her poetry. I shall also consider the probable impact of her childhood on her later years. My focus in Chapter Two will be on Smith's very prolific work throughout much of her adult life as a book reviewer, a role important to her thinking and to her poetry, and often overlooked to her detriment by commentators, in favour of her

³⁵ Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), p. 14.

³⁶ Graves, p. 343. The original is italicised.

³⁷ T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and Individual Talent' in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1960), pp. 47-59 (p. 59).

work as a secretary. In Chapter Three I shall consider Smith's uneven critical reputation in her lifetime, in the later twentieth century and in the early part of the twenty-first. I shall explore, in Chapter Four, another highly significant and revealing aspect of the reception of her poetry – the nature and extent of twentieth and twenty-first century anthologising of a range of her poems. The judgement that has sometimes been made, that Smith did not develop as a poet, diminishes her as an ambitious artist dedicated to her art, and in Chapter Four I shall investigate her early pre-publication poetry writing, then identify her development through three distinct (though not discrete) stages of her published poetry.

In Chapter Five I shall focus on my own poetry sequence *Fairoz*, for which Smith's poetry was a valuable source of inspiration, her highlighting of cruelty as an aspect of religion, for instance, and her light touch with dark themes. My sequence, which features a teenage girl called Fairoz and her vulnerability to extremism, was initially suggested to me by Smith's preoccupation with the cruelty inflicted in religion's name, and I drew on Islam and Christianity in my own background. I was particularly inspired by Smith's posthumously published poem 'Angel Boley', in which she writes in response to dark material in the public domain, situating her poem potently at the point where fairy tale, religion and morality converge.³⁸ I also drew more generally on some of Smith's techniques such as her tonal changes and her use of dialogue. Thus I shall show how Stevie Smith has been an example and an enabler for me and, it is hoped, may continue to be such for other poets. I shall finish by drawing some overall concluding thoughts about the re-introduction of Stevie Smith at this point in the twenty-first century, and how my current work on Smith might be advanced.

³⁸ 'Angel Boley', *Collected Poems*, pp. 610-15.

Chapter One

Stevie Smith: Questions of Biography

An effect of the frequent devaluing of Smith in the male-dominated poetry climate of her lifetime, and, to an extent, today, has been the distracting emphasis on her ‘oddness’ or ‘eccentricity’, which caricatures her, distracting from the essential humanity and seriousness of her poetry. My contention is that there were four distressing events in Smith’s early life, clinically defined as traumatic, which would have contributed to the shaping of her work, feeding her powerful Muse and shedding light on her inner world and the sadness at the core of her poetry. These events, which have been given insufficient biographical weight are: her birth and its aftermath (critically ill, Smith almost died as a baby); her parents’ separation when she was three; the three years from the age of five in which Stevie Smith was almost continuously incarcerated in a sanatorium; and her mother’s ill health and eventual death when Smith was sixteen. Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, I shall shed light on the probable impact of these traumatic happenings on the poet, and consider how the biographical accounts of her life have been, in this important respect, superficial. In Part I of the chapter I shall focus on Stevie Smith’s childhood, particularly these difficult aspects that are in need of biographical emphasis, while also giving some attention to that which gave her release and pleasure, especially her love of the wild, and of the adventure of reading. In Part II I shall suggest the probable impact of her childhood on her later years. While not attempting to be exhaustive, I shall consider major stages in her life so as to illuminate the woman and poet behind the reductive focus on the ‘eccentric’ Smith.

There are two biographies of Smith, both tellingly out of print. The earlier *Stevie: A Biography of Stevie Smith* (1985) by Jack Barbera and William McBrien contains a wealth of information and is sometimes revealing about Smith’s emotions. This biography does, however, have a tendency to descend into accounts of Smith from friends and acquaintances that are sometimes adverse or unsympathetic, and in doing so, to lose any sense of an authorial overview of her life.³⁹ These biographers quote, for example, correspondence to them from the anthropologist Polly Hill whose reflections of Smith in the 1940s and early 1950s include the comment:

³⁹ Jack Barbera and William McBrien, *Stevie: A Biography of Stevie Smith* (London: William Heinemann, 1985, repr. London: Macmillan, 1986).

I often found dear Stevie's adolescent giggle embarrassing – an unacceptable, and isolating, cry for help. Indeed, friend though she was (and she helped me to get poetry published), I sometimes found her company depressing. Might not suicide after all have made sense?⁴⁰

The accompanying comment from Barbera and McBrien is the inadequate assessment: 'Her memory of Stevie at that time is vivid'. The authorised biography, Frances Spalding's *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography* (1988), published by the prestigious Faber, is the richer and fuller of the two biographies and has the most literary 'gravitas'. This detailed work of scholarship has proved indispensable to Smith studies and has contributed very considerably to affirming and furthering Stevie Smith's stature as a poet. Spalding presents Smith as a major writer and gives necessary critical attention to her work. She provides a strong account of the extent of Smith's learning through self-education, and she emphasises throughout the biography Smith's thinking and the wide reading that informed her poetry, fiction and other prose writing. Very successful in conveying her more outward writerly life, Spalding shows Smith as being actively engaged in literary, social and public life as a writer, reviewer and broadcaster. Psychoanalyst Adam Philips, in his account of Freud's life, draws attention to biographical gaps, emphases and desires, and suggests we pose the question: what does the biographer want her or his subject to be?⁴¹ It seems that Spalding wants Smith to be a serious, dignified and animated writer and a part of the literary world. In her concentration on the more outward, as well as the more intellectual aspects of Smith's life, however, Spalding minimises the focus on another, important aspect of Smith; her inner, emotional life. I have attempted to extend Spalding's work to consider in depth Smith's early traumas and their impact. This biography, the life of Smith I shall most frequently discuss, encompasses the four distressing events of Smith's early years, without sufficiently conveying their significance. There is almost no analysis of these events and their implications for Smith's life as a whole. They become lost in a wealth of other practical or literary detail within the very full chapters, and their accumulative force is unacknowledged.⁴²

⁴⁰ Barbera and McBrien, *Stevie*, p. 176. Letters from Polly Hill to the authors, 18 February 1984 and 14 February 1986.

⁴¹ Adam Philips, *Becoming Freud* (New Haven and London: Yale, 2014), p. 27.

⁴² I note, in contrast, that Robert Crawford in *Young Eliot* (2015) is able, through a more psychologically alert approach, to signal the future impact on the work of significant distressing events in T. S. Eliot's childhood, such as his witnessing of the 1896 St. Louis cyclone, the devastating effect of which he would later draw on for *The Waste Land* (Robert Crawford, *Young Eliot: From St Louis to the Waste Land* (London: Cape, 2015), p. 27).

In his 1988 review of the Spalding biography, Anthony Thwaite, who knew Smith and published her work as poet and critic in her lifetime, commented: ‘there was always a sense of levels and depths and angers which were undredged, and probably unfathomable’.⁴³

Andrew Motion, later in the year, observed in *The Listener* of this biography: ‘it does not penetrate the sadness which lies at the heart of things: when, in 1953, Stevie Smith has a nervous breakdown and attempts suicide, Spalding has no light to shed [...] never gets under her skin’.⁴⁴ My aim is not to ‘over-pathologise’ the poet, but to address a biographical shortfall by providing a more rounded portrait of Stevie Smith, attempting to ‘get under her skin’, so as to make aspects of her adult life more comprehensible and to provide an illuminating hinterland to her poetry.

I Peggy Smith, the child

a) Trauma and its impact

When considering the extent to which Stevie Smith bore all her life the effects of a high degree of ‘trauma’ stemming from her infancy and childhood, it is necessary to define clinically a term that is now used loosely in early twenty-first-century common parlance to describe any adverse experience, the effects of which might be very short lived. In psychological medicine, the term is specific. Psychoanalyst Caroline Garland, in her clinical study *Understanding Trauma* (1988), gives its origin as the Greek word *trauma*, meaning wound: ‘Trauma is a kind of wound. When we call an event *traumatic*, we are borrowing the word from the Greek where it refers to a piercing of the skin, a breaking of the bodily envelope. In physical medicine it denotes damage to tissue.’⁴⁵ Freud, in ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ (1920), suggests that it is a rupture of the mind’s capacity to protect: ‘We may, I think, tentatively venture to regard the common traumatic neurosis as a consequence of an

⁴³ Anthony Thwaite, ‘Waving’: review of Frances Spalding, *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography*, *London Review of Books* (LRB), 10.19 (1988), <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v10/n19/anthony-thwaite/waving>> [accessed 13 October 2021]

⁴⁴ Andrew Motion, ‘But Why So Sad?’, review of Frances Spalding, *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography* (1988), *The Listener*, 3087 (1988), 28.

⁴⁵ Caroline Garland, ‘Thinking About Trauma’ in *Understanding Trauma: A Psychoanalytic Approach*, ed. by Caroline Garland (London: Karnac, 1988), pp. 9-31 (p. 9).

extensive breach made in the protective shield against stimuli.’⁴⁶ He attributes importance to fright and an absence of any form of being prepared, and terms this psychic overload *hypercathexis*. As early as 1893, Breuer and Freud had described the far-reaching effects of such an overload. They conclude that unless a form of catharsis takes place, ‘the psychical trauma – or more precisely the memory of the trauma – acts like a foreign body which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work’.⁴⁷ When we learn that Stevie Smith endured four traumatic happenings in her formative early years, we can gain some idea of the psychological hinterland to her poetry, a hinterland that would have been augmented by the fact that she lived through two world wars. In a conversation in 1970 with her friend, Kay Dick, Smith emphasised the fear in her poems, and admitted tellingly: ‘being alive is like being in enemy territory’.⁴⁸

i Her birth and its aftermath

Stevie Smith (originally christened Florence Margaret, and first known as Peggy) was born in Hull on 20th September 1902, the younger of two daughters. She was christened, initially at home, on 11th October because her state of health was so critical that, in her mother’s words, ‘The doctor had given up all hope’.⁴⁹ Perhaps she was born prematurely, as may be suggested by her poem ‘Infant’, which begins: ‘It was a cynical babe / Lay in its mother’s arms / Born two months too soon’.⁵⁰ Peggy Smith’s birth should be considered in the light of the darker landscape of childbirth in Britain at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁵¹ The Midwives’ Act of 1902, which laid down rules about the training, registration and regulation of midwives, did not come into force until 1905.⁵² Ante-natal care was sporadic and post-natal care did not exist. Home births were considered safest, although a birth was often attended solely by an untrained, if experienced, midwife. Infant and maternal death rates were high. In

⁴⁶ Sigmund Freud, ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’ (1920), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, XVIII, ed. and trans. by James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 7-64 (p. 31).

⁴⁷ Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, ‘On the Psychical Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena: Preliminary Communication’ (1893), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, II, ed. and trans. by James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 3-17 (p. 6).

⁴⁸ Dick, *Ivy and Stevie*, p. 71.

⁴⁹ Spalding, *Stevie Smith*, p. 3.

⁵⁰ ‘Infant’, *Collected Poems*, p. 25.

⁵¹ Tania McIntosh, *A Social History of Maternity and Childbirth: Key Themes in Maternity Care* (London: Routledge, 2012).

⁵² McIntosh, p. 24.

England and Wales at that time, one in just over six babies died in their first year of life.⁵³ Thus, pregnancy and childbirth were often times of intense fear. On the night of the 11th, Florence Margaret gained strength, and continued to do so. All her life, however, she would be physically frail, and for psychological reasons, perhaps, as well as those of physical weakness, would often feel overwhelmingly tired.⁵⁴

That Peggy Smith almost died in early infancy is apportioned less than four lines of Spalding's densely packed twenty-five-page chapter 'From Hull to Palmers Green', with its emphasis on a wide variety of family and geographical information: 'Peggy was baptized at home on 11 October 1902 owing to her critical health. "The doctor had given up all hope," her mother recorded, "but she began to improve this very night and thank God continued to do so."' ⁵⁵ These brief but important lines are swiftly followed by pages of practically orientated details of place and of family history. However, the emotional development of babies, often overlooked by non-professionals, is taken very seriously by psychoanalytic thinker-practitioners. Melanie Klein, in the first half of the twentieth century, adopting Freud's concepts of the life and death instincts, developed a theory of internal and external object relations, primitive mental states that she considered characteristic of an infant's life that continued to varying degrees throughout life. Intensifying the physical distress that she would have suffered, Peggy Smith's critical condition would have jeopardised the early bonding between mother and child. In Kleinian psychoanalytic terms, her internalising of the mother as a *good object* would have been threatened. A mental and emotional image of an external object, such as the mother, or the mother's breast, taken inside the self, will be imbued by aspects of the self, projected into it. In her 1946 paper 'Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms', Klein considers the impact of birth on the baby:

Other important sources of primary anxiety are the trauma of birth (separation anxiety) and frustration of bodily needs; and these experiences too are from the

⁵³ Danny Dorling, 'Infant Mortality and Progress in Britain', in *Infant Mortality: A Continuing Social Problem*, ed. by Eilidh Garrett, and others (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 213-28 (p. 216). A twenty-first century figure is 7.6 deaths per 1,000 live births. Jenny Phillimore, 'Delivering Maternity Services in an Era of Super-diversity: the Challenges of Novelty and Newness', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 38.4 (2015), 568-62, (p. 570).

⁵⁴ Smith, 'Too Tired for Words', in *Me Again*, pp. 111-18 (p. 114). First published in *Medical World*, December 1956. Smith discusses both the strain and the positive aspects of a depressive tiredness in relation to her poetry writing: 'The pleasures of tiredness are as exquisite as the pains. Take loneliness, for instance, that runs with tiredness. How rich for poets is this sad emotion.'

⁵⁵ Spalding, p. 3.

beginning felt as being caused by objects. Even if these objects are felt to be external, they become through introjection internal persecutors and thus reinforce the fear of the destructive impulse within.⁵⁶

Thus, birth itself is defined by Klein as a trauma and Smith's physical condition in earliest infancy would have exacerbated the effects of this early mental *schizoid* position with its accompanying anxieties, a state in which the self feels disintegrated and which will, in Kleinian thinking, have influence, to a greater or lesser extent, in later life.

Building on Kleinian theory, Esther Bick, psychoanalyst and a pioneer of infant observation, set out in 1968 'evidence suggesting that in the earliest times the parts of the personality are felt to have no inherent binding force and fall apart unless passively held together, an experience indistinguishable from feeling the body to be held together by the skin'.⁵⁷ A critically ill baby, such as Stevie Smith, may well experience the lack of containment that Bick suggests and exhibit a possible future tendency towards psychological disintegration at times of stress. Contemporary psychotherapist Margaret Cohen draws attention to the stress that will afflict the mother's own internal world, as well as that of her baby. She comments on the importance of the mother-baby relationship to the child's experience of integration in the face of pain, and she describes how the mothers of sick babies have to cope, as well as with fear, with having their own maternal needs frustrated.⁵⁸

ii Her parents' separation

The second adverse event in Peggy Smith's life was her parents' separation when she was three, after which her father, who left for a career at sea, was mainly absent from the family home. The 'disgrace', in early twentieth-century terms, of the parental separation, may have been one of the reasons for the family move, when Stevie Smith was three, from Yorkshire to Palmers Green, on the outskirts of London. Smith disliked her father. As a young child she resented having to sit on his knee and show him affection during his infrequent visits. She

⁵⁶ Melanie Klein, 'Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms' in Juliet Mitchell, ed., *The Selected Melanie Klein* (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 176-200 (pp. 179-80).

⁵⁷ Esther Bick, 'Further Considerations on the Function of the Skin in Early Object Relations / Findings from Infant Observation Integrated into Child and Adult Analysis', *British Journal of Psychotherapy* 2.4. (1986), 292-99, (p. 292).

⁵⁸ Margaret Cohen, *Sent before Time: A Child Psychotherapist's View of Life on a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit* (London: Karnac, 2003), p. 72. Although Cohen's book is a twenty-first century study of life in a neonatal intensive care unit, it is likely that the emotional findings of her study will be applicable to an extent to Smith's situation.

found him irresponsible, a financial drain on the family, ‘a tremendous old egotist’.⁵⁹ It seems that Smith also felt a dual burden of guilt and rejection: ‘This was just after I’d been born, and poor Daddy took one look at me and rushed away to sea.’⁶⁰ Very young children who are developmentally self-focused may feel, as it seems Stevie did, that they caused the disruption in their parents’ lives. The twentieth-century American psychoanalyst Erik Erikson built on Freud’s work to explore the relationship between a social context and individual development with a focus on how a healthy ego is maintained through the various phases of the life cycle.⁶¹ According to Erikson, the polarities of trust and mistrust are particularly relevant for the first stage of an infant’s development. If trust is in the ascendancy, the ego strength of *hope* is formed. Even a baby will register the tension in the home that often accompanies divorce or parental separation. Erikson affirms:

Increasing numbers of us come to the conclusion that a child and even a baby – perhaps even a fetus – sensitively reflect the quality of the milieu in which they grow up. Children feel the tensions, insecurities, and rages of their parents even if they do not know their causes or witness their most overt manifestations.⁶²

It is reasonable to conclude that the parental difficulties and separation would have very probably shaken Peggy Smith’s trust, leaving her susceptible to insecurity in future life.

Stevie Smith’s anger at her father remained strong throughout her life. Biographers Barbera and McBrien emphasise that, significantly, in 1949, Smith did not attend her father’s funeral, not wishing to lose a broadcasting opportunity by ‘taking time to pay her respects to a father she did not respect’.⁶³ In her opening chapter, Spalding comments perceptively on how Smith shows, through the adventurous fantasies in her poetry, an unconscious identification with her father, despite the fact that her affections are ostensibly with her mother.⁶⁴ This biographer does not, however, speculate directly on the impact of the parental separation on the family. The topic is concluded, and dispensed with, in the single observation: ‘In some ways, his absence was easily filled.’⁶⁵ The paragraph, of which this is the opening sentence, then continues with an emphasis on lively externality and it focuses on Smith’s aunt, Madge

⁵⁹ Dick, *Ivy and Stevie*, p. 65.

⁶⁰ Dick, *Ivy and Stevie*, p. 65.

⁶¹ Erik Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994).

⁶² Erikson, p. 105.

⁶³ Barbera and McBrien, *Stevie*, p. 164.

⁶⁴ Spalding, p. 3.

⁶⁵ Spalding, p. 8.

Spear, who played such a prominent and stable role in the Palmers Green household. Perhaps Spalding colludes, in the fast pace of this chapter, with Smith's livelier self in order to retain a fully animated biography, while omitting to take into account the child's underlying feelings.

iii Incarceration in a sanatorium

Thirdly, and very significantly, for three years, from the age of five, Stevie Smith was almost continuously incarcerated in a sanatorium; she had contracted tubercular peritonitis, a disease that would have caused bowel disorders, vomiting and loss of appetite. Separated from her mother and the family during three of her crucial developmental years, she was only allowed home for summer holidays. Spalding recounts: 'the pain of seeing her mother turn to wave goodbye was on one occasion so great that the doctors feared for her chances of recovery and forbade further visits'.⁶⁶ This was the recommendation of the 1900s and certainly not the wisdom of today. Peggy Smith was, in this respect, a victim of her times. This lengthy period was to have a deep and enduring effect on Smith.

That such prolonged separation would be damaging seems common sense to us now, but this was not the case one hundred years ago. It was not until the mid-century period that child psychiatrist John Bowlby published a pioneering work, drawing extensively on James Robertson's research concerning hospitalised children. In this work he drew attention to the great adverse significance of a child's separation from the mother, or primary carer, in such circumstances. Bowlby conveyed a sense of the child's inner life in the face of such deprivation:

Partial deprivation brings in its train anxiety, excessive need for love, powerful feelings of revenge, and, arising from these last, guilt and depression. A young child, still immature in mind and body, cannot cope with all these emotions and drives. The ways in which he responds to these disturbances of his inner life may in the end bring about nervous disorders and instability of character.⁶⁷

Bowlby's work on *attachment*, strongly influenced by the science of character formation in human behaviour, highlighted the need for continuity in a child's relationship with the

⁶⁶ Spalding, p. 16.

⁶⁷ John Bowlby, *Childcare and the Growth of Love* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 14. This book was based on Bowlby's 1951 report for the World Health Organisation.

mother, or primary carer. ‘Bowlbyism’ has been criticised or challenged on various counts. Psychologist Michael Rutter, for instance, in his reappraisal of maternal deprivation in 1991, commented on such aspects as children’s possible resilience in the face of such adversity and children’s capacity for multiple attachments.⁶⁸ Rutter does stress, however, the importance for the child of continuity of contact with the same person over a long period of time, and that when the strongest bond is with the mother, she will have the greatest influence on reducing the child’s level of stress. With her father’s prolonged absences, Smith’s relationship with her mother would have been particularly central. Rutter stresses the impact of separation from the family as a whole (in Smith’s case her mother, sister and aunt).⁶⁹ In recognition of Bowlby’s contribution, contemporary child psychotherapist Judy Shuttleworth affirmed in 1995: ‘His role in calling attention to the needs of the young child and in generating work which changed the climate of thought about child-care has been of enormous importance.’⁷⁰ This increased significance of the psychoanalysis of early childhood makes a reappraisal of Smith’s life as an infant and young child particularly necessary.

Aged five, Peggy Smith would have been on the cusp of Bowlby’s most vulnerable period for separation (below the age of five). It was from this point that she developed the outlet of talking to herself in her solitariness (soliloquising was a strategy that she would utilise to strong effect in her future writing of poetry and prose). Smith reveals that at the age of eight she had suicidal thoughts, and that eventually she cheered herself with the realisation that the possibility of ending her own life lay in her hands – that life was, in this way, in her control. In Stevie Smith’s own words ‘The thought cheered me up wonderfully and quite saved my life. For if one can remove oneself at any time from the world, why particularly now?’⁷¹ Smith’s uplifting thought here has the economy of a joke, of dark Beckettian humour. Her thought produces a shudder because the idea that one could commit suicide anytime is not necessarily cheering; it indicates the thin line between life and death, and the great responsibility we have for our own lives. Perhaps Smith was uplifted partly by the discovery of her own early capacity for such thought. Hers was a very prolonged period of separation when even a week would seem interminable to a young child. Added to the effect on her life

⁶⁸ Michael Rutter, *Maternal Deprivation Reassessed* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981).

⁶⁹ Rutter, p. 217.

⁷⁰ Judy Shuttleworth, ‘Notes’ to *Closely Observed Infants* (London: Duckworth 1995) ed. by Judy Shuttleworth and others, p. 205.

⁷¹ Spalding, p. 17.

of these extended periods of separation from her mother, was anxiety, even at that early age, about her mother's health.⁷²

The years spent by Smith in a sanatorium are presented by Spalding without analysis of the tremendous importance of the despair and the suicidal thoughts that the child experienced. Spalding's first chapter, in which this distressing experience is outlined, soon turns to the livelier matter of school, with only a brief mention of the fact that Smith would have missed out on formal schooling between the age of five and eight. The biographer comments within the same chapter: 'Her home life was happy, if sometimes emotionally strained and financially rocky.'⁷³ The sketchiness and lighter tone of this summary precludes a deeper engagement with Smith's feelings.

iv Early bereavement

The fourth traumatic early life event, a permanent form of abandonment, in psychological terms, was the tragedy of Ethel Smith's death in 1919 when Stevie Smith was only sixteen. Without a close relationship with her father, Smith may have felt almost orphaned by this loss. It is clear that her mother shared Smith's literary and artistic inclinations, whereas her more robust and loved aunt (with whom Smith, her mother and sister lived) did not. Her poem 'Human Affection', which portrays a child's love for her mother, is painfully evocative in its suggestion of an intimacy that is a kind of buried love: 'Said the child, I love you more than I know.'⁷⁴ In the drawing below the poem, the child-figure and the mother-figure barely touch fingers. Her mother's loss was felt so keenly by Smith that towards the end of her life in August 1969, during a television programme in which she was taking part, the poet became visibly distressed and could not continue when an intrusive interviewer pressed her to recall whether she was present when her mother died.⁷⁵ The manner of her mother's death was a strong part of the trauma that haunted Smith. In the semi-autobiographical novel *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936) she wrote: 'My mother was dying, she had heart disease, she could not breathe, already there were the cylinders of oxygen [...] if you cannot breathe you must suffer. And the last minute when you are dying, that may be a very long time indeed.'⁷⁶

⁷² Spalding, p. 17.

⁷³ Spalding, p. 19.

⁷⁴ 'Human Affection', *Collected Poems*, p. 181.

⁷⁵ Spalding, p. 290.

⁷⁶ Smith, *Novel On Yellow Paper* (London: Cape, 1936, repr. London: Virago 2015), p. 175.

Bowlby's psychological findings are applicable. In his volume on *Loss, Sadness and Depression* (1980), he considered the impact of the death of a parent during childhood and adolescence. He drew cautiously on research on psychiatric patients to conclude:

Early loss, it seems, can sensitize an individual and make him more vulnerable to setbacks experienced later, especially to loss or threat of loss. Nevertheless, by no means every child or adolescent who loses a parent becomes sensitized in this way and it is therefore necessary to determine why some should become so and others not.⁷⁷

Factors to be taken into account include family relationships after the death, with particular emphasis on the role of the surviving parent, or parent substitute, the pattern of the relationship of the parents themselves, and the encouragement of the child or adolescent to express feelings. When these elements indicated by Bowlby are considered alongside the earlier distressing events in Smith's life, it seems obvious to assume her vulnerability.⁷⁸ The importance to Smith of the enduring figure of her capable and loving aunt becomes understandable in the light of this trauma.

Smith may well have been revealing her own experience of early bereavement in a 1965 radio broadcast in which she reviewed the book *Death, Grief and Mourning in Contemporary Britain* (1965) by Geoffrey Gorer.⁷⁹ Gorer recounted how, at boarding school at the age of ten, he hears of his father's death by drowning when the *Lusitania* was torpedoed in 1914. Smith, in the script of the broadcast, writes of Gorer's experience:

He was treated, by masters and boys alike, with uniform kindness but as if he were an invalid. Nobody spoke seriously to him about death and nobody, for some time after, made a joke in his presence [...] His contention throughout the book is that an

⁷⁷ John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss, Volume 3: Loss, Sadness and Depression* (London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1980, repr. London: Plimlico, 1998), p. 310.

⁷⁸ As regards the death of a parent during a child's teenage years, psychologist Michael Rutter's findings (1991, p. 82) would concur with a future vulnerability: 'The evidence is somewhat contradictory but it appears that depressive disorders during adult life may be particularly common when a parent has died during the person's adolescence.'

⁷⁹ Smith, reviewing Geoffrey Gorer, *Death, Grief and Mourning in Contemporary Britain* (1965) for the BBC Home Service programme 'The World of Books', broadcast on 19 June 1965, pp.1-4. BBC Written Archives Centre, Caversham, Reading [BBC Written Archives], HS19.6.65.

accepted pattern of mourning – when people truly love and grieve – does give strength.⁸⁰

Smith, in this review, is critical of the role of the Christian church in the face of bereavement. She observes confusion in the beliefs of the church and suspects that afterlife theories are simply Christian wishful thinking. She laments: ‘congregations as a whole are taught more about being good than what to believe’.⁸¹ Gorer described how mourners tended to be left alone with their grief until they could act as if nothing had happened. Smith adds ‘nearly all mourners have to face this period of isolation, especially in the upper social classes, where grief is felt to be embarrassing’.⁸² As well as echoing Gorer, Smith is very probably indicating in this review here how alone she felt, as a vulnerable sixteen year old, with her own grief. Stevie Smith was confirmed into the Church of England in March 1918, the year before her mother’s death. In the light of her comments in this review, it may well have been the lack of comfort offered to her by Christianity at that time that led to the religious doubt she began to experience as a young adult. This doubt was to stay with her and it became an important strand of her poetry. Also notable in the review is that she praises the author for his animated approach to his dark and sorrowful terrain: ‘he is always interesting, and [...] a word so opposed to his subject matter...lively. Yes, alive alive-oh is Mr. Gorer’.⁸³ Smith herself, in her poetry, tended towards liveliness despite a dark terrain. The vivacity of her poetry, far from the whimsical, is an approach that enables an exploration of dark, or bleak, material.

Stevie Smith’s mother’s death, the period leading up to it, and its aftermath are accorded, in Spalding’s biography, the most weight and space of the four distressing early life events. Spalding’s language, however, can be distancing: ‘A photograph of Ethel Smith taken in 1918 shows her strained, thin and gaunt, looking much older than her forty-two years. When travelling with this tragic figure, Stevie must have felt considerable anxiety.’⁸⁴ This ‘tragic figure’ was, after all, Stevie Smith’s *mother*. The full and resounding significance of her mother’s death is dissipated by its being embedded in the chapter entitled ‘North London Collegiate School’. Here the busyness and variety of school life, the impact of convalescing World War I soldiers on the household, and Smith’s involvement with Christianity compete

⁸⁰ Review of *Death, Grief and Mourning*, p. 1.

⁸¹ Review of *Death, Grief and Mourning*, p. 3.

⁸² Review of *Death, Grief and Mourning*, p. 3.

⁸³ Review of *Death, Grief and Mourning*, p. 4.

⁸⁴ Spalding, p. 31.

for significance. All of these aspects are important, but their presentation in the one chapter does not allow Smith's life to quite cohere (or for her life to be convincing in its incoherence).

b) Childhood pleasures

Stevie Smith, despite setbacks, took great pleasure in aspects of her childhood, pleasures that may well have given her release and which must be fully acknowledged. In the script of her broadcast 'Syler's Green: A return journey', giving her London suburb a fictional name, she wrote: 'Of course it wasn't always [...] sunny but that is how one is apt to remember past times [...] This sunny time of a happy childhood seems like a golden age'.⁸⁵ The happier aspects of Smith's childhood have been well-documented in Spalding's biography, and also by Smith herself, and there is not the space to describe them fully here. I would, however, like to draw attention to the young Stevie Smith's adventurous love of the wild, which was to be reflected in her adult writing. This adventurous aspect, perhaps gained, in part, from her father, is particularly worth emphasising because 'the myth of Stevie Smith' presents her in the popular imagination as a dweller in the genteel, restricted suburbs.

When Smith was a child in the early twentieth century, Palmers Green was semi-rural in ambience and Smith's imagination was fed by the wildness that existed just beyond it, or even within it, in the nearby Grovelands Park with its impressive lake, rolling open spaces and tall trees. In her 1970 conversation with Kay Dick, Stevie Smith described this much-loved park, which helped to make her feel connected to the countryside:

It's absolutely marvellous. They haven't altered it very much. It's still got a huge lake, which is the source of inspiration for a great many of my deep country poems about lakes and people getting bewitched, enchanted, *ensorcellé*. It's very beautiful, and often quite empty. It lies high and those huge oak trees are heavenly. You can see right over to the Hertfordshire hills. You can't really see any houses, which is what I like. We are very near the country here – six stations before you get to Hertford, and it's absolutely untouched open country, fortunately turned into Green Belt now.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Smith, 'Syler's Green: A Return Journey', repr. in *Me Again*, pp. 83-99 (p. 84). (Script of radio broadcast, BBC Third Programme, 5 August 1947).

⁸⁶ Dick, *Ivy and Stevie*, p. 79.

As a child this appreciation of the wild was also reflected in her joy of reading of tales and legends, for instance, and of the Romantic poets, to whom, as an adult poet, she would ‘talk back’.

Revealing of Smith and her explorative love of reading is an article she wrote, aimed at children, ‘How to Read Books’ (1947).⁸⁷ Addressing young readers, she shares her excitement:

If you have not read much before, or even thought about finding enjoyment in reading, you will be rather in the position of an explorer who stands with a great new world before him. If he goes in the right direction, that world will open up and become more and more exciting and delightful.⁸⁸

She reveals a wealth of reading of adventurous books as a child, by writers such as Rider Haggard, John Buchan, fairy tales by Hans Christian Andersen, the brothers Grimm and Perrault, the legends of Ancient Greece, the stories of King Arthur, and the *Alice* books. She urges children to read ‘books about great causes’ such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and ‘books written that were written for grown-ups which children have taken for themselves like *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver’s Travels*’.⁸⁹ She gives examples of ‘the stirring poems’ she favoured when a child, including Tennyson’s ‘Mariana’ and ‘Locksley Hall’, and Browning’s ‘Flight of the Duchess’ and ‘The Pied Piper’.⁹⁰ Her list seems endless and spirited. She encourages children to make their own experiments as she must have done. In her adult reading and writing, such adventures were to become intellectual and metaphysical, as well as imaginative. Of the reading that opened out her world for her so joyously, she writes: ‘Reading is a living thing’.⁹¹ For Smith, in childhood and adulthood, reflected in her writing and in her work as a prolific book reviewer, reading was a life force.

Acting was a childhood pleasure that also nourished Smith’s imagination and her delight in language. In 1920, her final year at North London Collegiate School, she relished, for example, acting in Euripides’ tragedy, *The Bacchae*, in the original Greek.⁹² This was the

⁸⁷ Smith, ‘How to Read Books’, in *Discovery and Romance for Boys and Girls 2* (London: Cape, 1947) pp. 267-72.

⁸⁸ ‘How to Read Books’, p. 267.

⁸⁹ ‘How to Read Books’, p. 271.

⁹⁰ ‘How to Read Books’, p. 271.

⁹¹ ‘How to Read Books’, p. 272.

⁹² Spalding details this acting during Smith’s final year at school, and the praise received for it. Spalding, p. 38.

year after her mother's death, and it is likely that this performing would have given her some emotional release in her own acute suffering. Smith was to retain a life-long admiration for Greek tragedy. A love of drama was to be reflected in the dramatic qualities of her poetry, her adoption of personae, for instance, which allowed her to explore her own feelings from behind the safety of a mask, her use of monologue and dialogue. Her talent for acting became strongly evident in the performances of her poetry, which were to hold audiences spellbound.

In adulthood, for Smith, a joy in life often ran in parallel with a fascination with the release offered by death. The feeling of apartness that she needed to maintain could tip into a sense of isolation, of being, perhaps 'much too far out all my life'.⁹³ Smith was to indicate this inner predicament near the end of her life, in conversation with Kay Dick: 'I love life. I adore it, but only because I keep myself well on the edge. I wouldn't commit myself to anything. I can always get out if I want to.'⁹⁴ That Smith kept herself 'well on the edge' and was, in this way an outsider, was an aspect of being human to which readers can relate, along with the feelings of despair and isolation this position engenders. We can each experience ourselves as outsiders, as not quite belonging to society, or to a group, and each of us is susceptible, at times, to feelings of despair. In this way Smith's poetry provides fellow-feeling and a kind of relief.

II Adulthood: Stevie Smith, myth and reality

One aspect of the 'myth of Stevie Smith' that has entered the popular imagination is the 'oddity' of her living all her life in the suburban house in Palmers Green with her aunt. In her lifetime, it might have been considered a 'spinsterish' choice. In this way, it could be said that, in a sexist fashion, Smith has had *femaleness* mapped onto her. In her study *'Am I That Name?': Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History*, Denise Riley problematises the category of 'women'. She puts it this way: 'schematically: "women" is historically, discursively constructed, and always relatively to other categories which themselves change; "women" is a volatile collectivity in which female persons can be very differently positioned'.⁹⁵ 'Women', she continues, 'are often positioned harshly and stupidly as

⁹³ 'Not Waving but Drowning', *Collected Poems*, p. 347.

⁹⁴ Dick, *Ivy and Stevie*, p. 70.

⁹⁵ Denise Riley, *'Am I That Name?': Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (London: MacMillan, 1988), pp. 1-2.

“women””.⁹⁶ Stevie Smith’s fabled *spinsterhood* could be thought of as a reductive effect of the designation ‘women’. A male poet such as Charles Causley (1917–2003), for instance, was a ‘bachelor’ and became a ‘carer’ to his mother, but this is not considered a sign of oddness. Male life choices have been treated differently.

An aspect that was in opposition to an imposition of *femaleness* was Smith’s adopted adult name of ‘Stevie’ with its suggestion of androgyny, or masculinity; a diminutive that also hinted at the child self. Smith describes how, as a young adult, she was out riding with a friend, Arnold, on a London common and urging her horse on:

And then all the little boys shouted ‘Come on Steve!’ He was the favourite jockey at the time, Steve Donoghue. So Arnold said, ‘It suits you very well, you look like a jockey, you ride like a jockey, I shall call you Steve.’ Then it got to Stevie. Now this was given like that, then it stuck permanently.⁹⁷

Her chosen name, in resistance to the restrictiveness of the female, was to heighten her spirited individuality, her uniqueness, as writer and performer.

There are biographical accounts of Smith’s romantic attachments with men and with at least one woman, but none of these endured. A fear of intimacy would be unsurprising given her burden of childhood loss and the probable resulting distrust. To a woman with whom she had a relationship (Spalding refers to her as ‘Mary’): ‘Stevie admitted that she could give love but found it difficult to accept that she could be the object of love’.⁹⁸ Bowlby describes how early deprivations can set a process in train and ‘a failure to meet more intimate personal demands of marriage and parenthood’.⁹⁹ Though often lonely, the poet valued her solitude. Her poetry and prose amply indicate that she would have realised the strain that the marriage conventions of the time would put on her creative activities, her ability to conserve her fierce individuality and her mental and physical health. Her scepticism and fear about marriage are underlined in her poetry, in ‘Marriage I Think’, for instance, which begins revealingly:

Marriage I Think [*sic*]
For women
Is the best of opiates.
It kills the thoughts

⁹⁶ Riley, p. 3.

⁹⁷ Dick, *Ivy and Stevie*, p. 69.

⁹⁸ Spalding, p. 184.

⁹⁹ Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, p. 221.

That think about the thoughts,¹⁰⁰

It should also be added that a household that revolved around the authority of a man had not been the norm for Stevie Smith, and she may have found the idea of such a situation threatening. In her novel *The Holiday* (1949), Celia, Smith's alter ego, explains in a passage that speaks volumes about twentieth-century sexism:

But most women, especially in the lower and lower-middle classes, are conditioned early to having 'father' the centre of the home-life, with father's chair, and father's dinner, and father's *Times* and father says, so they are not brought up like me to be this wicked selfish creature, to have no boring old father-talk, to have no papa at all that one attends to, to have a darling Aunt to come home to.¹⁰¹

When the weight of the adverse events of Stevie Smith's childhood is taken into fuller consideration, aspects of her adult life become more comprehensible. It becomes understandable, for instance, rather than merely 'odd', that she lived all her life in the security of the Palmers Green semi-detached villa, attended to by an aunt whom she'd known most of her life and who was devoted to her care. Smith was to show her gratitude and love of her aunt Madge Spear by looking after her during her long decline, from the 1950s to her death in 1967.

a) Earlier adulthood

Stevie Smith's young adulthood appears outwardly to have been relatively stable. Discernible emotional difficulty came later. Smith trained at a secretarial academy and eventually was appointed secretary to Sir Neville Pearson at Pearson's, one of Britain's main publishers of women's magazines. Dull work, but not onerous, it left her energy, and gave her time, for self-education in the form of intensive reading, and for writing. This personal reading was to be augmented by Smith's other work as a prolific book reviewer. I shall devote Chapter Two to this often ignored work of Smith, which was crucial to her intellectual life and her poetry. During this period, Smith was also to take on related work, for which her discernment was much valued, as a publisher's reader for various publishing houses including Chapman & Hall and The Bodley Head. Stevie Smith's own first book, the modernist, autobiographically

¹⁰⁰ 'Marriage I Think', *Collected Poems*, p. 663.

¹⁰¹ Smith, *The Holiday* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1949, repr. London: Virago, 1979), p. 28.

based *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936), achieved striking literary acclaim. Partly on the strengths of this success, her first poetry collection *A Good Time Was Had By All* (1937) was published, the poems having been rejected for book publication at an earlier date.¹⁰² It was well received, if sometimes rather condescendingly, by its male reviewers.¹⁰³

This early success was followed, however, by a long period in which Smith's writing was undervalued. Her third poetry collection, published in wartime, *Mother, What Is Man?* (1942), was overlooked, despite being a considerable advance on her first two poetry books. It was consistently deeper, searching and more resonant, informed by the darkening forces of her life.¹⁰⁴ Her luminous third novel *The Holiday* (1949), her personal favourite and, arguably, her best, was less well received than her previous two. She had literary friends and acquaintances, Rosamond Lehmann, Naomi Mitchison, and George Orwell, for instance, but was not part of the very male poetry world. She had some poetic success – notably a group of her poems were included in *The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Verse* edited by John Heath-Stubbs and David Wright (Wright was a loyal admirer of her poetry) and published in January 1953.¹⁰⁵ This inclusion did not sufficiently raise Smith's spirits. Magazines and journals often rejected her unconventional poetry during this period and she felt the disappointment keenly. It must have been especially crushing that the poetry editor at Chapman & Hall, publisher of her 1950 collection *Harold's Leap*, lamenting the book's low sales, wrote regretfully in February 1953: 'Much as I should like to publish another volume, I am afraid I just can't.'¹⁰⁶

Because the distressing events of her childhood and their legacy have been given insufficient biographical attention, coupled with the emphasis of Smith as 'odd', the incident in which she attempts to cut her wrist in the office in July 1953 tends to emerge as somewhat inexplicable, an event 'out of the blue'.¹⁰⁷ It could better be viewed, however, as a crisis in the life of an adult who, as a result of the adverse aspects of her childhood, while often a resilient survivor, would also have been more than usually susceptible to despair. Spalding describes how the

¹⁰² Smith, *A Good Time Was Had By All* (London: Cape, 1937).

¹⁰³ I assess the critical reception of Smith's poetry in Chapter Three below.

¹⁰⁴ Smith, *Mother, What Is Man?* (London: Cape, 1942).

¹⁰⁵ *The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Verse*, ed. by John Heath-Stubbs and David Wright (London: Faber and Faber, 1953).

¹⁰⁶ Letter to Smith from Jack McDougall, 2 February 1953, Department of Special Collections, McFarlin Library, The University of Tulsa, Stevie Smith Papers, 1943-1900-1990 [Tulsa Archive], 1976.1.4.39.001.

¹⁰⁷ See Andrew Motion's comment in 'But Why So Sad?', pp. 24 above.

normally outgoing Smith became clinically depressed and ‘did not maintain the social contacts that had become an essential part of her life’.¹⁰⁸ The rejection of her poetry and prose would have seemed a rejection of herself, and the dullness of her secretarial work at Pearson’s would have offered no sustenance and was clearly another strong contributing factor to her despair. Freud, in his 1915 paper ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, provides a striking image for such a depressive state of mind as an active condition, draining the self: ‘The complex of melancholia behaves like an open wound, drawing to itself cathectic energies [...] from all directions, and emptying the ego until it is totally impoverished’.¹⁰⁹

In the face of the adult Smith’s distress, we may well wish to ask what she herself thought of the ‘talking cure’ offered by psychoanalysis. Smith showed scepticism about the process in the poem ‘Analysand’ in her first poetry collection. She depicts with wit and vehemence the plight of the analysand:

Self dedicated to self scrutiny
His every moment’s an eternity
Of irritation and monotony.¹¹⁰

The poem concludes:

Is it surprising Reader do you think?
Would you expect to find him in the pink?
Who’s solely occupied with his own mental stink?

Spalding comments on Smith’s affair with ‘Mary’, a psychotherapist, and how the poet was intrigued by this work. Spalding concludes: ‘Psychology amused, fascinated and frightened Stevie.’¹¹¹ In a 1963 BBC interview with John Horder, Smith revealed: ‘There’s a sort of unhappiness and melancholy, a soft melancholy that drives me to write. Actual despair – well, I suppose one doesn’t like to talk of that because this is a terrible experience for anyone

¹⁰⁸ Spalding, p. 213.

¹⁰⁹ Sigmund Freud, ‘Mourning and Melancholia’ (1915), in *The Complete Psychological Works*, XIV, ed. and trans. by James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 243-58, (p. 253). Cathexis is a psychoanalytic term used to describe a quality of libidinous energy analogous to an electric charge which a person invests in an object or another person.

¹¹⁰ ‘The Analysand’, *Collected Poems* (2015), p. 51.

¹¹¹ Spalding, p. 183.

to have.’¹¹² Unhappiness had a value for Stevie Smith in that it prompted her to write, although it was an unhappiness she distinguished from despair.

Where Smith shared a psychoanalytic preoccupation was in the importance she assigned to the continuity of childhood within the adult. In her moving poem ‘To Carry the Child’ she portrays the child and adult parts of the self as being in conflict.¹¹³ The grown-up despises the child self, while the child likewise despises the grown-up who has not kept his sadness alive: ‘the child has the tears alive on the cheek / And the man has none of them’. The adult carapace is constricting, and Smith gives the clue to how her playful, anarchic poetry operates as a form of resistance to this:

But oh the poor child, the poor child, what can he do,
Trapped in a grown-up carapace,
But peer outside of his prison room
With the eye of an anarchist?

There is a broadly applicable aspect to this portrait in terms of the human predicament of growing up. The strength of the emotional pain to which the child develops in response ‘the eye of an anarchist’ suggests, however, the poem’s origin in personal distress. In a letter to Rosamond Lehmann in 1938, Smith emphasised with feeling the significance for her of childhood and the importance of keeping touch with the child she ‘carries’: ‘I am a child because I was a child and nothing that is ever perishes, but now I am also something else as well as a child, but I am the sum of all my ages [...] I think the child must never be denied’.¹¹⁴ Through her poems Smith is able to hold the child and the adult self in combination. In both the playfulness and the directness of the emotional engagement of Stevie Smith’s poetry, the child self is apparent, and, therefore, the sadness that stemmed from her childhood.

b) ‘Not Waving but Drowning’

In April 1953, before Smith’s ‘suicide attempt’ in July of that year, she wrote her celebrated

¹¹² Smith interviewed by John Horder for ‘The World of Books’, BBC Home Service, 28 January, 1963, pp. 1-12 (pp. 10-11). BBC Written Archives, HS.2.263.

¹¹³ ‘To Carry the Child’, *Collected Poems*, pp. 505-06.

¹¹⁴ Smith, letter to Rosamond Lehmann, 4 February 1938. Archive Centre, King’s College, Cambridge, The Papers of Rosamond Nina Lehmann, Letters to Rosamond Lehmann, 1938-02-04 – 1968-01-15 [KCC, RN Lehmann Archive], GBR/0272/RNL2/569.

poem of human isolation ‘Not Waving but Drowning’.¹¹⁵ Will May, in *The Collected Poems*, misdates the writing of the poem to 1954.¹¹⁶ It seems that May has confused the first publication date with the date of the poem’s composition. In a letter to her friend Kay Dick dated 28th April 1953, Smith revealed that she ‘felt too low for words’ but had ‘worked it off’ in a poem ‘Not Waving but Drowning’.¹¹⁷ This true dating is vital as it shows how close Smith was to despair when she wrote the poem. A man, alienated and experiencing an inner deadness, speaks resonantly:

Oh, no no no, it was too cold always
 (Still the dead one lay moaning)
 I was much too far out all my life
 And not waving but drowning.

This poem demonstrates how successful she was artistically at transposing personal feeling. She renders despair as a part of what it is to be human and presents both a psychological predicament of unheard distress, with which she would have been familiar, and loneliness as aspects of the human condition. The absence of speech marks in the poem increases the sense of the internality of the voice. A contemporary critic Vidyan Ravinthiran comments on the potency of this unpunctuated speech: ‘It isn’t speech cooled and hardened and situated within a larger utterance – it touches the reader directly.’¹¹⁸ In an earlier letter to Kay Dick in 1943, Smith claimed that particular poems in her 1942 collection *Mother, What Is Man?* are ‘self-portraits’; in ‘Not Waving but Drowning’ Smith likewise funnels her poem through a dramatic persona.¹¹⁹ The writing of it gave her some release, but its early reception was disappointing to her. At first only *Punch* had been interested and Smith thought that the poem’s essential seriousness had been unrecognised: ‘Punch like it, think it’s funny I

¹¹⁵ ‘Not Waving but Drowning’, *Collected Poems* (2015), p. 347.

¹¹⁶ May, ed., *Collected Poems*, Chronology, p. xli. May’s misdating has also been pointed out by Matthew Bevis in his review of *The Collected Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith* (2015): (‘What I most love I bite’, *LRB*, 38.15 (2016) <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v38/n15/matthew-bevis/what-most-i-love-i-bite>> [accessed 13 October 2021]).

¹¹⁷ Smith, letter to Kay Dick, 28 April 1953. Washington University Libraries, Department of Special Collections, St Louis, Florence Margaret “Stevie Smith” Papers (MSS103), 1943-1970 [St Louis Archive], MSS/103.5.33.

¹¹⁸ Vidyan Ravinthiran, ‘Your Thorns Are the Best Part of You’, a review of May, ed., *All the Poems: Stevie Smith* (2016), the American version of May, ed., *The Collected Poems* (2015) in *Poetry*, 209.1 (2016), 83-103 (p. 101). In a note to the poem, as Ravinthiran points out, Will May, in editing of *The Collected Poems* has, by taking out the speech marks, restored Smith’s poem to an earlier version. (See May’s note to ‘Not Waving but Drowning’, *Collected Poems* (2015), p.762.

¹¹⁹ Smith, letter to Kay Dick, March 1943. St Louis Archive, MSS103.2.1. In an introduction to a 1963 reading of this poem, Smith explains how it was based on a newspaper story in which, tragically, a drowning man was mistakenly thought to be playing around and pretending. The reading is included in ‘The Spoken Word: Stevie Smith’, BBC/British Library CD, 2009.

suppose'.¹²⁰ It is significant that this poem was not published in the *Observer* until after her 'suicide attempt' in August 1954.¹²¹ The initial lack of recognition for a major poem, and one in which she had written so resonantly of an aspect of the human condition, may well have contributed to her despair.

Severely depressed, Stevie Smith cut her wrist in her office in July 1953. Spalding refers to the incident as a suicide attempt, but she admits: 'What exactly happened cannot now be uncovered.'¹²² Spalding recounts one story that had reached Smith's friend Kay Dick, that Stevie Smith lunged at her long-standing employer Sir Neville Pearson (to whom she was secretary and personal assistant) with a pair of scissors, but then, it is assumed, turned them on herself after he'd left the room. He had casually picked up one of her personal objects, a small paperweight seal.¹²³ Freud asserts: 'We have long known, it is true, that no neurotic harbours thoughts of suicide which he has not turned back upon himself from murderous impulses against others'.¹²⁴ In Smith's behaviour, as recounted here, it is evident how swiftly hostility against another can be turned into a hostile act against the self, especially when exacerbated by the feelings of an unheard, despairing child within the adult. There appears to be some biographical confusion about a letter Smith sent after the incident to her friend, Anna Browne. In Spalding's version, Browne is reported to have disclosed that she found it too painful to keep the letter in which Smith gave an account of this incident. In the letter, Smith had explained that she could not stand the strain of work any longer and expressed great concern about the upset she had caused her aunt.¹²⁵ Barbera and McBrien, however, recount that, in an interview, Anna Browne told them that Smith herself had asked her to destroy the letter.¹²⁶ At any rate, the distressing content of the letter is clear. Revealingly, Spalding comments about the speculation over Smith's subsequent disappearance from the office: 'But to those who had known her well it was not surprising. She was peculiar: it was to be expected.'¹²⁷ This emphasis on 'peculiar' points to Smith's isolation, suggesting that the friends did not actually know her very well. Smith spent three weeks in bed after the attempt.

¹²⁰ Smith, letter to Kay Dick, 28 April 1953. St Louis Archive, MSS103.5.33.

¹²¹ May, ed., *Collected Poems*, note to 'Not Waving but Drowning', p. 762.

¹²² Spalding, p. 213.

¹²³ Spalding, p. 213.

¹²⁴ Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 252.

¹²⁵ Spalding, p. 214. No evidence is cited by Spalding for Anna Browne's comment.

¹²⁶ Barbera and McBrien, *Stevie*, p. 188.

¹²⁷ Spalding, p. 214.

It may have been, in contemporary terminology, an incident of self-harm rather than an actual suicide attempt; an unconscious attempt, perhaps, to alert others to the depth of her despair.

It is important to remember that Stevie Smith did not commit suicide, and may not have seriously attempted it. Nevertheless, it was indeed a grave incident, as is emphasised by her first biographers:

In early August Stevie's physician reported to Sir Neville Pearson that she obviously had been under considerable nervous strain for some time, and the condition in which he found her on 1 July was extremely serious [...] he no longer considered Stevie to have the nervous or physical strength to continue regular office work.¹²⁸

Out of the crisis came some relief for her. As recommended, she did not return to her secretarial job, but instead supplemented the work pension she received with her very extensive book reviewing for magazines such as the *Spectator*, the *Listener*, and the *New Statesman*. Although hard work, Smith approached this reviewing with verve. It strengthened her connection with the literary world and, increasingly, fed her poetry.

c) Later years – fame and responsibility

As with my discussion of Smith's earlier life, I shall not attempt to be exhaustive here, but I shall rather focus on some areas in which the reality of Smith's life and character was at variance with the popular myth of Stevie Smith. I shall draw attention to the strength she showed, despite considerable setbacks, in very successfully carving out a writer's life for herself. The later years of Smith's life were marked by her increased public profile as a poet. Her critical reputation as a poet, which I shall assess in Chapter Three, while never entirely steady, grew considerably during her lifetime with the publication of *Not Waving But Drowning* (1957),¹²⁹ *Selected Poems* (1962)¹³⁰ and *The Frog Prince and Other Poems* (1966).¹³¹ Her work as reviewer appeared in prominent literary publications such as the *Observer* and the *New Statesman*, she broadcast frequently on radio arts programmes, and took part in a popular BBC discussion programme of the 1950s, 'The Brains Trust'. I shall consider Stevie Smith the performer and how she crafted her theatrical image. I shall also

¹²⁸ Barbera and McBrien, *Stevie*, p. 189.

¹²⁹ Smith, *Not Waving But Drowning* (London: Deutsch, 1957).

¹³⁰ Smith, *Selected Poems* (London: Longman, 1962).

¹³¹ Smith, *The Frog Prince and Other Poems* (London: Longman, 1966).

draw attention to practical aspects of Stevie Smith, the survivor; her financial shrewdness, and, importantly, the practicality, perseverance and family feeling she was to show in caring, first for her elderly aunt in the 1960s, and then later in 1969 and 1970, close to the end of her own life, for her sister who had been disabled by a stroke. That Smith continued to write and publish poetry of such high quality and to review regularly, as well as give poetry readings when she could, throughout these demanding later years, proves her determination and dedication to her artistic and intellectual life.

i In performance

Smith's change of fortune with regard to her poetry was particularly connected with her very successful performances in the New Departures live poetry events in the 1960s. These were part of an alternative poetry culture fostered by poet Michael Horovitz. The anti-establishment 'happenings' he organised aimed to popularise poetry, especially for young audiences, by giving 'functioning local habitation in the middle of society to an art which belongs to all people'.¹³² Poet Brian Patten, who read with Smith a few times at these *happenings*, recently reflected on how they must have boosted her morale when the dominant poetry culture of the 1960s was unreceptive: 'I think Michael's championing of her and the younger poets' admiration for her work (and the way she read it) gave her a lift when the more formal poets like Stephen Spender and Kathleen Raine simply didn't "get her".'¹³³ The inherently dramatic qualities of Smith's poems, their array of voices, for instance, as well as their outspokenness and sharp humour, would have contributed to her success with the New Departures youthful audiences. A skilful performer, Smith was adept at inhabiting her poems. She often sang them, either to well-known tunes, or to those she made up, in a rather off-key, but appropriate voice. Brian Patten remarked: 'To hear her read "Do Take Muriel Out" in that plaintive singsong was so evocative, it could melt the heart. She became Muriel.'¹³⁴ Poet Ruth Valentine attended one of these events at the Roundhouse at Chalk Farm, when Stevie Smith performed. This is how she recollects the experience:

¹³² *The Children of Albion: Poetry of the Underground in Britain*, ed. by Michael Horovitz (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 'Afterwords', pp. 316-377, (p. 376).

¹³³ Brian Patten, 'Letter Brian Patten', email to MA, 29 November 2021. Private correspondence.

¹³⁴ Brian Patten, email to MA, 29 November 2021. Private correspondence. 'Do Take Muriel Out', *Collected Poems*, p. 285.

In 1969 poetry was cool. The nearest equivalent to the Roundhouse gig I can think of now is Glastonbury [...] In this atmosphere of youth and celebration, Stevie Smith came on stage. Straight grey hair, bobbed; something like a grey pleated skirt, flat shoes. I think I was shocked that a woman poet could be so radically uncool. This wasn't even the style of a respectable middle-aged woman of the time; it was a throw back perhaps to the 40s, and unfashionable then. She spoke impeccable BBC English of the time, plummy and precise.¹³⁵

Ruth Valentine comments that she thinks she found Smith's poetry 'accessible and appealing'. She added, emphasising the male-dominated poetry world of that time: 'I don't remember any other women reading that night. It was [...] a very male scene, and I didn't question it.' Valentine recounts a prevalent derision of women poets: 'There was (including at university) a ridiculing of women poets of any era. Given which, it's interesting that she was on the bill.'

Stevie Smith's performances, her self-presentation, including the clothes she wore and the contrast she made in that youthful scenario, have contributed to the myth of Smith and her 'eccentricity'. Smith, we are told in Spalding's biography, often wore a pinafore dress and white lace stockings for her readings.¹³⁶ We can see how a woman poet performing may well have femaleness mapped onto her, in that it would be unusual for a performing poet from the male majority to attract comments on his clothes. In such a potentially overpowering male-dominated poetry world, Smith, who had seen the theatrical Edith Sitwell perform in the 1940s and who savoured the dramatic, would have been attracted to the idea of presenting herself to some degree theatrically, as a persona. A woman poet reading in an otherwise all, or mainly, male line-up would certainly have felt exposed. Her self-presentation was a kind of protective mask, enabling her to protect her more vulnerable self, an alternative to having her more 'naked' personal self on view, rather as in her poetry she explored her feelings via an array of characters.

Smith presents, in her poem 'The Songster', a 'Miss Pauncefort' singing: 'And nobody knew what she sang about'.¹³⁷ In the accompanying drawing, a large-bosomed woman stands exposed, mouth wide open, as if on a stage. Contemporary poet and scholar Deryn Rees-

¹³⁵ Ruth Valentine, 'Stevie Smith', email to MA, 29 March 2021. Private correspondence.

¹³⁶ Spalding, *Stevie Smith*, p. 264.

¹³⁷ 'The Songster', *Collected Poems*, p. 20.

Jones has commented on how, through this picture of Miss Pauncefort, ‘we are made immediately uncertain about the status of women’s speech or song’.¹³⁸ It is this kind of painful exposure and emphasis on herself as a woman poet that Smith may well have been anxious to avoid. In doing so, she contributed to the myth of Stevie Smith by presenting herself in a way that she must have known created a dramatic contrast with the wit and outspokenness of her poetry, as well as with the impression given by the other, generally youthful and male, performers. The fact that Smith often wore a pinafore dress and white stockings for her readings projected a childlike or asexual image, fusing, as did her poetry, the child and the adult. While Smith proved her efforts to be in control of her performance, her mode of dress is also likely to have been, fortuitously, what she felt comfortable wearing and what seemed appropriate. Another aspect of her self-presentation was, of course, her chosen name, Stevie. It brought to her an androgyny and was a facet of her uniqueness; she performed as *herself*, but also as one who kept herself apart and was able to comment on societal norms and the human predicament from the margin, rather than foremost as a woman poet.

ii Practical and responsible

A time of fame, her later life was also one of responsibility in which Smith’s practical skills as well as her resilience were called upon. In some ways Smith was extremely down-to-earth, although this aspect of her character is not usually given prominence. Her responsible, worldly side was shown in her work as a reliable book reviewer, as well as in her early employment as a secretary. It also came to the fore in her financial dealings, as abundantly shown in her letters to her financial adviser and friend Ladislav Horvat. Writing to Horvat in 1957, for instance, she speculated with relish and a shrewd irony:

I’ve got £300 on deposit & £300 on current account, so I thought I’d put one of them into something. What do you advise? Naturally I want, as I believe all female punters are supposed not only to want but to expect – quick capital appreciation & a high rate of interest plus absolute security.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Deryn-Rees-Jones, ‘Tirry-Lirry-Lirry All the Same’: The Poetry and Performance of Stevie Smith’, in *Consorting with Angels: Essays on Modern Women Poets* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2005), pp.70-92 (p.76).

¹³⁹ Smith, letter to Ladislav Horvat, 20 September 1957. The underlinings occur in Smith’s original. The Hull History Centre, Stevie Smith Papers 1936-2015 and Related Material [Hull Archive], Letters from Stevie Smith to Ladislav Horvat 1957, U DP197/1.

Another example of her financial astuteness and sense of practical fairness is shown in communications with the editor of *Outposts* poetry magazine, Howard Sergeant. Smith objected to doing an unpaid reading. She writes with an independence of mind, politely, but firmly:

I do think these no-fee readings can be rather wicked. They may, I don't say they always do, exploit the poets by appealing to the poor darlings' vanity. I also fancy it's a hangover from the old PEN custom, when poets reading their poems were given neither fee nor expenses, and not dinner either. This seems to me a bad thing for both poets and poetry, and something no poetry group should countenance [*sic*].¹⁴⁰

She continues by pointing out how letters from organisers of poetry events should be explicit about what will be done for the poets and what is expected of them. She knowingly concluded: 'If people don't make a stand it's the hard up young poets who will suffer.' Again, this is the shrewd, more worldly Smith – Smith the survivor.

We see how Smith, rather than being forever like a cosseted child, as some of her acquaintances described her, had to take charge of the Palmers Green household for several years. The reality was that for a six-year period from 1962 to 1968, when Stevie Smith herself was in her sixties, she was, in contemporary terms, a full-time 'carer' to her aged aunt, combining this responsibility with her work as a poet and book critic. Her aunt became confined, through arthritis, to upstairs and the household duties would have fallen to Smith. This was a time when she was particularly sought after for poetry readings and broadcasts. Her freedom to travel, or even leave the house, was increasingly curtailed, as either a helpful neighbour had to be called upon to look after her aunt, or a short stay in a nursing home had to be organised. The effect on Smith's spirits is indicated by an account of a visit to Palmers Green by Gertrud Häusermann in 1965. Spalding recounts this visitor's experience: 'The sighs and occasional moans that she heard were, she thought, unconscious, a regular accompaniment to Stevie's household tasks.'¹⁴¹

The situation continued and, predictably, worsened. In 1967, Smith wrote to her friend Polly Hill:

¹⁴⁰ Smith, letter to Howard Sergeant, 21 March 1965. Hull Archive, Papers of Howard Sergeant, c. 1930-95, GB50 U DSG/1/5/3.

¹⁴¹ Spalding, p. 279.

My poor aged aunt has been living on the first floor since 1962, i.e. “upstairs” [...] her old hips are arthritic and she can only walk with two sticks and is even so apt to fall over. She is also very deaf and getting a bit blind too.¹⁴²

Confined to such a large extent to Palmers Green, Smith became increasingly lonely. Sociable, and now missing the company of friends, she invited them warmly to visit her. We can imagine how this reduced opportunity for the sociable Smith to see friends would have affected the delicate balance of her well-being. In the same letter to Hill she wrote hospitably, reassuring her of her increased household skills:

Do let me know, if you could come to lunch or tea or something one day. For the last five years I have been getting more and more domesticated and am now quite a good cook, so don't feel apprehensive about that lunch.

Stevie Smith showed devotion to her aunt's welfare, although looking after her must have been a crushing responsibility and her resilience was tested. At one stage she was so frustrated that she struck her aunt, and was then mortified. Spalding describes this incident: 'Stevie once arrived at the home of her near neighbour, Rosemary Cooper, upset because she had slapped Aunt.'¹⁴³ This comment, easily lost in a welter of other details, makes the actual extent of the burden on Smith, less vivid. Earlier biographers, Barbera and McBrien, portray the strength of Stevie Smith's emotions more memorably: 'Once, a friend recalls, Stevie came in tears to tell her that she had struck Aunt and was horrified at what she'd done.'¹⁴⁴ Smith herself was not robust in health, and looking after her aunt must have been a strain on her own health, physically, as well as emotionally; she outlived her aunt (her mother's elder sister) by only three years.

After her aunt's death in 1968, Smith, in poor health by then, showed her family feeling and sense of responsibility by spending long periods of time in 1969 and 1970 in Devon, helping her sister Molly who had been disabled by a stroke. During this period, Smith was even less able to work with ease or see friends. A letter to Kay Dick in October 1970 indicates the pressure she was under:

¹⁴² Smith, letter to Polly Hill, 25 March 1967. Hull Archive, U DP209/3.

¹⁴³ Spalding, p. 245.

¹⁴⁴ Barbera and McBrien, *Stevie*, p. 240.

I have only just got back to London after nearly three months in Devon – Buckfast – with poor Mol. I have crammed all the readings I can into Oct. & shall then be down to Mol again till after Christmas. She is now I suppose as well as she ever will be – but it is not very well. Her left arm is completely paralysed & she can't walk except v. slowly & with a formidable 4-pronged stick.¹⁴⁵

In the same letter, she writes of the impact of her own health problems:

I go about living with bottles of this & that in the way of ghastly drugs which make me feel even worse. Hence, I suppose, feeling so un-enthusiastic about Poetry, Poetry Readings, Poets Talks on tape etc. Everything to do with Poetry except writing it.

These health problems increased in severity and in January 1971 a letter from Smith to Anthony Thwaite showed the onset of the brain tumour from which she was to die in March of that year:

I wasn't very well for about a month & even then I did often find myself using all but quite extraordinarily odd wrong words. It is like the telephones scrambling their eggs. [...] I fell [*sic*] almost dead, I mean ridiculous etc.¹⁴⁶

In 1969, two years before her death, Stevie Smith's standing as a poet was such that she was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry, only the third woman to receive it since the award was instigated in 1934. The first recipient was Ruth Pitter in 1955, and the second Frances Cornford in 1959. The Gold Medal, awarded by a committee and C. Day Lewis, the then poet Laureate who had published her poetry as early as the 1940s as an editor of the publication *Orion*, suggested far-reaching admiration for her work and for her popularity as a poet. Smith's relatively early death at the age of sixty-eight, however, may well have affected her posthumous reputation. Had she lived through the 1970s and beyond, her publishing history as a living poet would have overlapped with that of the rising women poets born in the 1920s and 1930s who were publishing their early poetry books in that decade, poets such as Elaine Feinstein, Anne Stevenson and Fleur Adcock. Her writing life would then have also overlapped with the posthumous ascendancy of the poetry of Sylvia Plath, a poet who admired her work intensely.

¹⁴⁵ Smith, letter to Kay Dick, 2 October 1970. St Louis Archive, MSS103.754.

¹⁴⁶ Smith, letter to Anthony Thwaite, 17 January 1971. Hull Archive, Letters from Philip Larkin and Stevie Smith to Anthony and Ann Thwaite, U DP 214/3/14.

My aim has been to show Stevie Smith, the human being, as distinct from the caricatured version that survives in the public arena and does Smith a disservice. She suffered in some respects, as I have indicated, from the after-effects of the traumatic childhood events she experienced, while these aspects of her inner life also fed her poetry, as did her vibrant self and her enthusiasm for life. Her writing life continued despite periods of emotional and physical adversity. I have shown the capable, down-to-earth side that co-existed with any oddness that was detected (and can surely be understood, given her life circumstances). No biographical study of Smith can be complete without an exploration of her intellectual life and I shall focus on this aspect in Chapter Two via a consideration of her work as a book reviewer, which strongly nourished her poetry. Her very prolific reviewing has often been overlooked in the popular imagination in favour of her early secretarial work, and I shall counter this residue of twentieth-century sexism.

Chapter Two

Stevie Smith: Book Reviewer

Stevie Smith's long, successful and prolific career as a book reviewer has often been overlooked. Instead, the 'myth of Stevie Smith' has highlighted her work as a secretary at Newnes. This emphasis contributes to a general critical undervaluing of her literary output, promoting the idea of her as a 'spinster' poet who lived in the dull suburbs, away from the literary world. Her reviewing was a major part of her life throughout the 1940s, 50s and 60s. As well as casting a perceptive and witty light on the books discussed, these reviews augment our knowledge of Smith herself, her values and the hinterland to her poetry. Through the high quality of her writing on a wide range of fiction and non-fiction for increasingly prestigious publications, the sharp, judicious and knowledgeable mind behind the poems is fully in evidence. That Smith was prodigiously well read is apparent throughout the reviews. Clearly, this wide, often scholarly reading informed her reviews, while the multiplicity and variety of books she reviewed and the thinking she did about them nourished, and often contributed directly to, her poetry. As she wrote of her poems in 1969:

Many come from books I read (I almost never read poetry), especially from the books I am sent for reviewing, which are often books on controversial subjects such as history and theology. From the printed page, a counter argument will strike up in my mind. From this poems often come.¹⁴⁷

Thus this work, while it helped her financially, also served other purposes for Smith. In addition to feeding and inspiring her poetry, it enabled her to play an active part in literary life. It is, to a large extent, an aspect of the legacy of the patriarchal literary world of her lifetime, and beyond that the quality and phenomenal output of her work as a woman reviewer has been suppressed. In Part I, I shall introduce Smith as a book reviewer, considering both her approach to this role and the sexist neglect of her reviewing. In Part II, I shall outline the trajectory of Smith's reviewing career, and discuss some key reviews by

¹⁴⁷ Smith, 'What Poems Are Made Of', repr. in *Me Again*, pp. 127-29 (p. 129). First published in *Vogue*, March 1969. Smith preferred not to read contemporary poets, she disclosed, so as not to threaten the individuality of her own poetry writing. See Chapter Five, p. 146-47 below, focusing on Smith's development as a poet.

Smith and the light they cast on her thinking and her poetry. I shall focus, in Part III, on Stevie Smith's reviewing of books on religion, an important theme in her poetry and a major aspect of her reviewing, especially in the 1960s.

I A woman reviewer

A dedicated reviewer, Stevie Smith reviewed for many periodicals, some of them for ten or fifteen years, producing, in her lifetime, reviews of varying lengths of over 4,000 books.¹⁴⁸ In the early years of 1941–1951, she wrote mainly for *Modern Woman*, a publication of Newnes (the company for which she worked as a secretary), but also for other publications, including the *London Mercury*, *Tribune*, *John O'London's Weekly*, *World Review* and the *Daily Telegraph*. She first reviewed for the *Spectator* in 1953 and for the *New Statesman and Nation* in 1946. In the 1960s she reviewed for the *Listener*. Reviewing both women and men writers, her columns often featured books by women friends and acquaintances, although she did not necessarily fully endorse their work.

A single typical year of the 1940s indicates Smith's huge output: in 1947 she reviewed fourteen books in January and eleven books in February for *Modern Woman* alone, a reviewing haul that included novels by Stella Gibbons, Pearl S. Buck, Monica Dickens and Arthur Koestler, and a collection of essays by C.V. Wedgwood. She maintained this quantity of reviewing during every month of that year, without a break. She was also, at this time, producing reviews for other magazines, working as a secretary and writing poetry. The secretarial work was not arduous and she had spare time in the office.¹⁴⁹ This does not detract, however, from the enormity of her reviewing output during this period of work at Newnes and afterwards. Despite being prone to tiredness, the tiredness that seems to have been partly related to melancholia, there is no sense of weariness in this writing, in either the quantity or the quality of the articles.¹⁵⁰ Reading, for Smith, was a driving force, as was writing, and her enjoyment of reviewing, her penetrative mind and stylistic verve can be witnessed throughout.

¹⁴⁸ Detailed records of Stevie Smith's reviewing are provided in Jack Barbera, William McBrien, and Helen Bajan, eds, *Stevie Smith: A Bibliography* (London: Mansell, 1987). Smith's reviewing of over 4,000 books is my estimate from these pages.

¹⁴⁹ Spalding, p. 52.

¹⁵⁰ 'Being everlastingly "too tired for words" might seem a serious handicap to a writer.' Smith, 'Too Tired for Words' (1956), repr. in *Me Again*, pp. 111–18 (p. 111). See also my 'Introduction', p. 16 above.

The professionalism with which Smith approached her reviewing is clear in the article ‘Statement on Criticism’, which she was well placed to write in 1958.¹⁵¹ Qualities that Smith considers necessary in the reviewer were, in part, those of the legal judge: attention, impartiality, and ‘no respecter of persons’, although she points out an essential difference: ‘the judge does not have to be interesting and enjoyable. I think a critic should be both.’¹⁵² Also important, Smith asserts, is ‘knowledge of life, art, books and people (that is already a good deal) and a gift for writing well’¹⁵³. A book should not be used simply as a peg for the critic’s own views, Smith states, but she adds: ‘In the summing-up we may turn the sharp edge of our own opinions against the author’s argument.’¹⁵⁴ Smith the reviewer, like Smith the poet, shows an awareness of the requirements of her readers – for stimulation, clarity and pleasure. For Smith, a review, like a poem, was frequently a kind of performance. In her reviewing, as in her poetry, her knowledge of books and of the Christian religion, for instance, as well as of people and society, is broad and can seem inexhaustible. Despite being a reviewer with strong opinions, her assessments are marked by balance and fairness, as well as rigour of argument and personal vehemence. She finds her desirable reviewing qualities often absent in reviewers, and, in her ‘Statement on Criticism’, exclaims: ‘how dull the dull ones can be’.¹⁵⁵

Clear indications are given in Virginia Woolf’s seminal 1929 essay on gender and writing, *A Room of One’s Own*, as to why Smith’s reviewing should be overlooked in preference to her secretarial work.¹⁵⁶ Giving a full account of a man’s fear of the woman writer, Woolf describes how the woman’s role, to act as a mirror in which a man could see himself reflected and enlarged, was threatened by a woman who chose to write. A man was especially threatened, and had to defend himself against, the idea of a woman as critic:

Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size [...] That serves to explain in part the necessity that women so often are to men. And it serves to explain how restless they are under her criticism; how impossible it is for her to say to

¹⁵¹ Smith, ‘Statement on Criticism’ (1958), repr. in *Me Again*, pp. 173-74. First published in *P.E.N. News*, Autumn 1958.

¹⁵² Smith, ‘Statement on Criticism’, p. 173.

¹⁵³ Smith, ‘Statement on Criticism’, p. 174.

¹⁵⁴ Smith, ‘Statement on Criticism’, p. 173.

¹⁵⁵ Smith, ‘Statement on Criticism’, p. 174.

¹⁵⁶ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), in *A Room of One’s Own and Three Guineas*, ed. by Anna Snaith (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 3-86.

them this book is bad, this picture is feeble, or whatever it may be, without giving far more pain and rousing far more anger than a man would do who gave the same criticism.¹⁵⁷

This was the picture Woolf painted in 1929. Relatively soon after Stevie Smith's death in 1971, American researchers Susan Sniader Lanser and Evelyn Torton Beck, building on Woolf's findings in a 1979 essay, pointed out that while great efforts had been made to uncover and study women's literature, no similar material had yet been unearthed for women critics.¹⁵⁸ They offer the explanation that a woman writing critically, as opposed to 'creatively', is perceived, in a patriarchal society, as displaying qualities that are more threatening to men than those traditionally associated with women:

While the term *woman writer* is clear evidence of society's basic conception of the artist as male, our comfort with the phrase does suggest some recognition of women as creators. Because the artist has always been permitted a few of those qualities historically attributed to women (sensitivity, expressiveness, sensuality), patriarchal culture has grudgingly learned to tolerate the woman artist; yet it continues to resist, denigrate and mistrust woman as critic, theory-builder, or judge.¹⁵⁹

During Smith's lifetime and beyond it was hard for women who wrote poetry to gain recognition, and, as Lanser and Torton Beck proved, at least equally difficult for women critics. In a survey of twenty-four widely used anthologies of literary criticism containing essays from the Ancient Greeks to the time of their research, these authors found that 'The typical anthology contained twenty to forty essays, with no more than one text written by a woman.'¹⁶⁰ Virginia Woolf was one of the very few women literary essayists acknowledged at the time of the survey. Lanser and Torton Beck made observations on the invisibility of women in this field:

Certainly women have never been as plentiful in any intellectual/theoretical discipline as men, but a paucity is not an absence. Small numbers, however, are easier to erase;

¹⁵⁷ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 28.

¹⁵⁸ Susan Sniader Lanser and Evelyn Torton Beck, '[Why] Are There No Great Women Critics?: And What Difference Does It Make? Make?', in *The Prism of Sex: Essays in the Sociology of Knowledge*, ed. by Julia A. Sherman and Evelyn Torton Beck (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), pp. 79-91.

¹⁵⁹ Sherman and Torton Beck, p. 79.

¹⁶⁰ Sherman and Torton Beck, 'Notes' to 'Why Are There No Great Women Critics?', p. 89.

thus, paucity allows the creation of an *illusion* of absence, and this illusion in turn perpetuates the paucity.¹⁶¹

Stevie Smith's critical work as a reviewer (although she always signed her reviews) is still, in the twenty-first century, largely unknown or ignored. The effect of the blanking out of this aspect of her work is that the myth of Stevie Smith, the secretary-poet of Palmers Green, continues, while the extent of the reading, thought and knowledge behind her poetry is largely unappreciated, as is the contribution she made, with flair and conscientiousness, to critical thought. While Eliot, for example, was renowned in his lifetime, and is renowned today, as both a poet and critic, Smith is not perceived in this way, and this diminishes her status.¹⁶²

Apart from a general sexist disregarding of women's writing, there are other, related, reasons for the overlooking of Smith's reviewing. Laura Severin in *Stevie Smith's Resistant Antics*, her 1997 feminist-orientated, book-length study of Smith, devotes a chapter to the poet's early reviewing between 1941 and 1951.¹⁶³ She cites Lanser and Torton Beck's essay on the invisibility of the female critics and gives reasons that might well provide contributing factors to the overlooking of Smith, the reviewer: the myth of Smith as the literary outsider; the fact that Smith reviewed for such a wide range of publications, not just the literary; and that, while she reviewed fiction and a tremendous range of non-fiction, including biography, religious works, social treatises and, occasionally, art, she did not review poetry, the genre for which she eventually became well known. To this list of reasons offered for the side-lining of her reviewing, we might add Smith's wit as a reviewer and the lightness of touch in the style of her critical work (which echoed the lightness of touch in her poetry). Ambitious male writers may well have felt threatened by the wit, while also finding in it an excuse to take her reviewing work less seriously. In her reviewing, as in her poetry, Smith found her own productive and individual path. This involved no sacrifice of quality. Reading Smith's reviews, and her writing on reviewing, actually raises the standard of what should be expected from a reviewer; integrity, for example, and a pleasurable writerly style.

In her reviewing, as in her poetry, Smith made, in Woolfian terms, a 'room of her own', both fruitful and unconventional. That she chose to live with her aunt in the family home, neither

¹⁶¹ Sherman and Torton Beck, p. 85.

¹⁶² That Eliot largely left book reviewing behind for essays and lectures will have contributed to his reputation.

¹⁶³ Severin, *Stevie Smith's Resistant Antics*, 1997.

marrying nor having children, enabled her to focus on her writing and to sustain a phenomenal level of book reviewing, as well as working full-time for many years as a secretary. In this distinctive and defined space, she proved that she had an instinct for what would inspire the poetry, for which she also made time. Her social positioning as a woman who had grown up in a house of women, who lived in Palmers' Green and who was comparatively self-educated, rather than university educated, made her something of a literary outsider. Smith became, however, through her own talents and determination, an insider, as well as an outsider. As an exceptionally widely read and well-informed reviewer, for instance, she was, in part, an insider. This 'positioning' contributed to her quality as a writer, making her well placed to refresh critical journalism, as well as to write highly original poetry.

II A career in book reviewing

a) Reviewing for *Modern Woman*

Smith's early reviewing in the nineteen forties, mainly, but not exclusively, for the magazine *Modern Woman*, proves that her assessments are already sharp and lively, and that she has a strong sense of the readership. Her secretarial work for Newnes had already familiarised her with the outlook on gender promoted by the company's women's magazines. The ideology of domesticity presented by the Newnes-owned *Modern Woman*, and other magazines which flourished in the 1940s and beyond, is summed up by Martin Pugh in his social history of Britain between the wars:

These magazines prospered on the basis of a standard formula comprising romantic fiction, marriage-and-husband tips, fashion, health and beauty, babycare, cookery, knitting patterns, dress-making, gardening and flower arrangement. In the aftermath of the war they increasingly emphasised household management especially for middle-class readers now struggling to find or to afford domestic servants.¹⁶⁴

While Smith would not have wanted to subscribe to the sexist nature of the woman's role presented by *Modern Woman*, she would not have wished to overtly undermine her

¹⁶⁴ Martin Pugh, *We Danced All Night: A Social History of Britain Between the Wars* (London: Vintage, 2009), p. 174.

employers. Nor did she wish to show disrespect to the readers of the magazines. Laura Severin shows that, in her very numerous reviews for *Modern Woman*, Smith was adept at subtly challenging the magazine's predominant view of women, the view that would now be termed sexist, without alienating readers or too obviously subverting the magazine's editorial stance.

She was, as Severin emphasises, able to pointedly, if subtly, disrupt the tone of the publication:

While the magazine maintains a chirrupy and sometimes syrupy tone, Smith's reviews are playful, ironic, and, at times, even savage. Whatever her intention, her reviews seriously disrupt the conservative gender ideology of the magazine.¹⁶⁵

Severin shows, for example, how Smith makes use of the reviewer's summarising technique, rescuing it from dullness through an adroit selection of detail. In this way she is able to mock plots in which, for instance, unfortunate marriages are speedily resolved into happy ones. George Eliot lamented comparable writing a century earlier in her essay 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists' (1856): 'in novel-writing there are no barriers for incapacity to stumble against, no external criteria to prevent a writer from mistaking foolish facility for mastery'.¹⁶⁶ Smith, featuring a romantic novel *Trailing Glory*, mockingly suggests its lack of realism and unsuspecting entertainment value:

A girl is never too young to know that there are four aces to a pack of cards. But if you must marry a card-sharper, girls, see that he has a half brother who is the living spit of him in looks. Then, according to Ursula Bloom's entertaining new novel, *Trailing Glory* ... , you can switch over – and no questions asked. Perhaps. But we shall continue to teach our daughters that five aces to a pack spells trouble.¹⁶⁷

Here we note how Smith, as she does in her semi-autobiographical *Novel on Yellow Paper*, establishes an intimate bond with the reader by addressing her or him directly.¹⁶⁸ She doesn't pontificate overtly in these reviews about what the reader should or should not be reading.

¹⁶⁵ Severin, *Stevie Smith's Resistant Antics*, p. 78.

¹⁶⁶ George Eliot, *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists* (London: Penguin Books, Great Ideas, 2010), p. 34.

¹⁶⁷ Severin, *Stevie Smith's Resistant Antics*, p. 88., quoting Smith, 'What Shall I Read?', *Modern Woman*, February 1941, p. 22.

¹⁶⁸ Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper*, p. 1. Smith draws the reader in from the outset: 'Read on, Reader, read on and work it out for yourself.'

Severin shows how Smith is slyly critical of the excessive emotionality of some of the novels she describes. She begins one review, for instance: '*My Enemy and I*, by Theresa Charles ... is one of those very long novels in which many delighted readers will lose themselves with the greatest of ease.' She then draws attention to the novel's ridiculousness: 'The heroine is called Amoret Worplesdane (I am not making this up)'. If 'the greatest of ease' sounded alarm bells, the novel is now rendered absurd. Smith concludes: 'There is plenty of action in this book, and enough emotional steam to drive the Royal Scot to Edinburgh and back.'¹⁶⁹ The implication is that there is too much emotion for the action of the novel to sustain, and that while many readers will 'lose themselves' in it, discerning readers will not.

Smith rarely dismissed books entirely. Her reviewing stance was strategic, however, and she was capable of being blunt when not reviewing for a magazine owned by her employer. In a round-up of novels reviewed for *John O'London's Weekly* in 1947, she despairs robustly:

Is there anything in any of these novels to appeal to the intelligence, the imagination or the heart? There is not. [...] One might not complain so loudly about this sort of thing if paper grew on every bush.¹⁷⁰

The reviewing of romantic fiction for *Modern Woman* would have added to her personal knowledge and experience, feeding Smith's writing on the gender roles that she explored and often satirised in her poems. During this 1940s' reviewing period, she would have been producing, for her collection *Harold's Leap* (1950), poems that cast a sceptical eye on relationships and gender, for example 'Wretched Woman', 'The Rehearsal', and 'My Hat', which begins: 'Mother said if I wore this hat / I should be certain to get off with the right sort of chap'.¹⁷¹

By highlighting the shortcomings of various romantic novels, Smith assisted readers of *Modern Woman* to turn away from being merely passive consumers. She also encouraged her readers to read more widely via the range of books she reviewed in the publication, which featured, for instance, fiction of quality, biography, memoirs, books on history, religion, anthropology and travel. She included autobiographical books that cast a realistic eye on wartime roles, such as her friend Inez Holden's *Night Shift*, reviewed in 1942, in which the

¹⁶⁹ Severin, *Stevie Smith's Resistant Antics*, p. 90, quoting Smith, 'Books', *Modern Woman*, August 1941, p. 20.

¹⁷⁰ Stevie Smith, *John O'London's Weekly*, 'Books: What Are They About?' 61.1320 (1947), 633. Paper would still have been rationed in 1947.

¹⁷¹ Smith, *Collected Poems*, p. 362.

author reveals the hardships and boredom of life as a munitions worker.¹⁷² Smith encourages her readers to use the library and to seek out determinedly books on a variety of subjects:

A word about public libraries. They will always, if pressed sufficiently hard (you do the pressing) get for you any book that you want, provided that it is a non-fiction book. This means that all history, criticism, biography, poetry, is at your beck and call. Make a nuisance of yourself in pursuit of a good book, it is a good cause.¹⁷³

While drawing her readers' attention to a range of books, Smith tactfully, and shrewdly, suggests that her readers might already have these interests. This advocacy of libraries is also revealing of the diversity of Smith's personal reading habits and her own avid borrowing of library books. In a response to a 1951 questionnaire on her writing, unsurprisingly Smith placed books first in her list of 'Other Predominant Interests', apart from her writing.¹⁷⁴

Although Severin sees Smith's early reviewing as more radically feminist than her later reviewing for the more prestigious publications, it is impossible, in my view, to make such a definite demarcation. Severin asserts:

Smith's reviews in the *Spectator* and other such magazines, while sometimes outrageous in their opinions, largely preserve the conventions of the reviewer as expert judge and the reader as willing receiver of the reviewer's expert opinions.¹⁷⁵

It is true that in her reviews for *Modern Woman* Smith does manage very obviously to suppress her role as 'expert judge', but her writing for the more literary publications also maintains a closer than usual rapport with an imagined reader. Her reviews, for all their wit, are more heartfelt in tone than those of the traditional authoritarian reviews of that time, and she takes the reader into her confidence. Her emphasis on opinions 'grown out of life and books and pictures and friendships' suggests a reviewer who shares aspects of her life and experience and whose approach is unusually open and integrated.¹⁷⁶ The personal (and fearless) nature of her reviewing is apparent when she suggests in her 'Statement on

¹⁷² Smith, review of Inez Holden, *Night Shift* (1941), *Modern Woman*, February 1942, p. 24.

¹⁷³ Severin, *Stevie Smith's Resistant Antics*, p. 81, quoting Smith, 'Do You Make the Best Use of Your Book Page?', *Modern Woman*, December 1946, p. 42.

¹⁷⁴ Smith's response to a questionnaire sent by Marjorie Boulton on 26 May 1951. 'Other Predominant Interests; "Books, pictures. Scenery, especially fields, rivers, sea, cliffs, pathways & woods: also weather & ruins."' Tulsa Archive, 176.012.115.002.

¹⁷⁵ Severin, *Stevie Smith's Resistant Antics*, p. 79.

¹⁷⁶ Smith, 'Statement on Criticism', p.173.

Criticism' that critics sign their names to articles, as she herself did, rather than remaining anonymous, as was sometimes the custom.¹⁷⁷

b) A wealth of reading

Smith's reviews, particularly those of the 1950s and 1960s, are marked by the kaleidoscopic wealth of books reviewed and her knowledge and opinion on a correspondingly wide range of subjects, on literature, religion, art, and history, for example. Generally, she ensures through her humour, through her honest and lucid perceptions, and also through her knowledge worn lightly, that the reader is regarded as an informed and engaged equal who will usually understand Smith's viewpoint even without necessarily sharing it. That she did not generally review poetry, apart from her avowed fear of influence, may have been, in part, a wise move, in that she spared herself the risky task of being honest about the publications of fellow poets.

Hers is a questioning voice, and one of experience rather than of naïveté. While her opinions are sharp, she can also be sympathetically aware of human frailty. Reviewing Vera Brittain's *Testament of Experience*, for example, in July 1957 (a book that calls 'a memoir that reads like a novel'), Smith writes of the complex nature of idealism:

All the good causes of our time, in their peculiarly human mixture of good intentions and imperfect performance, their flights, fancies, good sense and nonsense, are here, along with the famous names they are associated with – Dick Sheppard, George Lansbury, H. G. Wells, Gandhi ...¹⁷⁸

Of Brittain's pacifist views, she writes: 'no country that was not a successful fighting country could afford to cherish her'.¹⁷⁹ Sometimes the relationship between a review and one of her poems is very direct. Of Arthur Koestler's *The Age of Longing* in 1951 she writes shrewdly about both optimism and pessimism:

Another point that strikes one in this, as in other books he has written, is his optimism. For surely that preoccupation with human misbehaviour, as if there were something noteworthy about it, is optimistic. The pessimist – or should one say the

¹⁷⁷ Smith, 'Statement on Criticism', p. 173.

¹⁷⁸ Smith, 'On the Side of the Angels', review of Vera Brittain, *Testament of Experience* (1957), repr. in *Me Again*, pp. 193-94 (p. 193). First published in the *Observer*, 14 July 1957.

¹⁷⁹ Smith, 'On the Side of the Angels', p. 194.

Old Soul? – must surely be surprised not by human vice but by human virtue. It is that which needs explaining.¹⁸⁰

These words are echoed in her conclusion about man in her poem ‘Away, Melancholy’ featured in her collection *Not Waving But Drowning* (1957): ‘It is his virtue needs explaining, / Not his failing.’¹⁸¹

Many of her reviews, unsurprisingly for a poet-reviewer, emphasise language, as in her unexpected comment on Agatha Christie’s *Endless Night*, one of Smith’s 1967 ‘Books of the Year’ in the *New Statesman*:

After a few months I can read it again. In order to make it a bit different, I often read her in French. It is the sort of *franglais* (sometimes) that makes the General [de Gaulle] so cross: ‘Est-ce que vous avez booké les sleeping?’ ‘J’ai stoppé mon car’; it is very exotic.’¹⁸²

This playful relish of linguistic blending is sometimes a feature of her poems, as in the French and English of ‘Si peu séduisante’, in which she conjures a ten-year-old girl on a train: ‘*Elle portait son* school uniform, / *Si peu séduisante*, / And a perfectly frightful little pair of shoes’.¹⁸³ Smith’s interests are not confined to the literary ‘highbrow’, and she finds her own very particular delight in a range of books. Far from the whimsicality with which some commentators have associated her, the qualities she admired included a down-to-earth practicality, as shown, for instance, in a 1946 review of a market trader’s memoir *I Had a Pitch on the Stones*. She writes of the author Jane Brown: ‘Jane is herself the epitome of market life at its best – brave, resourceful, vigorous and cheerful. Her book is a brave and entertaining slice of somebody else’s business.’¹⁸⁴

Stevie Smith appreciated emotional complexity when she encountered it in the fiction she reviewed, such as L. P. Hartley’s exploration of a brother and sister bond in the *Eustace and Hilda* trilogy, of which she wrote in 1948: ‘the subtlety veiled, the claws sheathed, the smile

¹⁸⁰ Smith, review of Arthur Koestler, *The Age of Longing* (1951), *World Review* (August 1951), 78.

¹⁸¹ ‘Away, Melancholy’, *Collected Poems*, p. 378.

¹⁸² Smith, review of Agatha Christie, *Endless Night* (1967), ‘Books of the Year’, *Observer*, 10 December 1967, p. 9.

¹⁸³ ‘Si peu séduisante’, *Collected Poems*, p. 504.

¹⁸⁴ Smith, ‘Tales of the Caledonian Market’, review of Jane Brown, *I Had a Pitch on the Stones* (1946), *John O’London’s Weekly*, 55.1, 291 (1946), p. 183.

only is visible. But the theme is tragic in the grand manner'.¹⁸⁵ Another novel that Smith praised highly was Marguerite Yourcenar's penetrating, concentrated story of a love triangle with a homosexual undertone, *Coup de Grâce*: 'this eerie tale so just and imaginative and so memorable'.¹⁸⁶ Significant in terms of Smith's emotional life is her 1961 review of Una Troubridge's account of her lesbian relationship with Marguerite Radcliffe Hall: *The Life and Death of Radcliffe Hall*.¹⁸⁷ Smith herself had, as recorded by Frances Spalding, at least one same-sex relationship.¹⁸⁸ An intimate relationship with a woman is hinted at in poems by Smith such as 'The Pleasures of Friendship' and 'The Broken Friendship'.¹⁸⁹ She writes, in her review of Lady Troubridge's book, with an unusual strength of warm feeling:

This book may seem to some a study in self-delusion. It does not seem so to me because out of whatever dreams they had came the realities of love and friendship. Good luck to them, one thinks. In a desperate world, in the fearful business of being a human creature, they made a corner for themselves and were happy.¹⁹⁰

She also approves of Troubridge's restraint in writing about her lesbian relationship, a writerly restraint that Smith also demonstrated.

c) Case studies of Smith's book reviewing

i 'Wild Fighting Writer': *The Life and Works of D. H. Lawrence* by Harry T. Moore¹⁹¹

Although not uncritical, Smith shows, in her 1952 review of Harry T. Moore's book, an affinity with D. H. Lawrence that casts light on her own writing and values. In her semi-autobiographical *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936), Pompey, the character based on Smith

¹⁸⁵ Spalding, p. 197, quoting Smith, 'The Story of Eustace', review of L. P. Hartley, *Eustace and Hilda* (1947). First published in *The Windmill*, Vol. 10, (1948) 60-4.

¹⁸⁶ Spalding, p. 271, quoting Smith's review of Marguerite Yourcenar, trans. Grace Frick, *Coup de Grâce* (1957). First published in the *Daily Telegraph*, 13 November 1957, p. 13.

¹⁸⁷ Smith, review of Una, Lady Troubridge, *The Life and Death of Radcliffe Hall* (1961), repr. in *Me Again*, pp. 191-2. First published in the *Listener*, 7 December 1961. Radcliffe Hall's ground-breaking memoir *The Well of Loneliness* (New York: Covici Friede, 1932) features in Will May's list: 'Books Reviewed, Owned, Or Influencing Stevie Smith', May, *Stevie Smith and Authorship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 230.

¹⁸⁸ Spalding writes briefly of 'an affair' Smith had with a woman referred to as 'Mary', in the 1940s, not long after the war. Spalding, p. 183.

¹⁸⁹ See my discussion below of Smith's poem 'The Pleasures of Friendship', pp. 119-21.

¹⁹⁰ Smith, *The Life and Death of Radcliffe Hall*, p. 192.

¹⁹¹ Smith, 'Wild Fighting Writer', review of Harry T. Moore, *The Life and Works of D. H. Lawrence*, (1951), in *John O'London's Weekly*, 61.1434 (1952), 5.

herself, borrows and reads a European unexpurgated edition of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (first published privately in Italy in 1928) on a train in Germany.¹⁹² Pompey was keen to devour it: 'I acted real quickly. I said: If you're going to sleep, would you mind if I read your book for a bit?'¹⁹³ She continues, indicating Smith's early wide knowledge of Lawrence's available published works:

I have a great respect for D.H. since I read his *Kangaroo*, his *Lost Girl*, his memoir of M.M. that certainly was his good one, and since I read his short story [sic] *St Mawr and The Rocking Horse Winner*. These of his, with *The Plumed Serpent*, are the ones I like best.¹⁹⁴

Pompey did not mention Lawrence's poetry in this reading. In her review of Moore's book, however, Smith quotes the second and final verse of his early poem 'Discord in Childhood':

Within the house two voices arose in anger, a slender lash
Whistling delirious rage, and the dreadful sound
Of a thick lash booming and bruising, until it drowned
The other voice in a silence of blood, 'neath the noise of the ash.

This is a rare example of Smith quoting, and paying a direct tribute to, a twentieth-century poet. She observes that the poem 'shows the conflict going on indoors, but outside is the beautiful natural world and the ash tree waving about'. Clearly Smith, with her own background of parental disharmony and separation, would have understood the pressure of the 'discord' that she writes 'bit deep' into the young Lawrence. She would also have understood the solace and joy he took in the natural world, as she herself did in her local Grovelands Park, in the Hertfordshire woods, and on visits to the Norfolk coast. Smith, who often used archaisms deliberately in poems such as 'The Bereaved Swan' and 'Fafnir', shows her poetic acuteness in her response to dated language in Lawrence's poem: 'It took Lawrence a little time to weed out such poor words as 'neath'.

Stevie Smith would, doubtless, also have recognised something of her parents' incompatibility in her focus on Lawrence's clashing, unsuited parents, the 'ladylike, denying, intellectual woman, withering in sadness, and the rough, primitive, aggressive man'. She comments of his parental background: 'the father went off more and more and the little

¹⁹² Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper*, p. 81. The unexpurgated edition of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was not published in the UK until 1960.

¹⁹³ Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper*, p. 81.

¹⁹⁴ Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper*, p. 82.

children were roped in more and more on the side of respectability'. Perhaps unconsciously, Smith felt regrettably cut off, through her father's absence, from the adventurousness and lack of conformity that was akin to her own. Smith writes, in this review, of the liberation of women in Lawrence's later stories: 'But in the later tales, like the beautiful *St. Mawr*, it is the dandified man who is the worm at the heart, and it is the women who "ride away".' This spirit of female adventure may have provided inspiration for poems of her own, such as the incantatory 'I rode with my darling...', a poem in which the male figure returns, but the woman rides off into the dark wood, ignoring the voices that bid her go back:

And in the pale light stood a tall tower without windows
And a mean rain fell and the voice of the tower spoke,
Do not stay alone in the dark wood at night.¹⁹⁵

Moore's book, Smith writes approvingly, 'drives the reader to Lawrence himself, to read and read again the battered fighting wild creature's own novels, short stories and poems, to pick and choose among them with a surer touch, to understand and appreciate this great writer'. It is likely that Lawrence's directness, outspokenness and individuality would have had a resonance for Smith. Of his early novels, she perceives 'some of the turgid derivative prose passages' that he learned to 'weed out'. In her view: 'he wrote best from feelings of wildness'. This is true also of Smith's own best poems, including those with a visionary quality, culminating in a group of powerful late poems in her posthumously published collection.¹⁹⁶

Smith appreciates Moore's blend of Lawrence's life and work: 'No book about D.H. Lawrence could be better than this total approach, as he calls it; it is absolutely first class.' She fears that, as she may well have feared with her own writing, 'readers enjoying the book may underrate the keen brain and heart that wrote it. He has a dry wit, too, that is very agreeable.' Smith, herself a writer of experience, rather than innocence, finds an innocence in Lawrence that she considers admirable, but sometimes absurd. Ultimately, she shows an affinity with this writer, despite his convictions or stances with which she might disagree: 'Of course there is something absurd in Lawrence, as there is in Blake, but it is an absurdity one would rather have a part in than all the plain sense in the world.'

¹⁹⁵ 'I rode with my darling', *Collected Poems*, p. 296.

¹⁹⁶ Smith, *Scorpion and Other Poems* (London: Longman, 1972).

ii Hans Christian Andersen: 'Translation Fidgets'¹⁹⁷

The fairytale motif was to become increasingly important to Smith's poetry. In 1958 she reviewed in depth two new Andersen translations by R.P. Kweigan (World Edition) and Reginald Spink (Dent) respectively, sometimes comparing them with the old Everyman edition of Andersen with which she was familiar. This review is valuable in showing her knowledge and opinions of his stories, the detailed attention she gives, with her poet's ear, to language, and her balanced comparisons. Smith advises caution in translating Andersen: 'He is a very difficult genius to catch in translation, being apt to sound too jaunty and too pious.' She comments on an earlier translation, indicating her familiarity with it: 'Surely the old Everyman was pretty good?' Of Kweigan's newly published World Edition she approves the fact that it is translated from the Danish, rather than the German as was often the case. Comparing Gerda's hymn in 'The Snow Queen' in three translations, she considers R.P. Keigwen's version to be 'rather flat': 'The valley glows with many a rose, and there we meet the Sacred Child'. Reginald Spink, in the Dent translation, gives a rhyme of which Smith, herself drawn to the songlike, thinks that children will approve: 'Then seek your Saviour down below. For roses in the valleys grow'. She finds the earlier translation in the old Everyman edition closer to Andersen in feeling and more pleasurable in syntax: 'Where roses deck the flowery vale, There Infant Jesus, we thee hail'. Ever practical, in 'The Tinder Box' where the old lady puts on, in Spink's version, her 'waders' to run after the princess, Smith prefers Keigwen's 'overboots', because you cannot run in waders. She wonders, though, if the translator means Wellingtons or salmon-fishing boots. Smith considers that the drawback to the shorter, single-volume new publication is that many of her favourite stories have been left out. With her appreciation of directness and her preoccupation with cruelty, she finds both translators of the new publications 'admirably unmuffling' when 'horrors' occur in the stories.

Endorsing the more compendious of the two publications, she shows her own attraction to Andersen: 'the more you read of Andersen the more you want'. She conjures his flavour, one that chimes, in part, with the tough aspects of her own childhood, as well as with her religious upbringing: 'It is a mood you sink into, with shadows across it of great suffering and great endurance, and the sweet sickly Christian feelings coming in that seem so Victorian'. She

¹⁹⁷ Smith, 'Translation Fidgets', review of Hans Christian Andersen, trans. by R.P. Keigwen, *Fairy Tales*: 1,2 and 3, World Edition (1957), and Hans Christian Andersen, trans. by Reginald Spinks, *Hans Andersen's Fairy Tales* (1958), *Spectator*, 6780 (1958), p. 748.

shows, however, a contemporary awareness when she wonders what children of today, ‘both tougher and more pampered’ will make of the stories. In another review of fourteen children’s books, published in the same year, she laments, showing her own taste but also an open acceptance of difference of taste: ‘I should have liked more fairy stories than there are here, but that is the luck of the draw. Perhaps children like novels better anyway.’¹⁹⁸

iii Paintings and drawings

As a book reviewer, Stevie Smith is a keen judge of art, including paintings and illustrations, proving her knowledge and depth of interest. She demonstrates a wide familiarity, as well as a deep interest. Her own artwork, the drawings featured in her poetry collections, is expressive and accomplished, her drawings often adding to the poems by emphasising an aspect, or by casting a slant light on them. In response to the 1951 questionnaire, Smith gave ‘pictures’ as second in her list of interests.¹⁹⁹ ‘My Muse’ (1960), Smith’s article on her poetry, opens with the evocation of a painting in the National Gallery, ‘A Muse inspiring a Court Poet’.²⁰⁰ ‘Private Views’, an earlier article from 1938 published in the *New Statesman*, reflects critically on pictures in a Royal Academy exhibition she finds ‘smug in a mediocrity that is sometimes quite excruciating’.²⁰¹ Considering mere competence sad, she laments the lack of bold artistic inspiration: ‘This ruthlessness of a great artist who takes what he did not make and makes of it something that only he can make, is absent from many of our academy canvases.’²⁰² She wishes that Goya and Corot were on the Academy’s walls. The impact on Smith of the former, and of El Greco and Ribera, in this fierce, uncompromising school of painting, is shown in her early poem with its arrestingly rhymed opening: ‘The painters of Spain / Dipped their brushes in pain’.²⁰³

¹⁹⁸ Smith, ‘Skating to Ely’, review of fourteen children’s books, *Spectator*, 6805 (1958) 775.

¹⁹⁹ Smith, response to Boulton’s 1951 ‘Questionnaire’. Tulsa Archive, 012.115.002. (See p. 60 above).

²⁰⁰ Smith, ‘My Muse’, p. 125.

²⁰¹ Smith, ‘Private Views’ repr. in *Me Again*, pp. 130-33 (p. 131). First published in the *New Statesman and Nation*, 7 May 1938.

²⁰² Smith, ‘Private Views’, p. 132.

²⁰³ ‘Spanish School’, *The Collected Poems* (2015), p. 17. Smith’s alter ego Pompey in her 1938 novel *Over the Frontier* describes how the great painters of Spain, including Goya, were unable to avoid the cruelty they witnessed: ‘but must tip their paint brushes with the colours of the physical agony to portray the more subtle agony of the spirit’. *Over the Frontier* (London: Cape, 1938, repr. London: Virago, 1980), p. 62.

Smith's knowledge of, and responsiveness to, art is also exemplified in a 1953 review of Graham Reynolds' *Painters of the Victorian Scene*.²⁰⁴ She begins by commenting wryly on the author's endeavour: 'to give a clear picture of what the Victorians looked like and did, or rather, since sentiment rules, what they thought they looked like and did'. She shows her discernment in being able to pick out the few truly accomplished painters from the book: Sickert, Whistler, Greaves, Stevens, Hughes, Dadd, Millais, and Holman Hunt, unexpectedly adding Samuel Butler to the list. She misses colour in many of the book's illustrations, evoking the absent pre-Raphaelite colours vividly: 'those curious greens and violets, the strange new quality of luminescence in that inspired movement'. Colour was important to Smith's poetry and in paintings, particularly the colours outdoors. (In a 1969 essay 'What Poems Are Made Of' she would write: 'Colours are what drive me most strongly, colours in painted pictures, but, most strongly of all, colours out of doors in the fresh cool air'²⁰⁵). In an effort to be fair to the author in her review, she suggests, regarding the lack of colour, that most readers would already be familiar with the paintings and that 'the reproductions serve as a useful reminder of balance and composition'.

While she gives a balanced assessment of Reynold's book, Smith ends the review boldly by giving her own more general, informed comment: "'Literariness" – the picture that tells a story – is the bane of British art.' She adds that this enduring literariness is so inferior to European painting of that time: 'How far this is from true painting, how very far from the vigour and beauty and everlasting refreshment of the nineteenth-century painting that was starting up and going on across the channel.' Smith explains how a painting such as Rembrandt's 'Susannah and the Elders' is, in contrast, foremost a Rembrandt painting, rather than a painting that tells a story. The Victorian exceptions, in her view, are artists such as Sickert, Whistler, and the best of the pre-Raphaelites.

As one whose poems were accompanied by her own drawings, it is unsurprising that Smith often takes the opportunity, when it presents itself, to comment on a book's illustrations. In 1963, reviewing appreciatively Colette's memoir *The Blue Lantern*, Smith recalls her early reading of the author: 'I remember first reading "Claudine à l'École" – when I was about 18.

²⁰⁴ Smith, 'Victorian Mirror', review of Graham Reynolds, *Painters of the Victorian Scene* (1953), *John O'London's Weekly*, 62.1508 (1953), 503.

²⁰⁵ Smith, 'What Poems Are Made Of', repr. in *Me Again*, ed. by Barbera & McBrien, pp. 127-29 (p. 127). First published in *Vogue*, 15 March 1969.

I particularly liked the pictures, beautiful line drawings, as lively and malicious as the story.’²⁰⁶ Although the drawings by Henri Mirande with which Smith had an early familiarity are much more detailed and more specifically illustrative than her own, it seems likely that, with their humour, expressiveness and finesse, they were at least one of the influences on her artwork.



Figure 2

Figure 2 above is an example of one such drawing by Henri Mirande from Colette’s *Claudine à l’École* which might, in its playful irony, have inspired Smith.²⁰⁷ The work of cartoonists Thurber and Vicky, and drawings by the painter and draughtsman Topolski, are assessed with rigour in a later review ‘Party Views’ (1967).²⁰⁸ Commenting on the Thurber collection, while often admiring of the cartoonist’s captions, she is critical of his drawings: ‘Subtlety has never been his strong point’. She finds his illustrations to some famous poems ‘almost on a schoolboy level of intelligence and scribble’. She does, however, in a section of the book on Europe, approve ‘a very good drawing – going rather deeper than most of them – of a melancholy prostitute leading a hopeful tourist upstairs’. As satire is a strong vein in her own poetry, it is unsurprising that she particularly admires the political cartoons of Low (David Low), who satirised the dictators of his day. Smith praises how Low, unlike the cartoonist Vicky, has ‘the wisdom that makes for balance’. In her assessment of Vicky, she also objects that some of his less successful drawings are ‘touched with arrogance and sentimentality’.

²⁰⁶ Smith, ‘Pleasures of Old Age’, review of Colette, trans. by R. Senhouse, *The Blue Lantern* (1963), *Observer*, 7 July 1963, p. 23.

²⁰⁷ Drawing by Henri Mirande, Willy et Colette, *Claudine à l’École* (Paris: Albin Michel, c.1913), p. 65. First published, 1900.

²⁰⁸ Smith, ‘Party Views’, review of James Thurber, *Thurber and Company* (1966), Vicky [Victor Weisz], *A Memorial Volume* (1967), and Feliks Topolski, *Asia the Arena: Topolski’s Chronicle* (1966), *Listener*, 77.1991 (1967), 22.

She is critical of his portrayal of children: ‘As if children [...] were somehow “innocent” and not, as they obviously are, the young of their species.’ Unsentimental in her own portrayal of children, Smith is aware of the cruelty and anarchy of childhood in poem such as ‘To Carry the Child’, and the sado-masochism of ‘Seymour and Chantelle’. Of Feliks Topolski’s drawings, apart from noting the impracticality of the huge folded drawings included in the *Chronicle*, her criticism is that the drawings are unclear, clarity being an aspect of her own line drawings.

III Religion – views and counterviews

Smith’s robust, lively assessment of religious publications constituted a large part of her book reviewing, particularly in the 1960s. While indicating her agnosticism, these reviews, in addition to her poetry, prove how integral a consideration of religion still was to her thinking. Stevie Smith was brought up a Christian, attending the Anglican church of St John’s in Palmers Green. In her 1968 talk, ‘Some Impediments to Christian Commitment’, she was to affirm her warm early memories of this religious upbringing: ‘I was brought up in a household where there was great love and a great faith in the Christian religion according to the tenets of the Church of England. I enjoyed my religion, I enjoyed the church services’.²⁰⁹ As she explores in this talk, however, she was, with her practical and rational mind, to become extremely ambivalent in her views on the Christian religion. She became sharply aware of cruelty, the cruelty that she believed lay in all of us, and the cruelty of the concept of hell, and this made her question: ‘How could a God of Love condemn anybody at all, even a person as wicked as the most wicked person could be, even a great angel so rebellious as Lucifer Star of the Morning Sky, to eternal fiery punishment?’²¹⁰ Smith’s argument with the tenets of the Christian religion was at the heart of many of her poems throughout her oeuvre, from the dialectical ‘God and the Devil’ in her first poetry book, to ‘Angel Boley’, the rich and complex late poem of religion and morality, in her posthumously published collection *Scorpion and Other Poems* (1972).

When Smith asked in a 1956 review of a life of Christ, *Jesus in his Time*, ‘What will the religious-minded agnostic make of this book?’ she may well have been describing her own

²⁰⁹ Smith, ‘Some Impediments to Christian Commitment’, in *Me Again*, pp. 153-70 (p. 154). Script of a talk Smith gave to the St. Anne’s Society, 9 December 1968.

²¹⁰ Smith, ‘Some Impediments to Christian Commitment’, p. 155.

position.²¹¹ She never totally abandoned the idea of a God, in that she thought there was no harm in acting as if a God of absolute love were in charge of the universe, but there could be harm in actually believing blindly that this were so. Smith considered that there were distinct benefits to the world of religious uncertainty: 'Nor do I find the world of uncertainty, to which my thoughts draw me back, a cruel place; there is room in it for love, joy, virtue, affection, and room too for imagination.'²¹²

Her fear of the power of religion, and the cruelty carried out in its name, is a feature of Smith's 1958 essay on *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot's historical play of 1935, which was her contribution to the volume: *T. S. Eliot: A Symposium for his Seventieth Birthday*.²¹³ In this commissioned piece she displays the quality she considered important in her 'Statement on Criticism': 'the judge-like (and God-like) quality of being no respecter of persons'.²¹⁴ Despite Eliot's literary high-standing and the fact that she is contributing to a 'Birthday Symposium', Smith speaks her mind boldly. She contends that, in the play, Eliot

makes his archbishop so truly good and strong a man that we may forget to ask, Were they all like this, is the Church so sweet a thing, does it smell so sweet, was it not already, at this time of Becket, a bride of Christ somewhat stained with blood and no less greedy for political power than the State?²¹⁵

Showing her grasp of the history of church and state, she suggests: 'It might be argued that the martyrdom of Becket put back by about 400 years the reforms to which Mr Eliot gives so glib and derogatory a character.'²¹⁶ For Smith, Eliot exposes the Christian response to cruelty which, with terrible irony, eliminates reason and the perception of the Christian church's own cruelty and ruthlessness. At the end of this closely argued critical response to *Murder in the Cathedral*, she pays tribute to Eliot while strongly conveying the need to read him with a questioning, reasoning mind: 'He is a powerful writer and one to pay homage to and be thankful for, he stirs our thoughts and does no harm, if our minds are cool he does no harm but gives pleasure. Not every great writer is so enjoyable, not by a long way.'²¹⁷

²¹¹ Smith, 'A Life of Christ', review of M. Daniel-Rops, *Jesus In his Time* (1956), in *Me Again*, p. 202-03 (p. 202). First published, *Observer*, 19 February 1956.

²¹² Smith, 'Some Impediments to Christian Commitment', p. 153.

²¹³ Smith, 'History or Poetic Drama?', Neville Braybrooke, ed., *T. S. Eliot: A Symposium for his Seventieth Birthday* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1958), pp. 170-75.

²¹⁴ Smith, 'Statement on Criticism', p. 173.

²¹⁵ Smith, 'History or Poetic Drama?', p. 171.

²¹⁶ Smith, 'History or Poetic Drama?', p. 173.

²¹⁷ Smith, 'History or Poetic Drama', p. 175.

According to Anthony Thwaite, who published her reviews in the *New Statesman* in the 1960s, particularly offering her books on religion to review, editors valued Smith as a reviewer ‘because she was trenchant, serious, unphoney, and readable’.²¹⁸ For some readers in the second half of the twentieth century, she may well have captured the essence of their doubt in the tenets of the Christian religion. This fierce questioning, its thrust and variety, is an important aspect of her critical journalism and of her poetry.

a) Settled and unsettled beliefs

Showing a fair and comprehensive approach, Smith is aware of the struggles of belief, as well as the consolations of religion for those of strong faith. She writes in a 1946 review of E. A. Peers’ *Mother of Carmel*, a life of St. Teresa: ‘there is something bracing in the contemplation of a rock-like Christian orthodoxy, even if one is not of the faith’.²¹⁹ Her appreciation of the spiritual life is insightful and realistic, and she conjures with empathy the struggle of the nuns:

In the black moments of the search they know the night of the soul, of which the Catholic poet Hopkins writes when says: “Bitter my taste, my taste is me.” But in the happier moments they know a close companionship with God, not dark or strained, but gay and even playful [...] at the highest moment of all there is no playfulness, no self-consciousness, however innocent, no self at all, but only silence in God.²²⁰

It seems likely that this empathy of Smith’s is born, in part, from her own early faith, her struggles with it, and its waning. Clearly well acquainted with the work of Teresa, this ‘formidable’ saint, Smith concludes her review by endorsing Peers’s advice that readers should turn from reading the excerpts in his book, to reading what she terms ‘the full and great originals’. Smith’s own wavering, questioning and paradoxical thoughts on religion are explored in many of her poems. ‘Egocentric’, for example, begins with the protest:

What care I if good God be

²¹⁸ Thwaite, ‘Waving’, *London Review of Books*, 10.19 (1988).

²¹⁹ Smith, ‘Warrior Saint’, review of E. A. Peers, *Mother of Carmel: A Portrait of St. Teresa of Jesus* (1945), *John O’London’s Weekly*, 64.1276 (1946), p. 163.

²²⁰ Smith may have been quoting from memory as the actual quotation from Hopkins’ sonnet ‘I Wake and Feel’ is ‘Bitter would have me taste: my taste was me’. (‘I Wake and Feel’, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works*, ed. by Catherine Phillips (Oxford: Oxford World’s, Classics/Oxford University Press), p. 166.

If he be not good to me,
 If he will not hear my cry
 Nor heed my melancholy midnight sigh?²²¹

Smith ends a later poem 'The Reason' with a succinct rhyming couplet, underlining an internal debate: 'I can't make up my mind / If God is good, impotent or unkind.'²²² In her poem 'God the Eater', she presents the force of her ambivalence: 'There is a god in whom I do not believe / Yet to this god my love stretches'.²²³ With a lightning change of mood she then evokes a ravening, monstrous god whom she hopes darkly and desperately will 'crunch and feed upon' her after her death, eating 'Everything I have been and have not been'.

Reviewing Simone Weil's letters in 1965, Smith, while appreciating the philosopher's comments on suffering, remarks on the unquestioning, obdurate nature of Weil's Christian faith: 'Her cocksureness is too firmly rooted in innocence and energy to be offensive; it is perhaps the humility of laziness she lacks.'²²⁴ Of Weil's belief that truth can only come from outside us, from God, Smith observes: 'The notion that we want truth to come from God, want there to be a God of Love and Power to tell us the truth and pay attention to us, never came to trouble her.' For Smith, the concept of a God and our desire for God cannot easily be separated. Smith again questions belief in God as a self-fulfilling prophecy in a 1966 review of *Dreaming Back: Nostalgia for Paradise* by the Roman Catholic Sister Sylvia Mary: 'Man has always wished for religion [...] because the wish exists, therefore God exists'.²²⁵ Comparative religion, in Smith's eyes, is a guide to man's hopes and fears. She concludes her review with the reservation: 'Sister Sylvia Mary has written a fine book that stirs one's thoughts, but I think it will be best enjoyed and appreciated by Christians of settled beliefs'. The idea of 'stirs one's thoughts' was also used by Smith in her criticism of Eliot's play above and was obviously an attribute she valued. Roman Catholicism with its masked cruelties provokes particular outrage from Smith.²²⁶ Of Barry Ulanov's *The Making of a Modern Saint: a biographical study of Thérèse of Lisieux* (1967), she savours the opportunity

²²¹ 'Egocentric', *Collected Poems*, p. 7.

²²² 'The Reason', *Collected Poems*, p. 49.

²²³ 'God the Eater', *Collected Poems*, p. 390.

²²⁴ Smith, 'A Decided Girl', review of *Simone Weil: Seventy Letters* (1965), trans. by Richard Rees, *Listener*, 74.1910 (1965), 30.

²²⁵ Smith, 'Dreaming Back', a review of Sister Sylvia Mary, *Nostalgia for Paradise* (1966), in the *Listener*, 76.1951 (1966), 27.

²²⁶ Smith's sister Molly converted to Roman Catholicism in 1928, and this caused conflict between Stevie and her sister. See Will May, 'Chronology', *Collected Poems*, p. xl. See also, Spalding, *Stevie Smith*, p. 71.

to explore this territory, pronouncing the book: ‘an experience of Catholicism one would not miss’.²²⁷ She writes with sardonic glee: ‘What an extraordinary experience this book is. Sickliness mingles with strength, sentimentality with love, cruelty with sweetness, and the author’s wretched jauntiness with a true comprehension of his subject. It is a rich Roman Catholic experience we have here.’ It is her view of the cruelty inherent in the Christian religion, and the beauty that disguises it, that she emphasises in her essay-poem ‘How Do You See?’ in which she asks, for example:

But must we allow good to be hitched to a lie,
A beautiful cruel lie, a beautiful fairy story,
A beautiful idea, made up in a loving moment?²²⁸

She also asks tough questions in this poem as to whether the Holy Ghost endorses cruelty, and whether God, supposedly omnipotent, can be ‘bested’ by the Devil.

What is important for Stevie Smith in her reviewing, her poetry and in all her writing, is the asking of awkward questions and the search for truth. In 1966, reviewing Father M.C. D’Arcy, called by some ‘Apostle to the Intelligentsia’, she critiques this intellectual Catholic priest’s search for evidence of the truths of his beliefs.²²⁹ While she acknowledges, as ever, that Catholicism is a religion that has brought comfort and strength to a great number of believers despite its cruelties, she contests Father D’Arcy’s views, challenging, for example, his recommendation that we should pray for faith:

Pray for faith. But what does this mean? We should not pray for what is not true, and if we believe his faith is true, then we already have it. If we pray, we must pray to know the truth. Joyfully Fr D’Arcy will say: There is no distinction. Less joyfully – for it is happier to be settled – we say we think there is.²³⁰

Smith’s rigorous and agile mind is strongly apparent in this tireless reasoning.

²²⁷ Smith, ‘The Little Way’, review of Barry Ulanov, *The Making of a Modern Saint: a biographical study of Therese of Lisieux* (1966), *Listener*, 77.1981 (1967), 29.

²²⁸ ‘How Do You See?’, *Collected Poems*, pp. 596-601 (p. 596).

²²⁹ Smith, ‘Faith or Truth?’, review of M. C. D’Arcy SJ, *Facing God* (1966), in *Me Again*, pp. 198-99 (first published, the *Observer*, 14 August 1966).

²³⁰ Smith, ‘Faith or Truth’, p. 199.

i *The God I Want*

A further opportunity to pursue her thinking on how God is perceived is given to Smith in a collection of essays she reviews in 1967.²³¹ The title *The God I Want*, and, indeed, the book's whole concept, is, for Smith, in theological terms, a contradiction. She is at her most scathing. Pointing out that there is more 'I' than 'God' in the book, she asks: 'Why should the writers wish for God at all, if he is only to be what they want?' The Roman Catholics, she maintains, would particularly object to this concept as blasphemous as their religious beliefs have always taught that: 'God Is [*sic*] and that what we want has no part in his being'. These essays reflect, according to Smith, what she has noted as: 'the two outstanding characteristics of English theology: amiability and a disregard for logic'. While the writers all wish for a good God, Smith muses, provocatively, on the possibility of an evil God. Probingly, she suggests: 'To agree upon the definition of good, and to reconcile good with the acts of God as revealed by religion is of course another matter.' This carries an echo of 'Away, Melancholy', included in *Not Waving But Drowning* (1957), in which Smith also questions the perceived goodness of God. In this poem, man is responsible for pouring what he knows of good into an idea of a god and then 'Calling, good, God'.²³²

Smith describes some of the writers of the reviewed essays as merely clinging 'to the remnants of faith'. Looking behind the veil of the essayists' intellectualism, she reproves: 'it is like children talking about new dresses for their dolls, when really they should be thinking of putting dolls away as they are getting big children now'. These writers, she argues, contribute to an image of Jesus as a peaceable man of our times, while for the Christian contributors, he is also an incarnation of God. Finding it odd that her violent age, and an age in which people are addicted to reading about acts of violence, should perceive Christ as kind, she reflects that the times are also sentimental. The doctrine of eternal hell, the tenet of the Christian religion to which she particularly objects, is left out of the Christian essayists' terrain, and God is perceived rather as an ideal, benevolent parent. In a 1969 review of Malcolm Muggeridge's *Jesus Discovered* she comments on the author's slanted views that 'Christ's fiercer sayings – about Hell, for instance', is an aspect that the author has

²³¹ Smith, 'Can't Have It', review of James Mitchell, ed., *The God I Want* (1967), ed., *Listener*, 77.1988 (1967), 24.

²³² 'Away, Melancholy', *Collected Poems*, pp. 377-78.

conveniently left out of his book.²³³ According to Smith, the way of the world is inherently savage, as she expressed in 'Away, Melancholy':

The ant is busy
He carrieth his meat,
All things hurry
To be eaten or eat²³⁴

Despite the impediment of this inherent cruelty, she writes of man's capacity for humane behaviour, the humanity that is a strong vein in her poetry. Her sympathy for man, battling against the odds, is also shown in her poem 'Was He Married?', included in her *Selected Poems* (1962).²³⁵ Here she presents an idea of a god who does not suffer as man does. Perhaps with her own family circumstances in mind, she asks of this god:

Was he married, did he try
To support as he grew less fond of them
Wife and family?

She continues: 'Did he love people very much / Yet find them die one day?' and she concludes: 'He did not love in the human way.' Intimately aware of human suffering she proclaims: 'All human beings should have a medal, / A god cannot carry it, he is not able.'

ii Buddhism

In view of Smith's thorough critique of Christianity, it is of interest also to read her brief 1967 reflections on the Buddhism she encountered in a book of Tibetan biographies *Four Lamas of Dolpo*.²³⁶ On the portrayal of the lamas, Smith is unsparing, her wit caustic. She declares with forthright scepticism:

But though the behaviour of his lamas, their pupils and simple flocks, seems virtuous and agreeable, their religious ideas are such a mixture of nonsense and complication, one sometimes sighs with that staunch unbeliever H. G. Wells, for 'a great wind to blow it all away'. Buddhism holds terrors of confusion that make Christianity by contrast appear as straightforward as a Roman road.

²³³ Smith, 'The Wheat and the Tares', review of Malcolm Muggeridge, *Jesus Rediscovered* (1969), *Listener*, 81.2100 (1969), 26.

²³⁴ 'Away, Melancholy', *Collected Poems*, p. 377.

²³⁵ 'Was He Married?', *Collected Poems*, pp. 451-53.

²³⁶ Smith, 'The Lotus and the Powerbolt', review of D.L. Snellgrove, ed. and trans., *Four Lamas of Dolpo*, (1967), *Listener*, 78.2006 (1967), 22.

She comments ironically on the Buddhists' willingness to endure being reborn, even as 'a woman, a beast of burden or a flea', calling this a 'lofty willingness' as all life is seen by these monks to be 'suffering and illusion'. Smith exposes the irony of the commercial gain made by the lamas for fending off demons and unfriendly gods. Such a mode of operation is open, she observes, to unscrupulous behaviour: 'As lamas alone can save their flocks from misfortunes in this world and the next, one can see what might happen if the lama was not very good, or rather fond of money.' She comments dryly of the happiness apparent in the photographs of the faithful: 'No doubt such religious injunctions as "so you must attend to the local gods, to the serpents and the furies"' draw people together and keep boredom at bay.' With the breadth of awareness often shown in her poetry, Smith comments on the precariousness of such apparent contentment in the face of external pressure such as the continued 1960s Chinese military violation of human rights in the lamas' country: 'One supposes this sort of happiness has now passed away from Tibet.'

iii The living and the dead

Poems of Smith's such as 'Tender Only to One' (the title poem of her 1938 collection) and 'Black March' (included in *Scorpion and Other Poems*, 1972) feature the idea of death personified as a lover, but behind this portrayal is her more practical perception of death as a thankful release from the painful aspects of life. Thus she is unreceptive to the implication of spiritualism with its concept that the dead are, after all, not quite freed of living. In her memoir *The Swan in the Evening* (1968), novelist Rosamond Lehmann writes about how her daughter Sally, who died in her twenties, returned from the grave as a spiritual body and tried to help her mother to grieve less.²³⁷ Stevie Smith begins her review sensitively: 'This must have been a difficult book to write. It is also a difficult book to write about.' While acknowledging Lehmann's 'courageous intention', Smith is, however, vehement in her opposition to the idea of 'trafficking' with the dead. It is important, in her view, that the dead are safe from earthly harm and thus freed of life, and the living:

Nor can we help but feel that among the harms that might touch them, were they not protected by God (or by non-existence, if you are an atheist), is the harm of earthly lovers trying to get in touch with them.

²³⁷ Smith, 'Consolations', review of Rosamond Lehmann, *The Swan in the Evening* (1967), *Listener*, 79.2023 (1968), 23.

She continues with wisdom, perspicacity, and a strength of feeling, doubtless born of her own losses:

Miss Lehmann thinks that people who do not wish to traffic with the dead are cold, careless or timid. They may be more full of love than she thinks. For if you believe in God, you will let the dying go, glad that the pain of loss is ours, not theirs. They have finished with the imperfections of human love, its dark places of egoism, greed and idolatry. And, as even the new-born baby, with a full span of life ahead, cannot really be said to have to live very long, is it asking too much that we should love our dead and leave them alone, waiting for our own deaths to know what it is all about? Or to know nothing ever again.

In reply to a letter from Rosamond Lehmann who had protested about the review, Smith elaborates on her deeply felt viewpoint.²³⁸ She makes it clear that she admires Lehmann's courage and that it is the idea of communicating with the dead, not Lehmann herself, whom she is criticising. Smith reveals that some lines had been cut from her review, leaving it as: 'rather a sermon against certain beliefs than a book review'. She continues, however, with passion: 'I love the thought of "departing" and of the human pattern being broken for ever, either in nothingness or in love that is beyond our thought.' It is an idea that Smith was to express in her poem 'The Donkey', first published in the *New Statesman* in August 1969; this desire for the self, and the pressure of being alive, to be broken up in death:

And the thought that keeps my heart up
That at last, in Death's odder anarchy,
Our patterns will be broken all up.²³⁹

She concludes her reply to Lehmann with an equable accepting of difference: 'So there we are, both of us, I expect, so far as here and now goes, in the hands of our temperaments.' Nevertheless, Smith has made her own position clear.

²³⁸ Letter from Smith to Rosamond Lehmann, 15 January 1968. KCC, RN Lehmann Archive, GBR/0272/RNL/2/569. Rosamond Lehmann is one example of a literary friend who Smith reviewed in which Smith appears largely to put her views of the book before any concerns of friendship. The matter is complicated, however, by the fact that Lehmann had written critically, as well as appreciatively, of Smith's novel *Over the Frontier* (1938): 'Pompey is one of the most adult and enlightened women I've ever known. But sometimes I feel she lets herself be caught in her illness & weakness & little girl-ness – then I am disappointed.' Rosamond Lehmann, letter to Smith, 'Thursday' 1938. Quoted in Barbera and McBrien, *Stevie*, p. 114.

²³⁹ 'The Donkey', *Collected Poems*, p. 616. Sent to Anthony Thwaite and first published in the *New Statesman* on 2 August 1969. Barbera and McBrien, eds, *Stevie*, p. 283.

b) *The New English Bible*

Although Stevie Smith became highly critical of the tenets of the Christian religion, the psalms, hymns, and Bible stories of her upbringing were a cornerstone of her poetry, and it is fitting that her last published review (in March 1970 in the *New Statesman*, a year before her death) was ‘Smudgers and Meddlers’, her review of *The New English Bible*.²⁴⁰ Indicating the enduring importance to her of the Bible, she shows her enthusiasm for the reviewing task:

‘When a new translation of the Bible comes along, one wants to rush at once upon comparisons.’²⁴¹ Her knowledge and her poet’s love of the language of the *Authorised* (1611) and of the *Revised* (1881) versions shine through.²⁴² She calls them ‘the two great translations of our language’. For Smith, unsurprisingly, the new version falls badly short in comparison; a supreme work of literature and of nourishment for the human spirit had been reduced – desecrated.

In her analysis of the new text she finds, for example: ‘No psalm holds a candle to Cranmer, or has the beautiful “Selah” left in (meaning “a musical pause or stress”, not “hurrah”).’²⁴³ Smith expressed her admiration for archbishop and scholar Thomas Cranmer (born in 1489 and burnt at the stake in 1566) in ‘Admire Cranmer!’, included in her *Selected Poems* 1962.²⁴⁴ She wrote:

But for his genius, admire him,
His delicate feelings of genius, admire him,

That wrote the Prayer Book
(Admire him!)
And made the flames burn crueller. Admire Cranmer!

²⁴⁰ Smith, ‘Smudgers and Meddlers’, review of *The New English Bible* (1970), repr. in *Me Again*, pp. 206-09. First published in the *New Statesman and Nation*, 20 March 1970.

²⁴¹ Smith, ‘Smudgers and Meddlers’, p. 206.

²⁴² In a letter to the *New Statesman*, 27 March 1970, a reader did, however, point out two theological errors Smith made in this review, as recounted in Barbera and McBrien, *Stevie*, p. 287. Smith candidly admitted to *New Statesman* literary editor Anthony Thwaite (who recalled this review as ‘a terrific piece’), that these errors were the result of ‘pure ignorance’. Anthony Thwaite, private conversation with MA, 27 November 2018.

²⁴³ Smith, ‘Smudgers and Meddlers’, p. 206.

²⁴⁴ ‘Admire Cranmer’, *Collected Poems*, p. 460.

These lines are themselves reminiscent of the incantatory psalms, such as the patterning of the exhortation to praise God in Psalm 150 of the Authorised version: 'Praise ye ... Praise him ... Praise him ...' The Psalms were of particular emotional importance to Smith. In a much earlier review of C.S. Lewis's *Reflections on the Psalms* she wrote of their power to raise the spirits, to celebrate the natural world, and to provide sustenance and an outlet for the soul:

The psalms are a document in human feelings, especially in the heart that is oppressed from outside by the behaviour of the heathen and from inside by not being at home in the world and by sin. There are the gay ones, too, that sing the gaiety the soul feels in relation to the natural world of fish, seas, trees, animals and earthquakes, and in relation to the Being the soul looks towards. Even if this Being is an emanation, a creature of the leaping soul [...] still the leaping feelings are true and in the Psalms most truly cried [...] seldom have agitated souls cried out more truly than in the Psalms; and souls ought, in a holy way, to be agitated, especially modern souls.²⁴⁵

Though she thinks God may be an 'emanation', a product, of our own souls, Stevie Smith's abiding spiritual sensibility is clear.

In 'Smudgers and Meddlers', Smith laments innumerable weak specificities she finds in the language of *The New English Bible* as compared to that of the Authorised Version.²⁴⁶ For instance, in the former, the 'thou' form, for example, is only used in prayer. 'Lead us not into temptation' has now become, she notes, the weaker 'do not bring us to the test'. Lot's wife 'turned', rather than 'was turned' into a pillar of salt. 'This suggests', Smith observes, 'a vegetable process and is rather weak.' She compares the angels' greeting to the shepherds: 'on earth peace, good will toward men' which she perceives is 'so much more divinely generous' than the version in *The New English Bible*: '... on earth his peace for men on whom his favour rests'. The strong and beautiful 'Thou fool, this night shall thy soul be required of thee', has been reduced, in the new version to: 'You fool, this very night you must surrender your life'. Smith points out that 'very' is a 'manufactured archaism' introduced by *The New English Bible*. A few months after this March 1970 review, on 28 August, her poem 'Scorpion', with its opening reflection on words from St. Luke's Gospel in the Authorised

²⁴⁵ Smith, 'The Simple Psalms', review of C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (1958), *Spectator*, 201 (12 September, 1958), p. 352.

²⁴⁶ Smith, 'Smudgers and Meddlers', pp. 206-09.

Version Smith cherished, was to appear in the *New Statesman*: ““This night shall thy soul be required of thee””.²⁴⁷

Smith concludes with outrage and sadness at the loss of the beauty of language of the original version:

The New English Bible might be good enough – if we had never had King James’s and the Revised Version. To smudge, to weaken, to blunt, to make pallid, every beautiful word and the thought it carries – was this worth 24 years’ work, with the alterations so trivial, nothing to make even the attempt worth while?²⁴⁸

Although this contemporary version of the Bible is destined for popularity, Smith is adamant that it is ‘second-best’ and therefore unacceptable.

Through her immense and varied output as a reviewer, Stevie Smith proved herself to be a dedicated, reliable, and valued professional. The range of knowledge and depth of thinking displayed in her reviews reveal her abundantly as serious in her concerns, formidably well-read, and well-informed. She was practical in her thinking, and her voice was one of experience – very far from whimsical or naïve. Her reviewing facilitated an internal conversation, contributing strongly to her poetry, which is likewise innately probing and reflective, revealing her as a deep thinker, as well as an entertainer. The seriousness at the core of her work was not always appreciated by commentators on her own work, who sometimes mixed praise with condescension. In Chapter Three I shall explore how the sexism that overlooked her role as a reviewer in favour of her secretarial work also undermined the critical reception of her poetry.

²⁴⁷ ‘Scorpion’, *Collected Poems*, p. 593: cf. ‘But God said unto him, *Thou* fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee’, *The Bible: Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha*, ed. by Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, Oxford University Press, 2008), Luke, 12.20.

²⁴⁸ Smith, ‘Smudgers and Meddlers’, p. 209.

Chapter Three

Her Critical Reception

I shall assess the reception and reputation of Stevie Smith's poetry in three stages: in her lifetime, in the late twentieth century, and in the early part of the twenty-first century. Although Smith's poetry has always had its admirers, commentators (particularly male commentators) have frequently mixed praise with condescension and have sometimes been antagonistic. I shall set this uneven critical reception against the background of the very male-dominated 'poetry world' of Smith's lifetime and beyond, and the changes that took place in the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first century, particularly those brought about by the rise of the feminist movement in Britain in the 1970s onwards. Literary feminism has been especially welcoming of Smith's poetry. One point of focus will be the indication that, despite Smith's many literary friendships and connections, she lost out, in her lifetime and beyond, in terms of the wholehearted advocacy of significant male poets and reviewers, and this continues to undermine her status as a poet. Critics have frequently described her poetry in language to which Smith objected and which diminishes the power of her work and its serious core: 'eccentric', for example, and 'whimsical', 'naïve', and 'faux-naïve'. Such language detracts from the central aspects of her poetry, including the learnedness it wears lightly, and the relationship of her idiosyncratic poems to her times and to modernism. Some commentators have also placed undue emphasis on poems of Smith's that they consider unsuccessful. In addition to the responses of critics and poets, I shall consider Smith's own illuminating responses to the critical evaluation of her work.

I A 1930s woman poet

I shall begin by considering the literary climate that formed the background to the publication of poetry written by women in the 1930s, the decade in which Stevie Smith's first two poetry collections were published.²⁴⁹ Jane Dowson, in her 'Introduction' to her 'Critical Anthology' of *Women's Poetry of the 1930s* (1996), explored, while also seeking to rectify, the

²⁴⁹ Smith, *A Good Time Was Had By All* (London: Cape, 1937).
Smith, *Tender Only To One* (London: Cape, 1938).

beleaguered status of women's poetry during this decade.²⁵⁰ Dowson's study sought to redress this negligence by focusing attention on twenty-two women poets, including Smith. She discovered that women were writing and publishing poetry 'to a remarkable extent, but that they were not treated seriously in critical reviews'.²⁵¹ She writes of the reviewers: 'The degree of respect for women poets was largely determined by the poet critics. Male reviewers did not know how to assess poetry by women, so they left it alone, dismissed it or wrote about it obliquely.'²⁵² Dowson adds that where women poets 'did not conform to the poetess image, reviewers did not know where to place them'. All the poets of her study, Dowson asserts, 'have received niggardly treatment, if any, within literature's critical heritage and have rarely been included in any conspectus of poetry activity in the 1930s'.²⁵³ An affront to women poets, it meant that a wealth of writing was, and may still be, little known, and if known at all, severed from the times of its creation.²⁵⁴ Dowson's reading of this poetry affirms the quality of the poems and that they had simply been ignored. She finds in the work of these women poets 'the new demand for both social and psychological realism; they attempted to be observers, to imitate the patterns of everyday speech and to represent the compressed simultaneity of the unconscious'.²⁵⁵ Drawing attention to the language of this poetry, Dowson argues that, despite there being little stylistic conformity, the women poets are preoccupied, like their male counterparts, with reflecting the moment, as well as incorporating a sense of tradition. In doing so, she dissolves the myth that British poetry in the 1930s can be adequately represented by a coterie of young men poets, with Auden, MacNeice, Spender, and Day Lewis being among the most prominent.

Characterising the decade, Dowson writes:

The 1930s continue to hold a fascination as a decade in which everyday experience was lived under the shadow of national upheavals – news of events in Europe, the rapid advances in technology and the changes in gender roles and legislation which

²⁵⁰ Jane Dowson, ed., *Women's Poetry of the 1930s: A Critical Anthology* (London: Routledge, 1996).

²⁵¹ Dowson, ed., *Women's Poetry of the 1930s*, p. 3.

²⁵² Dowson, ed., *Women's Poetry of the 1930s*, p. 18.

²⁵³ Dowson, ed., *Women's Poetry of the 1930s*, p. 4.

²⁵⁴ Of its forty-five poets, the enduring anthology *Poetry of the Thirties: from Auden to Spender* includes only one woman, Anne Ridler. Ridler worked in Faber's poetry department with Eliot, who was an advocate of her poetry. See Robin Skelton, ed., *Poetry of the Thirties* (London: Penguin, 1964), pp. 83, 95 and 106. Ridler worked in Faber's poetry department with Eliot, who was an advocate of her poetry. See also Dowson, ed., *Womens' Poetry of the 1930s*, pp.102-03.

²⁵⁵ Dowson, ed., *Women's Poetry of the 1930s*, p. 9.

followed the First World War when women had assumed a new significance as a workforce.²⁵⁶

It was a decade of sharp contrasts, of poverty set against extreme wealth, for example. It was also a decade of changes that involved the blurring of some traditional boundaries. There was mass unemployment in the North of England where heavy industry was hard hit during the economic depression and pits were closed. In the South, however, there were increased opportunities for women, as well as men, to work in light industry – an example of one of the traditional boundaries that were being broken. Electrical appliances meant that there was less women's work to be done. The radio brought the public world into the home. Inter-war council homes were built and there was extensive suburban development. Stevie Smith's Palmers' Green, for example, became an increasingly built-up outer London suburb.

Women poets of the 1930s, of course, have their own relationship to their times because of their positioning as 'other' in a patriarchal society. In some ways they were better placed than the men to explore the social upheaval that, in part, characterised this inter-war period. In relation to poetry and social change, Dowson draws on Virginia Woolf's essay 'The Leaning Tower' (1940) in which Woolf outlines the ambivalent positioning of the poet in the 1930s.²⁵⁷ In the nineteenth century, Woolf imagined a steady, reassuring 'tower' inhabited by the male writer:

The writer was scarcely conscious either of his high station, or of his limited vision. Many of them had sympathy, great sympathy, with other classes; they wished to help the working class to enjoy the advantages of the tower class; but they did not wish to destroy the tower, or to descend from it – rather to make it accessible to all.²⁵⁸

In the 1930s, however, in Woolf's vision, this 'tower' began to lean disconcertingly, and what the writers saw from it in this period of upheaval had also changed. Writers became uncomfortably aware of their privileged educational and social positioning, and how they had profited from the society they wished to criticise. They were aware of how remote their position might seem from that of the society they hoped to portray, and, by implication, the readers they might hope to reach. Dowson's assertion in relation to Woolf's 'tower' is that

²⁵⁶ Dowson, ed., *Women's Poetry of the 1930s*, p. 1.

²⁵⁷ Virginia Woolf, 'The Leaning Tower' in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf* 6: (1933-1941) ed. by Stuart N. Clarke (London: The Hogarth Press, 2011), pp. 259-78.

²⁵⁸ Woolf, 'The Leaning Tower', p. 266.

women poets, despite the wealth or education that some may have had, had little power in comparison to men and that ‘consequently, women could write of injustice without patronising it and often without the guilt or anxiety of male privilege’.²⁵⁹

Dowson includes Smith among those women poets who particularly do not seem to experience distance from the disadvantaged. They may well see, with their perspective as ‘other’, what the men, who are in charge, fail to see. They are poets who, in Woolfian terms, pave the way towards a more democratic future for poetry in which, ideally, there are no more ‘towers’. To extend Dowson’s discussion of Woolf’s essay, we might say that Woolf’s ‘leaning tower’ poets, in their insecurity, are portrayed as looking for scapegoats, because they cannot fully rebel against the society that upholds them:

You cannot abuse that society wholeheartedly while you continue to profit by that society. And so very naturally you abuse society in the person of some retired admiral or spinster or armament manufacturer; and by abusing them hope to escape whipping yourself.²⁶⁰

In accordance with Woolf’s portrayal, women poets may well have then, and since, formed a target for male scapegoating, or bullying. In her earlier extended essay ‘A Room of One’s Own’ (1928), Woolf gave a background to the inferior position of women writers and illuminated men’s strong need to see themselves reflected in a mirror at twice their size, the mirror that women provided.²⁶¹ The insecurity of the Thirties male ‘leaning tower’ poets may have increased their need to see themselves as superior to an emerging woman poet, such as Stevie Smith. Against this background, the sexism so often apparent in the critical reception of Smith’s poetry seems almost inevitable. Dowson quotes novelist and poet Naomi Mitchison (who was a friend of Smith’s) as revealing that it tended to be the less ‘good’ poets who would not accept women poets:

Looking back to the Thirties, there was Auden and co. and they wouldn’t accept females as verse writers, at least that is how I remember them (not so much Auden himself, but his followers, few of whom were that good). Everything is made more difficult for women.²⁶²

²⁵⁹ Dowson, ed., *Women’s Poetry of the 1930s*, p. 12.

²⁶⁰ Woolf, ‘The Leaning Tower’, p. 268.

²⁶¹ Woolf ‘*A Room of One’s Own*’, p. 28.

²⁶² Naomi Mitchison, letter to Jane Dowson, undated, 1993, quoted in *Women’s Poetry of the 1930s*, p. 17.

Dowson describes how, as well as having a derogatory status as women poets, the women poets of the thirties were also isolated from each other: 'Any intimacies or encounters [...] tended to be personal rather than professional: they rarely exchanged or discussed their poems.'²⁶³ Unlike the men, the women poets lacked the power of being part of a group.

Stevie Smith's route to the publication of her first poetry collection as an unconventional woman poet was a circuitous one which might have put off the less determined. Through this circuitous route we gain an intimation from the outset of the mixed reception her poems would receive when published in book form. Smith was prolific, developing her poetry writing and her extensive reading in the 1920s and 30s. In 1934 she submitted her poetry to the literary agency Curtis Brown, whose reader 'E.B.' seemed to be overwhelmed by the task of assessing these numerous, assorted, unconventional, and sometimes brief poems.²⁶⁴ 'E.B.' thought that there were too many weak poems for her to justify submitting them to a publisher, and concluded uncertainly: 'The reader very much doubts the literary quality of most of the poems but feels there may be some power in them which she has failed to find.'²⁶⁵ This did not prevent Smith from sending her poems to Chatto and Windus for consideration in 1935. The advice from editor Ian Parsons, showing the economic hierarchy of the literary world, was to go away and write a novel – after which Chatto would consider publishing her poetry.²⁶⁶ Her modernist-influenced *Novel on Yellow Paper* with its lively stream-of-consciousness, was eventually turned down by Chatto, but was published by Cape in 1936. Cape's reader Hamish Miles had, ironically, first been attracted to Smith's work via five of her poems that he had read in the *New Statesman* in November and December of 1935, the journal having accepted six of them.²⁶⁷

She saw publication of her poetry as dependent on the success of the novel, writing, in a letter to writer Denis Johnston on 23 September 1936: 'They [Cape] are thinking to do some poems of mine in book form but I expect that will depend on the way Pompey gets around.'²⁶⁸ Her confidence in her poetry had, it seems, been understandably knocked, and she wrote to Hart-

²⁶³ Dowson, ed., *Women's Poetry of the 1930s*, p. 16.

²⁶⁴ Curtis Brown, Reader's Report, 1934. Tulsa Archive, 1976.012.2.4.17. E.B. is likely to have been Curtis Brown reader Eleanor Brockett (Barbera and McBrien, *Stevie*, 'Notes', p. 325).

²⁶⁵ 'E.B.' quoted in Barbera and McBrien, *Stevie*, p. 71.

²⁶⁶ Spalding, p. 111.

²⁶⁷ Spalding, *Stevie Smith*, p. 113.

²⁶⁸ Letter from Smith to Denis Johnston, 23 September 1936, published in *Me Again*, p. 255. Pompey is the central character based on Smith herself in her semi-autobiographical *Novel on Yellow Paper*, 1936.

Davis in October ‘I think *A Good Time Was Had By All* would be an attractive title for the book – if you really think you can do a book out of them.’²⁶⁹ It is hard to imagine, in the very male-dominated literary culture of the time, an aspiring male poet writing so tentatively.

Thus this early reception of Stevie Smith’s poems included enthusiastic publication in a prestigious journal, delayed book publication, and the early jostling for publication of her fiction versus her poetry. Book publication of her first poetry collection depended, to an extent, on the prior publication of her successful first novel. It is clear that Smith was determined, but that her confidence could be shaken by negative responses, by how her work was viewed (rather than by how she herself saw it) in a poetry world shaped by male perspectives.

II Her critical reception in her lifetime

The critical appreciation of Stevie Smith’s poetry increased, overall, very considerably during her lifetime, although her reputation was never entirely steady. Early reviews of the poetry were variable, often mixing praise with a patronising assessment, and, sometimes, with derision. Smith herself was incensed by the reductive language that reviewers and editors often used in relation to her work. It contradicted her view of her powerful Muse, and of poetry as being ‘like a strong explosion in the sky [...] a mushroom shape of terror’.²⁷⁰ Anthony Thwaite, who published Smith’s poems during her lifetime in the *New Statesman*, combines personal reflection with his review of Frances Spalding’s biography. In 1988 he recalls in the *London Review of Books*:

Stevie loathed [...] the often-approving epithet of “childlike”, and she loathed even more the less approving epithet “faux” (or “fausse”) “naïf”. My memory is that she forced Penguin Books into removing some such remark from Edward Lucie-Smith’s 1970 anthology *British Poetry Since 1945*.²⁷¹

²⁶⁹ Letter from Smith to Rupert Hart-Davis, dated Sunday October 1936, published in *Me Again*, pp. 255-56.

²⁷⁰ Smith, ‘My Muse’, p. 126.

²⁷¹ Thwaite, ‘Waving’, review of Spalding, Stevie Smith (1988), *LRB* (1988).

Similarly, she loathed ‘whimsical’. Penelope Fitzgerald, in the *London Review of Books*, wrote in 1981 of how Smith told the BBC producer Anna Kallin that her poetry was ‘not at all whimsical, as some asses seem to think I am’.²⁷²

The reception of her first collection, despite demonstrating some critical uncertainty, may well have been positively influenced by Smith having so recently published a memorable novel. An enthusiastic reviewer of *A Good Time Was Had By All* in the *Granta* (5 May 1937) considers the book as a worthy follow-on from the ‘knock-out’ *Novel on Yellow Paper*, and the poet ‘a new phenomenon’. In this particularly insightful early review, the reviewer detects Smith’s tonal subtlety and an interplay between surface and depth:

These poems are triumphs of tone: and the tone is doubly controlled. For the tone of each individual poem – whether gay, ironic, witty or reflective – is subject to the further control of a reserve tone which forms the unifying background of reference of this book. This is Miss Smith’s habitually detached and critical frame of mind. This system of double reference, and the use of a characteristic thought-structure which expresses only prominent ideas clearly and the rest implicitly, enables Miss Smith to deliver her intensities – however slight – without change of voice, and in the manner of public utterance. The result is a seemingly careless verse whose impact is both immediate and personal.²⁷³

This same review, however, mentions more dismissively ‘delightful doggerel’ and ‘squiggly little drawings’. Her drawings were often dismissed, particularly by earlier reviewers. Many later commentators, such as Rees-Jones, have found that their presence plays an important role at the edge of the poem, often providing an oblique commentary on the text, sometimes ironic, sometimes in collusion with it.²⁷⁴ In the *London Mercury*, the review was generally appreciative, if brief, with this reviewer finding the volume of poetry ‘grimly entertaining’. The review continued: ‘Malicious and romantic at the same time, she imparts the separate shocks of pain and laughter in a single verse.’²⁷⁵ A reservation followed: ‘Some of these

²⁷² Penelope Fitzgerald, ‘Jerusalem’, review of *Me Again* (1981), *LRB*, 3.22.3.12 (1981), <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v03/n22/penelope-fitzgerald/jerusalem>> [accessed 08 November 2021].

²⁷³ [Anon.], reviewer only identified by the initials P.G.B.K., review of Smith, *A Good Time Was Had By All* (1937), *Granta*, 46. (1937), 390.

²⁷⁴ Rees-Jones, *Consorting With Angels: Essays on Modern Women Poets* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2005), pp. 71-72.

²⁷⁵ [Anon.], review of Smith, *A Good Time Was Had By All* (1937), *London Mercury*, 36 (May 1937), 107.

verses are too private and personal to be satisfactory'. No examples are given. The drawings are appreciated as 'delicious', although no further observation is made. In the *Times Literary Supplement*, the collection is reviewed on the 'Other New Books' page reductively and one-dimensionally under the category 'Humour', rather than the category 'Literary'. Broadly positive, the reviewer comments on Smith's satire: 'Her scalpel, the humour that cuts, is handled irascibly. If sometimes she seems to brandish it rather wildly, there is no denying the keenness of the edge.'²⁷⁶ This review is unusual in drawing attention to a role of the drawings: 'Even poems which are apparently serious may suddenly be turned into satire by a mocking drawing.' The review itself then wavers: 'Such lightning changes of mood suggest some uncertainty of purpose at times.' Here we see how, in a male poetry world, an aspect of Smith's strengths, her mercurial quality, a stance she deliberately chose, can be construed as a weakness.

Reviews were, largely, less appreciative of the second collection of the prolific Smith, *Tender Only To One*, which was published in the following year.²⁷⁷ The reviewer in the *TLS* decided 'She writes, it must be admitted, with dangerous facility'.²⁷⁸ The review then continues more positively:

It would be easy to dismiss this collection as a spirited and amusing turn in the contemporary American tradition of light verse. But light as her verses are in form, the best of them reveal beneath the surface undercurrents of nostalgia and pain.

Absent here is an acknowledgement that the tension created in Smith's poems between an apparent lightness and the seriousness at their core, is an important source of her poetry's strength.

It is disappointing to read Louis MacNeice's brief, dismissive review published in *The Listener*.²⁷⁹ He jests: 'Miss Stevie Smith writes as Anita Loos might have written if she had a flair for doggerel and had sat a long time in a graveyard.' While appreciating the 'genuine feeling' in the poems, he uses the reductive 'whimsical'. He then reproves: 'I distrust Miss

²⁷⁶ [Anon.], 'Other New Books', review of Smith, *A Good Time Was Had By All* (1937), *Times Literary Supplement* [TLS], 1840 (1937), 13.

²⁷⁷ Smith, *Tender Only To One* (1938). The collection sold about 400 copies, half of the copies sold of her first poetry book. See 'Chronology', May, ed., *Collected Poems*, p. xli.

²⁷⁸ [Anon.], 'Light and Dark', review of Smith, *Tender Only To One* (1938), *TLS*, 1924 (1938), 12.

²⁷⁹ Louis MacNeice, 'A Brilliant Puritan', *The Listener*, 8 December 1938, p.8. The Listener Historical Archive, 1929-1991, <<http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/BZcAr8>> [accessed August 2019].

Smith's sleight-of-hand – her way of putting it over with a gesture of conscious *naïveté*. References to Smith's 'naïveté' were to become a feature of some significant reviews of her poetry. My contention is that an emphasis on the child within the adult is an important aspect of Smith's writing, and part of an intrinsic stance, rather than artificially adopted. Her own childhood had left an indelible impression on her and she valued the perspective of the child self within the adult. MacNeice does not acknowledge Smith's originality, her technical skill, or the quality of such poems as 'The Abominable Lake', 'Infelice', and 'The River Humber'. He makes no observation on Smith's range of concerns, which include religion, death, the soul, literary critics, sexism, and her poetic Muse. This review is at variance with the more perspicacious book jacket comment on her poems and drawings: 'fantasy, satire, comedy are inextricably linked with an evident and undeniable seriousness'. MacNeice's disparagement marks an occasion on which potential support from a significant male poet is absent.

Also disappointingly, the leap in achievement shown in Smith's wartime collection *Mother, What Is Man?* (1942) is not reflected in the contemporary reviews.²⁸⁰ It is a more searching book altogether, with poems of increased depth and resonance across the collection. At least thirty of the poems are among her best. The book includes 'Human Affection', 'Bog-Face', 'Love Me!', 'Lady "Rogue" Singleton', 'Croft', 'Lot's Wife', 'Voices Against England in the Night' and 'The Failed Spirit'. The collection is imbued with history, the presence of war, and a sense of the isolated human spirit. Influential critic George Stonier reviewed Smith, alongside comic poet Ogden Nash, in *The New Statesman and Nation*.²⁸¹ The review is reductively titled, particularly in terms of Smith, 'Fun and Poetry'. While calling her imagination 'her trump card', Stonier writes, 'she lets out a strain of whimsical poetry', then derisively notes its prevailing moods as 'sad and funny, sad and sad, sad and silly, just silly'. He does, however, have an eye for her drawings, perceiving them as an advance on those in her earlier books and a 'perfect blend of grace and incongruity'. The *TLS* reviewer also comments patronisingly on this collection, and without supporting evidence: 'It is an odd little book, hard to classify and yet filled with the disturbing force of a personality too strong for its medium.'²⁸² The 'little' is condescending and dismissive of the essential seriousness of

²⁸⁰ Smith, *Mother, What Is Man?* (London: Cape, 1942).

²⁸¹ G.W. Stonier, 'Fun and Poetry', review of Smith, *Mother, What Is Man?* (1942), *New Statesman and Nation*, 24.166 (1942), 393.

²⁸² [Anon.], 'Other New Publications: Poetry', review of Smith, *Mother, What Is Man?* (1942), *TLS*, 2151 (1943), 11.

the work, while 'hard to classify' fails to perceive how individuality could be an attribute of a poetry book. The review is redolent of a rule-bound critical climate.

Smith was disappointed with the overall reception of *Harold's Leap* (1950).²⁸³ It contained a large number of poems that were to become well known, including the title poem, 'The Castle', 'Pad, Pad', 'The River God', 'Do Take Muriel Out', 'Drugs Made Pauline Vague' and an elegant, mysterious, but less well-known poem which is one of her best: 'Voices about the Princess Anemone'. Smith considered that this collection indicated a development in that her poetry had 'grown perhaps simplified & more direct'.²⁸⁴ Despite her own assessment, the book sold fewer than any of Smith's previous poetry publications.²⁸⁵ Reviewing the collection in *The Tablet*, Maryvonne Butcher comments favourably on Smith's originality, precise use of language, and the addictive quality of her work for an admirer.²⁸⁶ Butcher herself, though, is a guarded admirer, also remarking, for example, on the 'flatness of the expression' and 'the apparent irrelevance of the illustrations.' The *TLS* review of *Harold's Leap* is headed with the childlike 'On a Broomstick'. While admitting that 'Miss Smith looks down deep into the soul of suffering humanity', the reviewer also uses more patronising terms such as the sexist 'the capricious eye of a witch', as well as 'random jottings', 'eccentricity' and 'naive yet malicious drawings'.²⁸⁷ On 9 February 1951, she wrote warmly to the critic Daniel George thanking him for his positive review of the book in *The Tribune*.²⁸⁸ He had written admiringly and prophetically:

Plumb the black depths of this unprecedented poetry and you will come up braced but smiling: gaze too long at its scintillating surface, and you will retire dazzled. Get the book and see how you fare. Keep it because it will one day be a collector's item.

²⁸³ Smith, *Harold's Leap* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1950). Chapman & Hall had also published Smith's novel *The Holiday* (1949), which Cape had rejected. This publisher was disinclined, after low sales of *Harold's Leap*, to publish Smith's next collection (Barbera and McBrien, *Stevie*, p. 176). *Not Waving But Drowning*, her fifth poetry collection, was published by Deutsch in 1957.

²⁸⁴ Smith in response to the question 'What do you regard as the main lines along which your poetry has developed since your first publication?'. Marjorie Boulton's 'Questionnaire' (1951), Tulsa Archive, 1976. 012.115.002.

²⁸⁵ Will May, ed., 'Chronology', *Collected Poems*, p. xli.

²⁸⁶ Maryvonne Butcher, review of Smith, *Harold's Leap* (1950), *The Tablet*, 197. 5777 (1951), p. 112.

²⁸⁷ [Anon.], 'On A Broomstick', review of Smith, *Harold's Leap* (1950) *TLS*, 2548 (1950), 15.

²⁸⁸ Daniel George, 'Rolling a Beautiful Log', review of Smith, *Harold's Leap* (1950), *Tribune*, 725 (1951), 19.

Smith's letter declared her anxiety and disappointment about the book's reception, as well as her gratitude to George:

I hope it will cheer my publisher up too. I fear he has fallen a prey to morbid fancies, one of which runs to the tune of, Never again [...] I think the New Statesman, Time & Tide, the Spectator and the Listener will have none of him [referring to *Harold's Leap*], but he has been lucky too and I am really so grateful to you.²⁸⁹

George's support cheered Smith during this period when she despaired over the reception of her poetry. He did not, however, have the weight of influence to significantly champion her seriousness as a poet.

The period following Smith's departure from her job at Newnes, the later years of the 1950s and the 1960s, marked a general increase in her critical standing, as well as a significant rise in her popularity as a poet. She had by this time left secretarial work with a pension, supplementing this with her frequent book reviewing. The critical reception of Smith's poetry was overall more positive for her later books: *Not Waving, But Drowning* (1957), *Selected Poems* (1962), and *The Frog Prince and Other Poems* (1966). The reviews were, however, still frequently marked by a sexist condescension. The 4 October 1957 *TLS* review of *Not Waving But Drowning*, for instance, while noting 'intensity of the vision and the vigour of language' also remarked on 'markedly feminine yieldings to impulse or capricious fancy' and 'triviality and whimsy' which she does not always avoid.²⁹⁰ This reviewer of a collection that marks Smith's maturity as a poet does not discern that what is termed 'capricious', for instance, might, in non-sexist language, be an inventiveness that is part of her artistry. However, they are admiring of various aspects of Smith's poetic art, her fierceness and tenderness, her control of off-beat rhythms and half-rhyme. This review points out the lack of establishment interest in her poetry and wryly attempts to explain it. Smith is hard to define and too genuinely nonconformist:

The obscure forces governing poetic reputation have shown little interest in Miss Stevie Smith's poems, and this is unlikely to surprise either their author or her devoted readers [...] If there is a blame for neglect it probably lies with Miss Smith's fidelity to an exigent and rather peculiar Muse who is too cunning to allow herself to

²⁸⁹ Letter from Smith to Daniel George, 9 February 1951. Hull Archive, U DP156/2.

²⁹⁰ [Anon.], 'Light Fantastic', review of Stevie Smith, *Not Waving But Drowning* (1957), *TLS*, 2901 (1957), 4.

be taped, and too suspicious of the conformist nonconformity which makes the wheels go round.²⁹¹

In this reviewer's distancing reference to a 'rather peculiar Muse' a strong sense is conveyed of Smith being 'other', as a woman and also as an unconventional woman poet.

Of Smith's *Selected Poems*, the reviewer in *The Listener* (25 October 1962) comments appreciatively and respectfully: 'Miss Smith can develop her apparently artless thought-processes with extreme literary and metrical subtlety. It should be added that she cares passionately about the purity of language and religion, where she shows occasional unexpected flashes of affinity with Blake.'²⁹² The essential seriousness of Smith's poetry is also recognised by the *TLS* reviewer of this volume (28 December 1962) who, commenting on both the stylistic and emotional aspects of her work, considers her 'a daring and skilful technician, a human being with a warmth of response that makes all her poems ultimately moving'.²⁹³

The *TLS* gives a generally positive, if rather patronising, review of *The Frog Prince* (1966), a collection containing many of Smith's most memorable poems, the majority of which were to be included in the Penguin *Selected Poems* (1978).²⁹⁴ The review contains the sweeping, dismissive pronouncement: 'Some of her work is indulgent, even trivial.' The reviewer then continues, however: 'But it ought at last to be recognised that Miss Smith's is a purposeful and substantial talent.'²⁹⁵ The reviewer also mentions qualities 'below the surface oddness', not appreciating, as many have not, that this idiosyncrasy is an essential feature of the whole. Graham Martin, who is almost entirely dismissive of *The Frog Prince*, also reviews in *The Listener* (26 January 1967) a recording of Smith reading her poetry. He alludes to what he defines reductively and misguidedly as 'adult pretending to be a child' in her poems, claims that 'without her voice [Smith's performing voice], not much of *The Frog Prince* would survive a second reading'.²⁹⁶ The jacket-flap comment for *The Frog Prince*, conversely,

²⁹¹ [Anon.], review of Smith, *Not Waving But Drowning* (1957), *Listener*, "The Listener's Book Chronicle." 17 October 1957, p. 623. The Listener Historical Archive, 1929-91.
<<http://tinyurl.gale.com/tinyurl/BggYo6>> [accessed 13 September 2019].

²⁹² K. W. Gransden, 'On Her Own', review of Smith, *Selected Poems* (1962), *Listener*, 1752 (1962), 49.

²⁹³ [Anon.], 'Light But Not Slight', review of Smith, *Selected Poems* (1962), *TLS*, 3174 (1962), 10.

²⁹⁴ Smith *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1978/2002).

²⁹⁵ [Anon.], 'Waving and Drowning', review of Smith, *The Frog Prince* (1966), *TLS*, 3386 (1967), 12.

²⁹⁶ Graham Martin, 'New Poetry', review of Smith, *The Frog Prince And Other Poems* (1966), and of Smith's recorded reading on the Marvel Press 'Listen LPV7 album' (1965), *Listener* 1974 (1967), 28.

emphasises the importance of the poems on the page: ‘But, as always with the spoken word, something is lost – and not only the drawings – if the poems cannot be seen, read, and reread, on the page.’ This was the final collection of Smith’s poems to be published in her lifetime. In 1970 she edited an anthology *The Batsford Book of Children’s Verse*.²⁹⁷ The *TLS* reviewer, in a welcome late endorsement of Smith’s poetry, described it reverentially as ‘childhood predilections which determined the direction of a profound adult talent’.²⁹⁸ This review appreciates Smith’s strength of vision and it suggests the shaping power of her childhood.

Among poets who were the most wholehearted admirers of Smith’s poetry during her lifetime, and valued her as a rare talent, poet-editor David Wright stood out. A major early champion of Smith, he included her poems in both *The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Verse* (1953)²⁹⁹ and *The Mid-Century: English Poetry 1940-60* (1965).³⁰⁰ Smith’s inclusion in both these anthologies will be discussed in Chapter Four. Wright was also co-editor of ‘X’, a magazine that preferred to publish work by writers who were unknown, neglected, or known, but not sufficiently honoured. The editors favoured the anarchic in poetry and that which could not be categorised:

There is at the heart of any interesting idea of art or poetry an anarchic volatile centre – a sort of living principle – which will not tolerate categoric definition so that even the wildest of surrealist or anti-art proclamations militate against the sort of freedom the artist values.³⁰¹

Thus, for the editors of this magazine, the characteristics that made Smith’s poetry hard to define and baffled some commentators were those which fully represented a powerful and necessary artistic freedom. Apart from featuring selections of Smith’s poetry in ‘X’, David Wright also published Smith’s writing on her poetry, ‘My Muse’, in 1960.³⁰²

²⁹⁷ Smith, ed., *The Batsford Book of Children’s Verse* (London: Batsford, 1970).

²⁹⁸ [Anon.], ‘Personal Pleasures’, review of Smith, *The Batsford Book of Children’s Verse* (1970), *TLS*, 1270 (1970), 1250.

²⁹⁹ *The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Verse*, ed. by Heath-Stubbs and Wright (1953).

³⁰⁰ *The Mid-Century: English Poetry 1940-1960*, ed. by David Wright (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965).

³⁰¹ Patrick Swift and David Wright, ‘Foreword’ to *X: A Quarterly Review* 1.2 (1959), n.p.

³⁰² Smith, ‘My Muse’, first published in *X: A Quarterly Review*, 1.2 (1960), 156-57.

Another enthusiastic admirer was Sylvia Plath. She revealed the strength of her appreciation of Smith in an article in *The London Magazine* (February 1962) in which she compared Smith's poetry, in an important respect, to that of some significant American contemporaries:

The poets I delight in are possessed by their poems as by the rhythms of their own breathing. Their finest poems seem born all-of-a-piece, not put together by hand: certain poems in Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, for instance; Theodore Roethke's greenhouse poems; some of Elizabeth Bishop and a very great deal of Stevie Smith.³⁰³

Shortly before her death, Plath famously wrote Smith a 'fan letter' in which she declared herself 'a desperate Smith-addict'.³⁰⁴ She expressed the wish that they might meet, although they never did. Plath was to commit suicide in February of the following year. Given the isolation of women poets at that time, it is hard not to speculate as to whether a meeting between these two poets, had it come about, might have helped Plath. She had wondered if Stevie Smith might 'come to tea or coffee when I manage my move – to cheer me on a bit'. Smith may well have been an influence as a role model for Plath in her use of personae and of dramatic monologue to convey the personal. As an indication of the breadth of Smith's appeal, one admirer who wrote to congratulate Smith, in an undated message that was very probably written on her receipt of the Queen's Gold Medal, was another woman poet, Rosemary Tonks (1932-2014), active on the London poetry scene of the 1960s: 'Dearest Stevie Congratulations!!! Love from Rosemary (Tonks)'.³⁰⁵ In an earlier (also undated) communication she had written to Smith: 'Thank you so much for being in my show, and doing everything so perfectly. I'm told it all rated as a first-class evening'.³⁰⁶ Plath's and Wright's wholehearted appreciation, particularly, contrasts with that of more grudging male critics who, along with praise and perception, felt the need to add caveats and to use reductive terms such as 'whimsical' and 'faux-naïve', suggesting that a woman poet, particularly such an unorthodox one as Smith, may be judged in a miserly fashion and, to an extent, mocked.

³⁰³ Sylvia Plath, 'Context', *London Magazine*, 46 (1962), 45-6.

³⁰⁴ Letter from Sylvia Plath to Smith, 19 November 1962. Tulsa Archive, 1976.012.1.7.2.

³⁰⁵ Rosemary Tonks, card to Stevie Smith, (undated). In an earlier (also undated) communication 'Thank you so much for being in my show, and doing everything so perfectly. I'm told it all rated as a first-class evening'. Tulsa Archive, 1976.012.1.11.14.

³⁰⁶ Rosemary Tonks, undated postcard to Stevie Smith. Tulsa Archive, 1976.012.1.11.13. The poetry of Tonks was recuperated and published by Bloodaxe Books in 2016. Rosemary Tonks, *Bedouin of the London Evening*, ed. by Neil Astley (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2016).

As discussed in Chapter One, Smith's poetic fortunes changed most obviously in the 1960s. As well as being a frequent BBC broadcaster of her poems, she became popular as a performer of her poetry in the events organised by Michael Horovitz. Horovitz, writing in memory of Stevie Smith in 1975, defines her gift to that younger generation of poets: 'this compulsive directness (– surviving its adoption of a mask), the still unfashionable notion that anyone might look into his heart and write – and well, so he speak straight and true what's there'.³⁰⁷ This apparent spontaneity, as opposed to the general restraint of the poets associated with the Movement, is an important aspect of Smith's enduring appeal, evident in the increasing of her anthologising across time, which I shall explore in Chapter Four.

III Obituaries

This later popularity of her poetry would have been a strong factor in the awarding of the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry to Stevie Smith in 1969. But Smith's obituaries, mirroring as a group her critical reception during her lifetime, did not all reflect her status as a recipient of this award. The very short obituary in *The Guardian* (9 March 1971), for instance, while entitled 'Stevie Smith: poet', then referred to her, initially, as 'the novelist and broadcaster'.³⁰⁸ The second paragraph mentioned the Queen's Gold Medal, but there is no further assessment of her work. The *Telegraph* notice of her death (8 March, 1971), lessening her status and denying the subtlety of her poetry, considered her 'a good poet, but even better as a performer'.³⁰⁹ The substantial obituary (9 March, 1971) in *The Times*, however, appraising her poems, novels, drawings, and readings, warmly appreciated Smith as 'one of the most original and individual artists of her time'.³¹⁰ This obituary identified that while her 'poems were often ostensibly funny', they also possessed 'a strange visionary quality'. Also highlighted in this account was Smith's zest for life, the fun she brings to writing and, fundamentally, her deep awareness of 'the "quiet desperation" of the common human situation'. A later *Guardian* tribute (14, March 1971) by the poet John Wain, Oxford Professor of Poetry 1973–8, also stood out for its strong celebration of Smith:

³⁰⁷ Michael Horovitz, 'Of Absent Friends' in *In Search of Stevie Smith*, ed. by Sanford Sternlicht (New York: Syracuse University Press), 1991, pp. 147–65, (p. 162).

³⁰⁸ [Anon.], obituary of Stevie Smith, 'Stevie Smith: Poet', *Guardian*, March 9, 1971, p. 7.

³⁰⁹ David Holloway, 'Stevie Smith, poet, critic and novelist', obituary, *Daily Telegraph*, 9 March 1971, p. 8.

³¹⁰ [Anon.], obituary of Stevie Smith, 'One of the most original poets of her time', obituary of Stevie Smith, *The Times*, 9 March 1971, p. 16.

As for her poetry, its most immediately striking feature is the perfect marriage of form and content. Since she perceived the world by the light of an imagination as undeflected as a child's, traditional poetic form would have hampered her like a frock coat on a mermaid; mere formlessness, on the other hand, would have failed to convey the ritual element in her message.³¹¹

Via the 'frock coat on a mermaid' conceit, though it may seem to be over-feminising Smith, Wain seems to be alluding to Smith's quality of the imagination, her ability to enchant or bewitch, and her fruitful strangeness, while the frock coat represents the constraints of patriarchy. He may be unconsciously acknowledging that the traditional in poetry is male. Wain concluded his tribute most warmly: 'The world is a sadder and poorer place because Stevie has gone from it, but it is happier and richer because she lived and did her work.'

IV The late twentieth century

In the latter part of the twentieth century, after Smith's death, the lack of wholehearted support from significant male poets was a continued thread. This contrasts with the posthumous male advocacy that Plath, for example, received from the influential poet, critic, and editor Al Alvarez. There was strong admiration for Smith's poetry from some male commentators, but this was set against outright hostility from others. Concurrently, the myth of Stevie Smith 'the eccentric woman poet' developed, and more was commonly known about some aspects of her external life than about her poetry, except, perhaps, for a very few of her more widely published poems. It was the rise of feminist publishing and feminist literary criticism in the late 1970s that particularly celebrated Smith and led to her being studied as a poet of stature. This attention was a strong precursor to Smith studies by men as well as women in the early twenty-first century.

Philip Larkin was a key figure among commentators who mixed genuine appreciation with some condescension, during Smith's lifetime and afterwards. Larkin's overall response, very positive, yet with some significant reservations, was first apparent in a 1962 article 'Frisolous and Vulnerable' published in the *New Statesman*.³¹² He wrote promisingly: 'I am not aware

³¹¹ John Wain, 'The Genius of Stevie Smith', *Guardian*, 14 March 1971. Observer archive: <<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2013/mar/17/poetry>> [accessed 22 June 2019].

³¹² Philip Larkin, 'Frisolous and Vulnerable', in *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), pp. 153-58. First published, *New Statesman*, 28 September 1962.

that Stevie Smith's poems have ever received serious critical assessment, though recently I have seen signs that this may not be far off.'³¹³ Larkin does indeed give some serious critical attention to Smith. He cites a passage from the end of her 1949 novel *The Holiday* that includes the striking title phrase of his article: 'The soul, frivolous and vulnerable, will now lie down and draw the snow over her for a blanket.'³¹⁴ For Larkin, a comparable note of solemnity and desolation sounds throughout her poetry. He praises her originality and observes 'she is always at her most characteristic when uttering the unexpected that once expressed is never forgotten'.³¹⁵ Memorably and perceptively, he concludes his article: 'Miss Smith's poems speak with the authority of sadness'.³¹⁶ Larkin, however, dismisses her accompanying drawings as the 'hallmark of frivolity'.³¹⁷ He also comments that her poems are not of the kind that can be anthologised: 'her successes are not full-scale full-square poems that can be anthologized and anatomized'.³¹⁸ This is ironic in view of the future anthologising of a wide range of Smith's poems in the later twentieth century and the twenty first, and the increasing twenty-first century scholarly study of her work. Larkin's description of her poems as 'not full-scale full-square' suggests a conventional male criterion of a solidly-built poem, as opposed to Smith's more mercurial approach. Larkin leaves this criterion unsettled, without directly challenging it. He continues by delivering the reductive, 'backhanded' compliment that she is more a poet of occasional memorable phrases 'that one finds hanging about one's mind like nursery rhymes, or folk poetry, long after one has put the book down in favour of Wallace Stevens'.³¹⁹ Unsurprisingly Stevie Smith was sceptical about this review, aware of its ambivalence. She wrote to her editor at Longman's: 'I got the impression that P. Larkin, though placing us much in his debt, was uneasy, hence shifting around a bit and coming out with the old charge of *fausse-naïveté*!'³²⁰

Larkin's review of Smith's posthumously published book *Scorpion and Other Poems* in *The Observer* (23 January, 1972) was affectionately titled: 'Stevie, Goodbye'.³²¹ Predictably, he

³¹³ Larkin, 'Frivolous and Vulnerable', *Required Writing*, p. 153.

³¹⁴ Larkin, 'Frivolous and Vulnerable', p. 154. Quoting from Smith, *The Holiday*, p. 198.

³¹⁵ Larkin, 'Frivolous and Vulnerable', p. 156.

³¹⁶ Larkin, 'Frivolous and Vulnerable', p. 158.

³¹⁷ Larkin, 'Frivolous and Vulnerable', p. 153.

³¹⁸ Larkin, 'Frivolous and Vulnerable', p. 158.

³¹⁹ Larkin, 'Frivolous and Vulnerable', p. 158.

³²⁰ Smith, letter to John Guest, 3 October 1962, quoted in Spalding, p. 257.

³²¹ Philip Larkin, 'Stevie Goodbye: Stevie Smith', in *Philip Larkin: Further Requirements: Interviews, Broadcasts, Statements and Book Reviews 1952-85*, ed. by Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), pp. 263-65. This review of Smith's posthumous *Scorpion and Other Poems* was first published, *Observer*, 23 January 1972. The affection of Larkin (as well as of Anthony

referred to her ‘her quaintness, frivolity, fantasy, call it what you will’.³²² While this was reductive of Smith’s power and resonance, he also wrote: ‘she was, for all this a writer of individuality and integrity, who had perfected a way of writing that could deal with any subject’.³²³ Larkin ends this review by quoting in full her poem ‘Grave by a Holm-oak’, which he especially admires, a haunting, lyrical poem in which Smith expresses perfectly her melancholy questioning of the mystery of death: ‘Where have the dead gone? / Where do they live now?’³²⁴ In my view, it adds to the strength of this more conventional lyric poem that it takes its place among her more stylistically unconventional poetry. Larkin’s overall positive regard is affirmed in a piece on Day Lewis published in the *Guardian* on 6 March 1980 where he comments: ‘he saw that the Queen’s Gold Medal for Poetry went to those who should have had it years before: Graves, Spender, Fuller, Stevie Smith’.³²⁵ That he cites Smith last, despite her having been second in birth-order in the group, does seem to suggest some self-consciousness, in the face of the male literary world, about this weight of approval. He uses her full name, despite there being no obvious poetic ‘Smith’ with whom to confuse her.

Also indicative of Smith’s significance for Larkin, a recent article by Michael Shuff in *About Larkin: The Journal of the Philip Larkin Society* (November 2019) details how the poet made a home for the ‘Stevie Smith Collection’ in his Librarian’s room at Hull.³²⁶ Shuff was struck by how this favouring of Smith’s work contrasted with how little evidence there was of her work in the catalogue of Larkin’s personal collection kept at home. Shuff concluded that while he may not have wanted friends, for instance, to see all the Smith books, he kept them more unobtrusively, although close to him, at his place of work. Larkin, he suggests, may well have secretly ‘thrilled at her original female poetic voice in the 1950s’.³²⁷ This apparent secrecy intimates again that because of the climate of the literary times, Larkin may well have felt the need to express his admiration for Smith guardedly. Showing Larkin’s strong valuing

Thwaite) for Smith was also shown in Larkin’s response to the film ‘Stevie’ (dir. by Robert Enders, 1978), as related to me by Thwaite: ‘He [Larkin] was in tears ... We were both in tears.’ Thwaite in conversation with MA, 27 November 2018.

³²² Larkin, ‘Stevie, Goodbye’, p. 264.

³²³ Larkin, ‘Stevie Goodbye’, p. 264.

³²⁴ Larkin, ‘Stevie, Goodbye’, p. 265.

³²⁵ Philip Larkin, “‘A Decent Minor Poet’” (1980), in *Further Requirements: Interviews, Broadcasts, Statements and Book Reviews*, ed. by Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), pp. 299-300 (p. 300).

³²⁶ Michael Shuff, ‘Philip Larkin’s Stevie Smith Collection’, in *About Larkin: Journal of the Philip Larkin Society*, 48.10-13.

³²⁷ Shuff, ‘Philip Larkin’s Stevie Smith Collection’, 48.13.

of Smith, Shuff also points out that Larkin was responsible for the acquisition of the original typescript of Smith's *A Novel on Yellow Paper* for Hull University library. He also recounts how Larkin gave Smith's poetry to close literary friends, such as Kingsley Amis, and went against their opinions through his support, although that support could sound patronising.³²⁸

Although the poetics of Smith and Larkin are very different, there is a commonality in their concern for truthfulness, for example, and in their directness and lack of sentimentality.³²⁹ Was Larkin influenced by Smith? Will May points out that Smith's line 'And by being not true, have made me unkind', from her poem 'I Was so Full...' published in her *Selected Poems* in 1962, is echoed in Larkin's 'Talking in Bed' published in *The Whitsun Weddings* in the same year:

It becomes still more difficult to find
Words at once true and kind,
Or not untrue and not unkind.³³⁰

Perhaps Larkin's poem 'Toads' has an intimation of Smith with its earthy, yet fabulist imagery: 'Why should I let the toad *work* / Squat on my life?'³³¹ Larkin may have envied Smith's integration of directness into her contemplative poems. He tended to keep directness of address neatly separate in poems such as 'This Be The Verse' ('They fuck you up, your mum and dad'), rather than incorporating them into his more reflective, lyrical poems.³³² A far less prolific poet, Larkin may well have envied how Smith so frequently achieved memorability in her work. His public attitude to her work, although appreciative in some

³²⁸ Shuff quotes Amis: 'Old Philip was given to literary passions that I never shared at all, as for the poetry of Hardy, Wm Barnes & Stevie Smith'. Kingsley Amis, letter to Anthony Powell, 21 November 1990; published in *The Letters of Kingsley Amis*, Zachery Leader, ed., (New York: Harper Collins, 2001). 'Philip Larkin's Stevie Smith Collection', *About Larkin* 48.12.

³²⁹ Larkin may well have 'borrowed' from Smith's poem 'I Was so Full...' (*Collected Poems*, p.464) for the lines 'Words at once true and kind, / Or not untrue and not unkind' in 'Talking in Bed' in *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964, in Anthony Thwaite, ed., *Philip Larkin: Collected Poems* (London, Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 129). This is suggested by Will May in his Introduction to *The Collected Poems*, p. xxvii. Smith's poem had its first book publication in her *Selected Poems* in 1962, and Larkin's poem was dated by Thwaite as being first written in 1960. Perhaps Larkin had read Smith's poem elsewhere as there is such a strong echo in his poem? At any rate, a commonality of diction and concern is in evidence.

³³⁰ May, ed., 'Introduction' to *The Collected Poems*, pp. xxvii-xxviii. Smith, 'I Was so Full...', *Collected Poems*, p. 464. Philip Larkin, 'Talking in Bed', *Collected Poems*, ed. by Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 129.

³³¹ Larkin, 'Toads', *Collected Poems*, 1988, p. 89.

³³² Larkin, 'This Be the Verse', *Collected Poems*, 1988, p. 180.

respects, was clearly also that of a member of the patriarchal literary establishment who may have felt threatened by her poetic lawlessness and the energies of her work.

Another central twentieth-century male poet, Seamus Heaney, had a view of Smith's poetry that was, in part, appreciative, but still more guarded than Larkin's. He wrote in 1976 of Smith's positive qualities as a poet: 'There is variety and inventiveness, much humor and understanding, and a constant poignancy. Her gift was to create a peculiar emotional weather between the words, a sense of pity for what is unfringed and unfulfilled.'³³³ Less positively, he continues 'One is tempted to use words like "fey," "arch" and "dotty"'. Then he adds 'such adjectives sell Stevie Smith's work short'. He arrives at a reductive conclusion: 'in the end, the adjective has to be "eccentric"'.³³⁴ Smith hated her poetry being called 'eccentric' and wrote in a letter to Anthony Thwaite in 1962 that she found it 'odd being told so often I am eccentric because I never once have felt that I am, but a plain down-to-earth as ever was'.³³⁵ Certainly Smith's satirical approach to themes such as religious belief and the position of women was extremely shrewd and 'down-to-earth'.

Extreme disrespect was shown by the influential editor, critic, and poet Ian Hamilton in a 1975 review in the *New Statesman* of Smith's first *Collected Poems*.³³⁶ He begins by describing her as residing 'in the company of those few poets for whom readers have genuine affection'. This might sound appreciative, but he continues: 'Her verse persona, though, does have the effect of seeming to miniaturise conflict, and to reduce complications to the appearance of mere moody inconsistency.' Hamilton's negative application of 'moody' is typical of the dismissal of a female stance by a male. He writes of her 'naïve style of utterance' and, even more insultingly, of her 'pat personifications, her plonking rhymes and generally offhand versification'. With unabashed sexism he remarks on 'her funny spinsters, her maidenly apostrophes'. It is revealing to contrast a poem by Smith with one by Hamilton, both poems on the same page of the *TLS* in 1965; the liveliness, vigour, and sharpness of

³³³ Seamus Heaney, 'A Memorable Voice: Stevie Smith' (1976) in Sternlicht, ed. (1991), pp. 211-13, (p. 212).

³³⁴ Heaney, pp. 212-13.

³³⁵ Smith, letter to Anthony Thwaite, 28 November 1962. Hull Archive, Letters from Stevie Smith to Anthony and Ann Thwaite, UDP 214.3.2.

³³⁶ Ian Hamilton, 'Goodness Me, a Poem', review of *Collected Poems of Stevie Smith* ed. by James MacGibbon (London: Allen Lane, 1975), *New Statesman* 8.8 (1975), 172.

Smith's 'Exeat', and the more conventional melancholy poeticisms of Hamilton's 'Night Walk'. Hamilton's comments may conceal an envy of Smith's popularity.³³⁷

A firm male admirer of Smith's poetry was poet and editor D.J. Enright, whose 1971 essay, written after Smith's death, is one of the most considered of the twentieth-century's responses by male poets to her work.³³⁸ He explores the depth of thought in her poems, thought that is always emotionally felt. Knowledgeable about the breadth of her influences, he emphasises that in the totality of her poetry she is, nevertheless, very much herself. Reflecting on Smith's immense admiration for Racine's *Phèdre*, he finds something of this classicism in her own work, affirming that being "'bone-straight and simple" [Smith's own view of *Phèdre*] doesn't necessarily mean shallow and obvious'.³³⁹ Critical of the terms often applied to Smith, Enright comments:

As for eccentricity and quaintness, Miss Smith's themes are commonly the large ones, central to the human condition. Extremely interesting, and sufficient to dispose of any suggestion of her being a *naïf*, are her reflections on death and suicide.³⁴⁰

Enright concludes by stating that, in his view, her most individualistic work 'is not amenable to interpretation or conducive to moralizing'.³⁴¹ He suggests that this is not so much because the work is difficult, as 'children are likely to enjoy it unworringly'. He quotes in full the equivocal 'Voices about the Princess Anemone'. Its fine ambivalence concludes with the couplet: 'She bends her head, her hands dip in the water / Fear is a band of gold on the King's daughter.'³⁴² While it is possible to tease out Smith's thematic concerns in this poem, Enright's choice is a good example of a successful enigmatic Smith poem that slips through the reader's grasp, and is resistant to paraphrase while taking a strong hold on an unconscious level.

Notable early academic work on Smith's poetry was published by the American Calvin Bedient. In his study *Eight Contemporary Poets* (1974), he features chapters on both Stevie Smith and another very original and Modernist-influenced twentieth-century poet, W.S.

³³⁷ Smith, 'Exeat', Ian Hamilton, 'Night Walk' in 'Poems of the Sixties', *TLS*, 3309 29.7 (1965), 28.

³³⁸ D. J. Enright, 'Did Nobody Teach You?' (1972), in Sternlicht, ed. (1991), pp. 119-31.

³³⁹ Smith, quoted in Enright, 'Did Nobody Teach You?', p. 120.

³⁴⁰ Enright, p. 128.

³⁴¹ Enright, p.131.

³⁴² Enright, p. 131.

Graham, poets ‘outside the usual categories’.³⁴³ Of Smith, Bedient writes ‘Stevie Smith had a wonderfully various mind and her work is a forest of themes and attitudes. In large part it was her intelligence and honesty that led to this – to the protean, compound substance we all are.’³⁴⁴ Bedient also observes her destabilising use of metre that takes the reader backwards and forwards in time, her conjuring of a traditional poetic style, only to shift it: ‘Smith sometimes uses metre as a foil, to show where we have been or would like to be before showing where we are.’³⁴⁵ Thus he shows real insight into an important attribute of her work.

Stevie Smith’s reputation as a poet in the later twentieth century was fostered through a variety of Smith-related publications, some of which contributed positively towards her critical reputation. One of the earliest of these, *Ivy and Stevie* (1983), by her close long-term friend Kay Dick, contained Dick’s reflections on her friend and an invaluable interview with the poet who talked freely about her life and work. Smith gives her own views of herself and her writing, such as: ‘I’m straightforward but I’m not simple [...] In some ways I’m romantic but my basic root is profoundly sensible – profoundly sensible.’³⁴⁶ Such a view contradicts superficial critiques of her work.

Posthumously, in the 1970s, ‘the myth of Stevie Smith’ began to rival interest in her poetry and to detract from the complexities of her poetry, even as it may have drawn some readers towards it. The play *Stevie* by Hugh Whitmore (1977), made into a film in 1978, captured aspects of Smith’s life in the suburbs with her aunt and aspects of her personality, including her loquacious conversational style, while also enhancing the myth of the ‘eccentric spinster’ Stevie Smith.³⁴⁷ There is little sense, for example, of the poet who worked as a reviewer and was formidably well-read and deeply questioning. Smith’s poetry was as much influenced by her reading and resultant thinking as by her life in the suburbs. As Patricia Beer pointed out in her review of the play, despite it making for ‘an sustainedly interesting and enjoyable evening’, there is an inevitable loss as the inner life of a poet cannot be shown, except via the poetry itself.³⁴⁸ It is Smith’s inner life and her poetry that are truly extraordinary.

³⁴³ Calvin Bedient, ‘Introduction’, *Eight Contemporary Poets* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. vii-x (p. ix.).

³⁴⁴ Bedient, ‘Stevie Smith’, in *Eight Contemporary Poets*, (pp.139-58), p.139.

³⁴⁵ Bedient, p. 142.

³⁴⁶ Dick, *Ivy and Stevie*, p. 75.

³⁴⁷ Hugh Whitmore, *Stevie* (London: Hampstead Theatre Publications, 1977). The film version of *Stevie* was directed by Robert Enders: *Stevie*, dir. by Robert Enders (MovieStore Collection, 1978).

³⁴⁸ Patricia Beer, ‘In the Sign of Scorpio’, review of Hugh Whitmore’s play *Stevie* (1977), *TLS*, 3917, 8.4. (1977), 14.

In the late 1970s and onwards there was an increased interest in Stevie Smith's work as a result of the rise of feminism in Britain in the late 1960s and in the 1970s. The feminist publisher Virago sought to redress the gender balance by publishing contemporary writing by women while also reprinting and showcasing work by women that had fallen out of print. As well as reissuing Smith's three novels between 1979 and 1981, Virago published *Me Again: The Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith* in 1981. The title diminishes Smith, but this volume is of interest both to general readers and to scholars, collecting some of Smith's prose, key letters, and unpublished poems. One of the fruits of this publication was that the writer and scholar Hermione Lee edited *Stevie Smith: A Selection* (published in 1983 by Faber), which enhanced Smith's reputation and included both her poetry and prose.³⁴⁹ Barbera and McBrien's *Stevie: A Biography of Stevie Smith* appeared in 1985. While this first biography was an exploration of Smith's life and world, Frances Spalding's authorised *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography* (1988) focused particularly on Smith's writing in its context. Spalding's biography has been invaluable in drawing serious attention to Smith's poetry and prose, and in tracing her life in the wide reading that was so strongly reflected in her work.

These Smith-related books gave reviewers a chance to consider her life and work. The reviews were often positive in their response to Smith's poetry, the increasing number of women reviewing helping to account for this. Vicki Feaver, for instance, favourably reviewing Hermione Lee's *A Selection* in the *TLS*, comments ironically, in relation to Stevie Smith, on the narrowness of the contemporary critical prejudices: 'For some reason it is all right for a contemporary poet to be unrelievedly serious; it's almost all right to be wholly comic; but to mix the two is to invite suspicion.'³⁵⁰ Patricia Beer writes perceptively and succinctly in her review of Spalding's biography: 'she is a highly significant poet; innovative and startling, yet accessible and touching'.³⁵¹

Smith's poetry also received notably negative attention. Hermione Lee, in her response to the Spalding biography, outlined a discussion that had taken place a month earlier on BBC2, in

³⁴⁹ *Stevie Smith: A Selection*, ed., by Hermione Lee (London: Faber and Faber, 1983).

³⁵⁰ Vicki Feaver, 'Alarming Domesticities', review of *Stevie Smith: A Selection*, ed. by Hermione Lee, (1983), *TLS*, 840, 5.8. (1983), 840. While this mixing of the comic and serious was less acceptable at the time of Feaver's review, it is much more acceptable now, in the poetry, for example of Carol Ann Duffy, Daljit Nagra and John Agard.

³⁵¹ Patricia Beer, 'Retold but unrevealed', review of Spalding, *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography* (1988), *TLS*, 4466 (1988), 6.

which a group of men poets, Douglas Dunn, Stephen Spender, Kingsley Amis, and Andrew Motion, were extremely disparaging about Smith and her work:

When Douglas Dunn, the chairman, came to Stevie Smith, the first adjective he used was ‘dotty’. Patricia Beer, the only woman speaker, tried to argue for her originality, but the chaps put paid to this with off-hand speed. Kingsley Amis said he couldn’t bear dottiness, hated her kind of performance poetry, and hoped she didn’t have a following any more; Stephen Spender that he had never liked her, she had no ‘rhythm’; Andrew Motion that she was repetitive, and that a little of her went a very long way.³⁵²

Lee comments:

That this complicated, subtle and disconcerting poet should still be condescended to as a tiresome, batty lady lacking in technical skills would probably not have surprised her [...] She herself had malevolent feelings about the old-boy network which excluded her.

Clearly Smith’s poetry had late twentieth-century supporters and detractors. The detractors were often men.³⁵³ Thus, critical opinion was divided, to an extent, along gendered lines.

The anthologies publishing poetry by women that emerged at this time as a result of the rise of feminism in publishing (see Part II of this chapter) were an important and very necessary step towards the recognition, celebration, and study of women poets. Smith’s work was often given prominence, editors showing, in both the generous selections of her poems and their introductory discussions, how strongly they valued her as a modern woman poet and a trailblazer.

Early scholarly work on Smith that emerged during the late twentieth-century period was often feminist-influenced. It included Jane Dowson’s *Women Poets of the 1930s: A Critical Anthology* (discussed above and also below in Chapter Four on Stevie Smith’s anthology

³⁵² Hermione Lee, ‘Poet of Palmers Green’, review of Spalding, *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography* (1988), *Observer*, 23.10.(1988), 42.

³⁵³ In view of this gender division of that time, it is especially gratifying to note that respected literary critic John Carey featured Smith’s *The Frog Prince and Other Poems* (1966) in his selection of the twentieth century’s 50 most pleasurable books: John Carey, *Pure Pleasure: A Guide to the 20th Century’s Most Enjoyable Books* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000). The other poetry books featured here are by Hardy, Eliot, Edward Thomas, Housman, Auden, Heaney, Hughes, and Larkin.

representation). Two book-length scholarly studies of Smith were published. Catherine Civello's 1997 study, *Patterns of Ambivalence*, focused on Smith's conflicting desires towards life, love, self, and God. Laura Severin's *Stevie Smith's Resistant Antics*, also published in 1997, gave a feminist interpretation of Smith's work. These critical books supplemented the attention of the reviewers and demonstrated a broadening of the interest in Smith, particularly, at this stage, from women scholars.

V The twenty-first century

The early twenty-first century critical reception of Smith is characterised by generally positive attention from scholarly publications such as the *LRB* and the *TLS* and, alongside this, increased academic work by men, as well as women. There are still, however, areas of critical superficiality and undervaluing, and the breadth and depth of her poetry and her unique contribution to literature remain, to an extent, unsung.

Boosting in-depth attention for Smith and showcasing her achievement, a landmark book from Faber, *The Collected Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith*, was published in 2015, edited by scholar Will May. The title indicates the importance that May gives to Smith's accompanying drawings. Significant in many respects, this volume provided the occasion for a critical reappraisal of Smith. The previous *Collected Poems*, edited by James MacGibbon and first published in 1975, as an indication of the undervaluing of Smith, had been out of print for over twenty years.³⁵⁴ May's *The Collected Poems* (2015) has performed a major service, bringing together for the first time all of Smith's previously published poems, with sections of both her 'Uncollected' and 'Unpublished Poems'. There are detailed 'Notes', a 'Chronology', and a list of 'Alternative Titles' for her poems. The volume is both a reflection of, as well as a prompt to, a serious valuing of Smith's poetry and its literary contribution. I shall consider Smith's twenty-first-century reception, particularly via the reviews of this *Collected Poems*, a contemporary reception which suggests that, despite significant admirers of her poetry and growing scholarly interest in her work, her critical reputation remains insecure.

Responses to this publication included scholarly essay-reviews. Academic Matthew Bevis, writing in the *LRB* (2016), assesses the editing of *The Collected Poems*.³⁵⁵ While the Notes section sometimes leaves him wanting more, in terms of indications of Smith's specific revisions, for instance, and information about the variants in the written and performed poem-texts, he praises May's attentiveness to Smith's breadth of classical and literary allusion. Most of this essay-review is taken up with Bevis's own reading of Smith's poems. Commenting on how admirers of her poetry 'often treat her as something of a pet', he draws

³⁵⁴ *The Collected Poems of Stevie Smith*, ed. by James MacGibbon (London: Allen Lane, 1975).

³⁵⁵ Matthew Bevis, 'What I most love I bite', review of May, ed., *The Collected Poems* (2015), *LRB*, 38.15 (2016). <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v38/n15/matthew-bevis/what-most-i-love-i-bite>> [accessed 13 October 2021].

attention to the ‘inscrutable’ and ‘untamed’ in her work, and how intimacy and animosity are mixed are combined. He is perceptive about her apparent, but hard-won, ‘simplicity’:

A poet who is willing to appear slight or light, willing to use words like ‘Phew’ or ‘ahem’ in her first collection, is going to have to swim against the tide of what certain readers take poetic enjoyment to be. Yet, for Smith, simplicity is something you get to rather than something you settle for; the simple is the essence, not the opposite, of the complex.

Bevis is also insightful about how adjectives habitually applied to Smith sell her short:

The adjectives so frequently used both to praise and to criticise Smith’s work – odd, quirky, eccentric etc – are sometimes estranging not because they are wrong, but because they can imply that these qualities place her far away from us, rather than both far and near.

Indeed, as Bevis indicates, while the poems are highly individual, they reflect on our commonality – the human condition. It is impossible, thus, for the misleading adjectives ‘odd’, ‘quirky’, and ‘eccentric’ to remain useful in application to Smith’s poetry; individualistic, original, and unexpected are more appropriate. The strangeness of her poems is a part of their power.

Another essay-review of the book appeared in the *TLS*, this time by poet and academic Angela Leighton.³⁵⁶ Leighton is also thorough in her critique of May’s editing, drawing attention, for instance, as Bevis does, to the Notes, in which it is sometimes unclear as to whether a version of a poem had been approved as final by Smith. She detects several unexplained changes in lines of the poetry, some of which may be serious misprints. She considers May’s ‘Introduction’ rather uninformative. Leighton compares the quality of the presentation of Smith’s drawings in the new volume with those in the earlier *Collected Poems* from Allen Lane, finding the drawings in May’s volume faded and the paper thin so that one drawing appears superimposed on the shadow of that on the next page. In all, however, she endorses the volume as a ‘very welcome addition to the canon of a poet who deserves a place, among her fellow modernists’. Discussing Plath’s admiration of Smith, Leighton quotes W.S. Graham and agrees with what she calls his ‘pairing of equals’ when he wrote of Plath ‘I think

³⁵⁶ Angela Leighton, ‘Her song never ends’, review of May, ed., *The Collected Poems* (2015), *TLS*, 17.2. (2016) <<https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/her-song-never-ends/>> [accessed 12 June 2019].

she's the best woman poet of our time apart from Stevie Smith'.³⁵⁷ Leighton believes that Smith's reputation has suffered because she has been hard to classify in a culture that likes to separate 'high seriousness from low, high-sounding from simple-sounding, difficulty of thought from the difficulty of what defies thought'. For Leighton 'the sophisticated, literary, erudite Smith, with her Latinate ear and her gift for Englishing foreign languages, is never far from the surface'. Counter to the conventions, Smith was unafraid to develop her poetry in this way, integrating, for example, the playful and the scholarly.

Lighter and shorter, Rachel Cooke's review in *The Guardian* ('Stevie Smith: you've read the poems, now look at the pictures' 16 November 2015) starts by ranking her in what might be called her personal canon, pronouncing her 'my second favourite poet (my first is Philip Larkin)'.³⁵⁸ Cooke does not give her reasons, but to be awarded second place amongst all the poet possibilities is a high ranking. Cooke cherishes a much-loved older edition of Smith's poems, but is 'nevertheless completely thrilled to be in possession of Faber's new *Collected Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith*'. She welcomes the inclusion of the previously uncollected and unpublished poems, most of them 'as savage and as true as any she ever wrote'. She approves the inclusion of the drawings in the title of the volume, having revised her opinion on them: 'now I see how very good they are, how swiftly they do their work'. Cooke mentions her response as a teenager to Smith's edginess and anarchy: 'I could hardly believe, then, that writing so jagged and so crazily enjoyable counted as literature'.

The review of this publication in *The Poetry Review*, the most influential British journal devoted to poetry and the one most read by poets is, however, the most tentative of all the reviews and amounts to a lost opportunity.³⁵⁹ This lengthy response (four pages of the journal) is by poet (and biographer of Charlotte Brontë) Claire Harman, who appears here to be coming to a slow, cautious decision about the overall worth of Smith's poetry. She begins by making the familiar reference to Smith's 'distinctive, naïve style', to the instances she finds of 'doggerel', and to the 'quirky line drawings'.³⁶⁰ Harman appears overwhelmed by 'a

³⁵⁷ W. S. Graham in a letter to Ruth Hilton, 26 April 1975, in *The Nightfisherman: Selected Letters of W. S. Graham*, ed. by Michael and Margaret Snow (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), p. 289.

³⁵⁸ Rachel Cooke, 'Stevie Smith: you've read the poems, now look at the pictures', review of May, ed., *The Collected Poems* (2015), *Guardian*, 16.11 (2015).
<<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/nov/16/rachel-cooke-shelf-life-the-collected-poems-and-drawings-of-stevie-smith>> [accessed 8 November 2021].

³⁵⁹ Claire Harman, 'Scorpion Wishes To Be Gone', review of May, ed., *The Collected Poems* (2015), *The Poetry Review*, 105.4 (2015), 92-97.

³⁶⁰ Harman, pp. 92-94.

very large body of work that at points looks so ephemeral and skittish as to deserve no attention at all'.³⁶¹ My own reading has revealed that only a very few poems in this entire *Collected* are as slight as they may first appear. Harman singles out for dismissal a two-line poem and writes: 'There seems little to be said, for instance, for pieces such as "To the Dog Belvoir"'.³⁶² She then quotes the poem's single couplet: 'The stricken Belvoir raised a paw and said: / I die a perfect gentle quadruped.' I would argue that this memorable, witty poem, particularly in the context of other poems by Smith, captures very concisely something of her fundamental view of human life. It presents the humane (ironically represented here by an animal), but also life's inherent random cruelty. Significantly, when Harman quotes the poem she does not include its epigraph: '*whom I saw in a Dream Push Baby N. from under a Brewer's Dray and Die in his Place*'. Approximately the same length as the body of the poem, it highlights this random cruelty of life, Smith's feeling that 'this ultimate good, God, has abdicated his power in the world'.³⁶³ This cruelty is only counteracted, in this instance, by the unlikely intervention of an altruistic dog. This is the poem's true absurdity, rather than that the dog should speak. The dog's name 'Belvoir' (beautiful view), reflects the welcoming aspect of Smith's own feeling about death.

Harman then offers her impression of Smith: 'a profoundly lonely person, a tender, simple, vulnerable, penetrating observer of human pain and folly talking to herself'.³⁶⁴ There is nothing here of the poet's fierceness, nor her dramatic power, nor that she speaks out to others in poems that are remarkably peopled. Harman does, however, mention poems of Smith's that surprise her, comments on the 'Janus-faced nature of Smith's genius', and welcomes May's volume as 'an essential addition to the canon'.³⁶⁵ An opportunity to re-introduce Stevie Smith to a contemporary generation of readers of *The Poetry Review* has, however, largely been lost.

Harman's review contrasts with a perceptive and informed essay-review by poet Vidyan Ravinthiran of *All the Poems: Stevie Smith*, the American version of *The Collected Poems* (2015), in the American magazine *Poetry*.³⁶⁶ He is critical of aspects of her poetry such as

³⁶¹ Harman, p. 92.

³⁶² Harman, p. 102.

³⁶³ Dick, *Ivy and Stevie*, p. 71.

³⁶⁴ Harman, p. 94.

³⁶⁵ Harman, p. 97.

³⁶⁶ Vidyan Ravinthiran, pp. 83-103. A review of Will May, ed., *All the Poems: Stevie Smith* (New York: New Directions, 2016). This is the American version of May, ed., *The Collected Poems* (2015). Earlier reference to this review by Ravinthiran, pp. 42 above.

‘the blurring looseness’ of some of the longer ones. Giving cogent reasons for his judgements about Smith’s quality, he has much to say that is extremely perceptive about her poetry. Seeing her, ultimately, as ‘a poet’s poet’, Ravinthiran emphasises an important quality of her poetry; the way in which Smith’s voice remains personal and idiosyncratic while it is also dramatically transformed:

what I’d stress is how carefully written, how intelligently stylish, how deep-diving the words on the page can be; for I do think this is the best way to appreciate Smith, as a poet’s poet, whose printed voice can be both intimately hers and wryly denatured in its ventriloquisms.³⁶⁷

Astutely, he finds an aspect of Lawrence in her work: ‘Smith, too, is more than – a dead word – unconventional; she is an avowed “enemy of convention”’.³⁶⁸ Ravinthiran also, because of her ‘joyous expansiveness, her riskily unprotected prolongations of self toward other, to give’, likens her unexpectedly and open-mindedly to ‘that impossibility [...] an English Whitman’.³⁶⁹

Early twenty-first century book-length studies of Smith confirm that, in parallel to other positive aspects of early twenty-first century reception, her poetry is an area of rising academic interest. While academic study on Smith is welcome in its depth of enquiry, there can be difficulties. One difficulty is the attempt to categorise this protean writer. Romana Huk’s study, *Stevie Smith: Between the Lines* (2005), makes a tentative case for Smith as a war poet. This claim can only be tentative because Smith cannot really be termed a war poet as such when her themes are so various. Another danger is that Smith’s poetry is portrayed as *difficult*, rather than *complex*, and the directness, which is part of its strength, goes unrecognised. Smith herself asserted about her poems: ‘They are not full of tricks. They are quite sort of straightforward with a great deal of thought underneath.’³⁷⁰ May, in his monograph *Stevie Smith and Authorship* (2010), concentrates on the poet’s management and fear of her reading and listening public, and begins Chapter 1: ‘Reading Smith’s poetry is often an exercise in bafflement.’³⁷¹

³⁶⁷ Ravinthiran, p. 98.

³⁶⁸ Ravinthiran, p. 96.

³⁶⁹ Ravinthiran, p. 103.

³⁷⁰ Smith, ‘Poet Talking’, ‘Woman’s Hour’, 16 February, 1970: BBC Written Archives (quoted in Spalding, p. 277).

³⁷¹ William May, *Stevie Smith and Authorship*, p. 21.

Thus, Smith's critical reception has fluctuated during her lifetime and beyond. It grew considerably during the 1960s with her popularity as a performer, and she received the accolade of the Queen's Gold Medal. There were areas of strong admiration for her poetry during her lifetime, notably from David Wright and Plath. There was also guardedness, as well as some outright hostility, from male poets. They may well have envied, and felt threatened by, her success with audiences, her output, and, perhaps, the anarchy of her poetry. Strong support came from the women's movement in the 1970s and 1980s, which saw Smith as a literary trailblazer. Serious study of Smith has increased over time and is developing a firm presence in the twenty-first century. Another aspect of her literary reputation, however, the continued anthologising of a large number of her poems across an increasing diversity of publications, attests, as I shall show in Chapter Four, to the enduring value of her poetry.

Chapter Four

The Anthologising of Stevie Smith

I Anthologies: The value-giving site

Anthologies can still be considered, as Andrew Michael Roberts claims, ‘perhaps still the central value-giving site for poetry’.³⁷² The anthologising of Stevie Smith’s work, in her lifetime and posthumously, forms an important aspect of her reception as a poet. It is also extremely revealing of the changing history of anthologies from the mid-twentieth century to the beginning of the twenty-first. Particularly striking is the highly sexist nature of the earlier anthologising, reflecting the patriarchal poetry landscape of Smith’s lifetime and afterwards, and how this has affected her posthumous reputation. Doubly an outsider as an unconventional woman poet, Smith has frequently been anthologised in such a way as to contribute to the blurring of her overall status, sometimes indicating that she is a lesser poet. In striking opposition to this, however, the full breadth and exceptional quality of a large number of Smith’s poems, anthologised over time in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries across an increasing diversity of publications, attest to the high value and enduring life of her poetry. The diversity of publications suggests that a more plural paradigm of the canonical is applicable to an exploration of Smith’s anthologising and to an appreciation of her unique contribution to poetry. In addition to landmark anthologies representing literary epochs, books include anthologies of poetry written by women, works taught in schools, popular anthologies that present poetry as being useful in some way to their readers, and anthologies that promote the speaking aloud of poetry. The range of publications attests to the protean quality in Smith and the fact that diverse editors are drawn to various qualities of her work, such as its subtlety and experiment with language, its compassion and humanity, its imaginative and performative strengths.

A patriarchal poetry landscape is strikingly apparent in the anthologising in the period between 1930 and 1970, when Smith was sometimes the only woman to have work published alongside the men in an anthology or magazine, and always one of a very few. Virginia

³⁷² Andrew Michael Roberts, ‘Introduction: Contemporary Poetry and the Question of Value’, in *Poetry and Contemporary Culture: The Question of Value*, ed. by Andrew Michael Roberts and Jonathan Allison (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), pp. 1-20 (p. 10).

Woolf's exploration of the relegation of women to literary inferiority in her impassioned treatise *A Room of One's Own* (1928), on which I drew in relation to women as literary critics, is very obviously applicable here in relation to this massive imbalance.³⁷³ Woolf demonstrated how this patriarchal relegation of women mirrored the position of women historically in society, a position which, in Woolf's lifetime was experiencing such revolutionary change. *A Room of One's Own* was first published a year after the vote was extended to all women over the age of twenty-one. Woolf, writing of the task of contemporary women in shaking off an historical legacy, drew attention to the lack of a history of women, to the suppression of those who might have written and to how a woman poet would face, not merely the indifference that a male poet might meet, but hostility. She exposes man's 'deep-seated desire, not so much that *she* shall be inferior as that *he* shall be superior'.³⁷⁴ In the later twentieth century, introducing a landmark anthology in which Smith's work was given prominence, *The Faber Book of 20th Century Women's Poetry* (1987), editor Fleur Adcock showed just how slow changes had been since Woolf's writing of *A Room of One's Own* in 1929. Adcock summed up the reasons for the undervaluing, even ignoring, of women's poetry and underlined what literary misogyny meant in practice:

The publishing world was dominated by men. Editors, publishers and critics were usually male. Men tend not to take women seriously. Women as a result tended not to take themselves seriously enough, and were in any case usually too busy, too oppressed or too under-educated to write. 'Poet' was a masculine word. The Muse was female, the poet was male. There was a deep-seated conviction that women couldn't do it.³⁷⁵

It was against such a background that Smith's work was published in the mid-twentieth century and afterwards.

a) Mirroring and shaping

Anthologies both mirror and shape the age. In Smith's lifetime and beyond, influential anthologies that take a historical approach, presenting poetry across a period of time, have been especially important in confirming and establishing reputations of poets, thereby

³⁷³ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 28.

³⁷⁴ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 42.

³⁷⁵ Fleur Adcock, ed., 'Introduction', *The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Women's Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), p. 1.

influencing which poets (and poems) will be valued and remembered across generations. Helen Gardner wrote in her Preface to *The New Oxford Book of English Verse* (1972): ‘any anthology that [...] aims at being classic will reflect not only the personal taste of the anthologist but also the critical consensus of the age in which it is compiled’.³⁷⁶ Although a woman editor, Gardner did indeed reflect, to a large degree, the dominant male tradition of the age. As well as reflecting their times, however, anthologies also have an active function. Anne Ferry in her 2001 study of anthologies confirms both a mirroring and a more active role: ‘the history of anthologies participates in the history of poetry and in the history of criticism, re-enacting or representing their shifts in direction; sometimes, in some measure, shaping them’.³⁷⁷ For Roberts, who emphasises the active role forcefully, anthologies are ‘sites for the definition and propounding of new values’.³⁷⁸ From a publisher viewpoint, Tony Lacey admits that one of the main drawbacks to the ‘landmark’ anthologies is ‘the canonical status that they can have and can confer not just on favoured poets but indeed on a few particular poems’.³⁷⁹ This status, which the prestigious historical anthologies confer, can be difficult to dislodge. Expensive to produce, publishers then wish to enjoy the sales. If general readers, schools, and colleges invest in them, they are slow to replace them.

Anthology detractors have included poets Laura Riding and Robert Graves. In their vehement, witty *Pamphlet Against Anthologies* (1928) they drew attention to anthologies’ commercial orientation and the disservice they often perform for poetry.³⁸⁰ These negative results of anthologising include the unhappy severing of poems from their original context, the including of poems because they fit with a particular theme, rather than because they are otherwise valuable, and the high status accorded to poems that are not as good as their anthologising might lead readers to believe. The authors’ criticism identifies the fact that the anthology has an implicit duty to present poems that are easily digested by the reader.

³⁷⁶ Helen Gardner, ed., ‘Preface’ to *The New Oxford Book of English Verse 1250–1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. v.

³⁷⁷ Anne Ferry, *Tradition and the Individual Poem: An Inquiry into Anthologies* (Stanford, USA: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 101.

³⁷⁸ Roberts, ‘The Rhetoric of Value in Recent British Poetry Anthologies’, in *Poetry and Contemporary Culture*, ed. by Roberts and Allison, pp. 101–122 (p. 101).

³⁷⁹ Tony Lacey, ‘The Anthology Problem: A Publisher’s View’, in *Anthologies of British Poetry: Critical Perspectives from Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. by Barbara Korte, Ralf Schneider and Stefanie Lethbridge (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 333–42 (p. 335).

³⁸⁰ Laura Riding and Robert Graves, *Pamphlet Against Anthologies* (London: Cape, 1928).

Dismissively, but shrewdly, they detail the attributes of the typical anthology poem, which include being ‘fairly regular in form and easily memorized’.³⁸¹

Smith’s ‘Not Waving but Drowning’ became, in Riding and Graves’ terms, ‘an anthology poem’.³⁸² Undoubtedly one of her very best poems, it is powerful, immediate, and speaks eloquently for an aspect of the human condition, while being subtle in technique, blending dramatisation with a more inward-looking, reflective voice, suggesting that the man who ‘was much too far out all my life’ portrays an aspect of the poet herself. The poem is memorable and ‘fairly regular in form’. Paradoxically, its frequent appearance may prevent it, through over-familiarisation, from getting the attention it deserves, and it may even be underrated because of its ‘anthology popularity’. An experienced reader may eventually simply see the poem rather than read it. Its presence, sometimes as the sole poem by Smith to appear, can lead readers to think, erroneously, that other poems by Smith are less valuable and accomplished. According to Anne Ferry, the quintessential ‘anthology poem’ tends to be accessible and illuminating, and to give the pleasure of recognition.³⁸³ She pinpoints how a poem that fulfils these criteria can be passed from anthology to anthology, so that readers will know it principally from having met it in anthologies. She then explores the case of Elizabeth Bishop’s ‘The Fish’, which, like ‘Not Waving but Drowning’, was also frequently anthologised, with Bishop becoming known as ‘the poet of the “The Fish”’, rather as Smith became known for the one poem. An important difference, however, is that, unlike Smith, Bishop, during her lifetime, had the wholehearted support of a poetry establishment, which included that of influential male critics and fellow poets such as Robert Lowell. As a result, her work as a whole became known, and her reputation was enlarged. This endorsement of influential literary men is a hugely significant factor in terms of the gender politics of poetry in Smith’s lifetime and beyond; a politics that has been both reflected in, and sustained by, the anthologies. Although ‘Not Waving but Drowning’ is certainly Stevie Smith’s best-known and most frequently anthologised poem, extensive study of the anthologies across time, up to and including the early twenty-first century, reveals that many of her other poems,

³⁸¹ Riding and Graves, *Pamphlet Against Anthologies*, p. 94.

³⁸² In 1995 ‘Not Waving but Drowning’ was positioned 4th in a poll to discover ‘the nation’s favourite poem’ conducted by the BBC programme *The Bookworm*. *The Nation’s Favourite Poems* (London: BBC Books, 1996), p. 16.

³⁸³ Ferry, *Tradition and the Individual Poem: An Inquiry into Anthologies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 165.

in fact a very wide variety, have also been anthologised; a changing, increasingly diverse poetry landscape has allowed for a fuller, broader representation and valuing of her work.

b) The changing landscape

The extended range of anthologising in the late twentieth century and onwards fits a paradigm of multiple and overlapping poetry canons and has resulted in the much more extensive anthologising of Stevie Smith's work. This plural paradigm of what is canonical in literature allows for a wide range of poetry and its contexts, and a diversity of readers and listeners. In her study of Victorian anthologies, in which she looks at the history of canon formation, Natalie Houston reveals: 'In actuality, there is not (and there has never been) only one literary canon. Simply put, a canon is a list or group of texts that describe certain boundaries to literary knowledge or expression.'³⁸⁴ Houston draws on the work of Alastair Fowler, who describes six major canons: the *potential* (in theory all works of written and oral literature), the *accessible* (those with which readers come into contact), and the *selective* canons.³⁸⁵ The *selective* canons include the *official* canon (produced by patronage, education or censorship), the *critical* canon (reflecting trends in literary scholarship), and the *personal* canon (comprising an individual's taste or knowledge). Additional key selected canons are the *pedagogic* (works taught in school) and the *diachronic* (those works that remain in critical or teaching canons for a long period of time).

Clearly, according to a theory of multiple canons, anthologies that publish women's poems exclusively also represent a canon; one that has put pressure on and informed the critical and diachronic canons, for instance, and has been disruptive to their suggested hierarchy of poetry. From the 1970s onwards, there was a significant rise in Stevie Smith's anthologising and an ascendancy in her reputation as a result of the rise of feminism in Britain in the late 1960s and 1970s. In the latter part of the twentieth century, feminist literary commentators continued Virginia Woolf's discussion of how women have been written out of literary history. Feminist critic Dale Spender wrote in 1986, for instance, of how men found talent amongst their fellow men, and of how a sufficient number of men are endorsed by men to

³⁸⁴ Natalie M. Houston, 'Anthologies and the Making of the Poetic Canon', in *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. by Richard Cronin and others (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 361-77 (p. 361).

³⁸⁵ Houston, 'Anthologies and the Making of the Poetic Canon', pp. 361-62, citing Alastair Fowler, 'Genre and the Literary Canon' in *New Literary History*, 11, pp. 97-119.

allow for ‘an uninterrupted tradition of men writers’.³⁸⁶ She proposed the pressing need for a re-instating of women’s contributions to literature. The publication of the anthologies that featured women’s poetry exclusively often included and celebrated Smith’s work. They helped to redress the gender balance and change the landscape of twentieth-century poetry, eventually influencing the increased representation of work written by women in anthologies that were to publish both sexes, in the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.³⁸⁷

A plural sense of what is canonical works against an easy ranking of poets as it suggests diverse poetry for diverse readers and listeners and broader criteria for judging poetry. A paradigm of ‘major’ and ‘minor’, with women poets historically often relegated to ‘minor’, now seems increasingly rigid and outdated. In 2005, the concept of ‘greatness’ in poetry and the ranking of poets was questioned and refreshingly reconsidered by a group of poets in the American magazine *Poetry*.³⁸⁸ Daisy Fried, for instance, emphasises the outdated and exclusionist aspect of mid twentieth-century criticism:

Mid-century criticism staked a lot on distinction-making: what was good, or great, or ‘flawed’. But liberal/left/anti-imperial/feminist politics made that seem a way of keeping the gates to greatness closed to almost everyone but white male writers. Opening the gates meant reconsidering, not denying, greatness.³⁸⁹

Adam Kirsch suggests that new ways of evaluating are needed and that it is always a mistake for a poet to try to sound ‘great’ in the terms of the past because ‘true seriousness is always surprising’.³⁹⁰ Arnold is a point of reference, and Thomas Sayers Ellis cites the black American poet Gwendolyn Brooks as having ‘repaired’, or perhaps refreshingly re-invented, Arnold’s idea of *a grand style* ‘with clarity, creativity, and fierce wit’.³⁹¹ Jeredith Merrin proposes that we need a contemporary emphasis, not on ‘the making of the career *poet*, but of

³⁸⁶ Dale Spender, ‘Women and Literary History’ (1986), in Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore, eds., *The Feminist Reader* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), pp. 16-25 (p. 21).

³⁸⁷ Houston discusses, as a significant development, the publication of a number of anthologies that focused solely on women writers of poetry in the mid-nineteenth century. At that time, however, such anthologies remained separate from the male-dominated historical canon. Houston, ‘Anthologies and the Making of the Poetic Canon’, p. 370.

³⁸⁸ Thomas Sayers Ellis, Daisy Fried, Adam Kirsch and Jeredith Merrin, “Ambition and Greatness: An Exchange” in *Poetry*, 185. 6, 2005, 445–453. *JSTOR*, <www.jstor.org/stable/20606943> [accessed 9 October 2020].

³⁸⁹ Fried, “Ambition and Greatness”, p. 446.

³⁹⁰ Kirsch, “Ambition and Greatness”, p. 449.

³⁹¹ Sayers Ellis, “Ambition and Greatness”, p. 452.

the unique and long-lived *poems*'.³⁹² Merrin's proposal is suggestive of the value of encountering poems in anthologies.

Various 'popular' anthologies of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century were hospitable to Smith, indicating her value as a poet and demonstrating the range of her appeal. They signified an opening, or widening, of the gates. The centrality of such anthologies suggests the way that most people encounter published poetry, and that, despite their detractors, they are 'here to stay'. Schneider, studying such anthologies, gives one definition of the popular: 'The simplest attempt to define the popular is by quantity, as the culture of many people.'³⁹³ The level of anthologising of a thematic and stylistic range of Smith's poetry in such anthologies, and its consistent quality, suggests that she is a poet whose work can 'speak to' many; an indication of the essential humanity of her poems, which is intrinsic to their quality. This eloquent humanity fits well with cultural critic Raymond Williams' assertion about the nature of true art: 'When art communicates, a human experience is actively offered and actively received. Below this activity threshold there can be no art.'³⁹⁴ Smith's ability to communicate directly, in combination with her unconventionality and her underlying subtlety, is an important aspect of her poetry.

A related key aspect of her poetry, one evident in her popularity with the editors of contemporary anthologies that are concerned with aspects of emotional well-being, is Smith's ability to conjure poetry from difficult emotions with directness and imagination. A central paradox of her poetry is the joy she found in life and in the composition of poetry, as opposed to the difficulty of living. It is partly this fruitful paradox that enables such a strong connection with readers and listeners. Her position 'on the edge', while it had its painful aspect ('I was much too far out all my life'), allowed her the necessary distance for the transmutation of life into art.³⁹⁵ This positioning as, to an extent, an outsider, enabled her to convey a strangeness at the heart of life, while her feeling of being in 'enemy territory' indicates both her combative stance and her vulnerability, compelling features of her poetry.

³⁹² Jeredith Merrin, "Ambition and Greatness", p. 448.

³⁹³ Ralf Schneider, 'Of Love, Cats and Football: Popular Anthologies in Britain Today – Between Culture and Commodity?', in *Anthologies of British Poetry: Critical Perspectives from Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. by Korte and others (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 289-306 (p. 289).

³⁹⁴ Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Cardigan: Parthian, 2013), p. 44.

³⁹⁵ 'Not Waving, but Drowning', *Collected Poems*, p. 347.

The continued potential reach of Smith's work is also shown by the strong representation of a wide variety of her poems in the pedagogic canon. This appeal to school students and their teachers can be explained by, for instance, Stevie Smith's directness, her depth and suggestiveness, her imagination and humour, her dramatic use of monologue and dialogue, and, importantly, her emotional resonance. The pedagogic canon is a hugely significant area of anthologising, bringing poetry to a wide readership. Related to the literary historical canon that it draws on and, in turn, influences, it is instrumental in forming tastes and expectations of poetry. The poems read and studied at school or college may well become part of a reader's personal canon. Julie Blake, in her 2019 study of poetry anthologies and the national curriculum, underlines the significance of this canon. She concludes:

the history of school poetry anthologies participates in the history of poetry anthologies, the history of poetry and in literary canon formation, re-enacting or representing their shifts in direction; sometimes, in some measure, shaping them and sometimes, in some measure, insisting on an alternative route.³⁹⁶

Thus school anthologies, Blake asserts, have an active as well as a mirroring role in literary history.

c) Omitting a drawing

The patriarchal nature of the literary landscape in Smith's lifetime and beyond, may well have resulted in the habitual exclusion, across all types of anthologies, of the drawings that accompany many of the poems in her collections. Influential critics, notably Philip Larkin, dismissed these drawings: 'a mixture of "cute" and "crazy", they have an amateurishness reminiscent of Lear, Waugh and Thurber without much compensating felicity.'³⁹⁷ In contrast, contemporary commentators, such as Rees-Jones, have found them highly significant and 'in constant dialogue with the text'.³⁹⁸ Smith's own wish for their inclusion was usually strong, to the extent that she withdrew the manuscript of her 1957 collection *Not Waving but Drowning* from André Deutsch, only agreeing to publication when the publisher finally

³⁹⁶ J.V. Blake, 'What did the national curriculum do for poetry? Pattern, prescription and contestation in the poetry selected for GCSE English Literature 1988-2018' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Cambridge, 2020), p. 216. <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.47726> [accessed 9 November, 2021].

³⁹⁷ Philip Larkin, 'Frivolous and Vulnerable', p. 154.

³⁹⁸ Deryn Rees-Jones, *Consorting With Angels* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2005), pp. 70-92 (p. 72).

agreed to feature them.³⁹⁹ The drawings, although not produced by Smith as illustrations to specific poems, were chosen by her to accompany them. The loss to a poem when a drawing is omitted can be seen in the following contemporary example from one of Candlestick Press's popular pamphlet-anthologies that opens with Smith's single-quatrains poem 'The Pleasures of Friendship':

³⁹⁹ Letter from Smith to Diana Athill (editorial director at Deutsch), 14 December 1955 in Barbera and McBrien, eds., *Me Again*, p. 301.

The Pleasures of Friendship

The pleasures of friendship are exquisite
 How pleasant to go to a friend on a visit!
 I go to my friend, we walk on the grass,
 And the hours and moments like minutes pass.⁴⁰⁰

On a superficial reading this may seem a simple poem on how friendship is so pleasurable that it makes the time pass quickly; an unexpectedly celebratory poem of Stevie Smith's, the reader might think. But the drawing (Figure 3), included with the poem when it was first published in Smith's 1942 collection *Mother, What Is Man?* depicts a different scenario.⁴⁰¹ Here two women are shown walking. One has her arm intimately, perhaps romantically, around the other, whose attention she is trying to gain. The other woman looks straight ahead, as if unheeding. Rather than closeness, the drawing suggests human isolation (a recurrent



Figure 3

theme of Smith's poetry). In the light of this drawing, the poem seems to be not quite what it was. Its emphasis now falls on the *need* for time to pass quickly and there's an underlying hint of the desire for the end of life, alongside any appreciation of its joys. Perhaps the sense of isolation conveyed by the drawing is a reason for this wish for life to move on quickly. The poem's last line is ambiguous; if the hours are passing like minutes, this might indicate

⁴⁰⁰ Smith, *Ten Poems About Friendship*, ed. by Lorraine Mariner (Nottingham Candlestick Press, 2016), p. 5.

⁴⁰¹ 'The Pleasures of Friendship', *Collected Poems*, p. 237. First published in Smith, *Mother, What Is Man?* (London: Cape, 1942).

time is happily spent, but if the moments are passing like minutes, does this mean that time is passing slowly? And now, on further reflection, could the poem be implying that the hours are also passing slowly, if each minute is being felt? Are these pleasurable moments or unhappy moments that are passing? The phrase ‘I go to my friend’ conveys an activity rather different from that of *visiting* a friend. It implies going to a friend *for* something, for help, for instance, or to discuss a problem; the *turning to* a friend. If the drawing is taken into account, this particular turning to a friend is fruitless. The opening line ‘The pleasures of friendship are exquisite’ may now be read satirically, with its rhyme-echo of the kind of polite society conveyed ironically in Eliot’s ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’: ‘Oh, do not ask, “What is it?”/ Let us go and make our visit.’⁴⁰² Smith makes a satiric reference to friendliness in another poem in the same 1942 collection ‘Lady “Rogue” Singleton’: ‘Edmonton / Where all the friendly people run’.⁴⁰³ Thus ‘The Pleasures of Friendship’ is more complicated and subtle than it might at first seem.

‘Happiness’, the poem directly following ‘The Pleasures of Friendship’ in *Mother, What is Man?*, opens with the lines ‘Happiness is silent, or speaks equivocally for friends, / Grief is explicit and her song never ends’.⁴⁰⁴ Here, happiness only speaks ambiguously in friendship, while grief is more vocal and enduring. In the accompanying drawing, two androgynous-looking figures (although one is wearing a dress) are angled away from each other, one is seated complacently, the other figure appears to be setting off down the road alone. Perhaps these two poems with their accompanying drawings are influenced by a same-sex relationship of Smith’s, which she may well, in the mid twentieth century, have felt the need to portray indirectly.⁴⁰⁵

II The anthologising of Stevie Smith: Her lifetime and beyond

In this section I shall explore the early anthologising of Stevie Smith in the very patriarchal literary climate of her lifetime, and then its significant rise with the ascendancy of publication

⁴⁰² T. S. Eliot, ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’, *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), pp. 13–17 (p. 13). In a bibliographic list produced by William May, ‘3. Works Reviewed, Owned by, Or Influencing Stevie Smith’ in *Stevie Smith and Authorship* (Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 230, Eliot is the only contemporary poet listed. Both Eliot’s *Complete Poems and Plays* (1952) and Eliot’s *Selected Poems* (1961) appear on this list.

⁴⁰³ ‘Lady “Rogue” Singleton’, *Collected Poems*, p. 216.

⁴⁰⁴ ‘Happiness’, *Collected Poems*, p. 238.

⁴⁰⁵ Dowson, ‘Introduction’ to *Women’s Poetry of the 1930s*, p. 6, alludes to ‘coded declaration’ as part of a thirties poetry ‘lesbian aesthetic’. Spalding writes, briefly, of the ‘affair’ Smith had in the 1940s, not long after the War, with a woman referred to as ‘Mary’. Spalding, p. 183.

of poetry written by women in the later twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I shall discuss how this stronger focus on Smith is also reflected in her generally increased representation during this period in the anthologies that include both sexes. In doing so, I shall explore the status of Smith as indicated by this anthologising, and her greater prominence in anthologies from the later part of the twentieth century onwards. This prominence may not, however, have necessarily led the reader to consider her an important poet. Reasons for this include the choice of her lighter, less probing poems in key historical anthologies, while a sense of her achievement is more fully evident across the anthologies that carry less literary prestige. The continued exclusion of her drawings from almost all anthologising detracts from the subtle, multi-faceted nature of her vision and may diminish its irony and pathos.

a) In her lifetime

The anthologising of Smith in her lifetime is characterised by significant areas of attention and endorsement, as well as by exclusions. It is notable that in this period (the 1930s–1970) Smith was sometimes the only woman to have work published alongside the men in an anthology or magazine, and always one of a very few. *New Poems 1963* featured work by many poets whose names have endured and it included Smith's 'The Last Turn Of The Screw' and 'Tenuous and Precarious'.⁴⁰⁶ Anthony Thwaite, reviewing this publication in *The Listener*, gives her a particular mention, proclaiming her poems as standing out 'magnificently'.⁴⁰⁷ Smith's name does not, however, appear on the back-cover list of 'Poets represented include'; her reputation obviously not well enough established. Revealingly, the biographical note, almost certainly contributed by Smith herself, states: 'has written criticism for *The Observer*, *The Spectator*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *Time And Tide*, *The Listener*, *The Times Literary Supplement* etcetera.'⁴⁰⁸ Rarely, if ever, in posthumous biographical notes on Smith are details included of the extensive critical work that she valued so highly.

A major champion of Smith's poetry, poet and editor David Wright included six of her earlier poems in *The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Verse* (1953), which he co-edited with John Heath-Stubbs.⁴⁰⁹ In the 'Introduction', Heath-Stubbs asserts that, as editors, they showed the

⁴⁰⁶ *New Poems 1963: A P.E.N. Anthology of Contemporary Poetry*, ed. by Lawrence Durrell (London: Hutchinson, 1963).

⁴⁰⁷ Anthony Thwaite, 'New Poetry', *Listener*, 1813 (1963), 29.

⁴⁰⁸ Smith, biographical note, *New Poems 1963*, ed., Durrell, pp. 155-56.

⁴⁰⁹ *The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Verse*, ed. by John Heath-Stubbs and David Wright, (London: Faber and Faber, 1953).

individuality and thoroughness of their stance by reading widely, by not compiling their book from previous anthologies, and by reading the collected poems of their chosen poets. In a shift away from the poets and critics of the 1930s, Heath-Stubbs also expressed the requirement that poets, as well as reflecting their times ‘work against the sensibility of their age, and affirm those values which the *zeitgeist* is in danger of neglecting, or even of actively suppressing’.⁴¹⁰ Smith’s poems, both of their age and with a far-reaching, individualistic quality, fitted this editorial approach. The editors welcomed an emotional, mythopoeic, and religious response to the world and emphasised the need for ‘the imaginative delight of the reader’.⁴¹¹ The selection of Smith’s poems includes the mythic ‘The River God’, as well as ‘The Heavenly City’ with its fantasied transcendence, and implied weariness with earthly life.

Wright also featured seven of Smith’s poems in a key anthology *The Mid-Century: English Poetry 1940–1960*. Keen to recognise anarchic outsiders, Wright stated in his Introduction:

Some of those who have written the best poetry of the time under review have been overlooked or neglected either because they published little or because their work ran counter to the various literary fashions [...] Cases in point are Patrick Kavanagh and Stevie Smith [...].⁴¹²

Wright recognised the profound influence of two major historical events on the spiritual make-up of those who experienced childhood or adolescence before either one of these cataclysmic events took place: the First World War and the atomic bomb of 1945. Thus, he places Smith (born in 1902) in a pre-First World War, as well as a post-Second World War, context. Unlike many anthologists, Wright makes a point of often including longer poems so as to give a fuller, more balanced representation of a poet’s work. His selection of Smith’s work highlights poems in which she shows her adeptness at the sustained imaginative portrayal and the working through of argument. In this selection, her questioning, combative stance shows in her animated response to writers of her broad literary heritage; to Coleridge, for instance, in ‘Thoughts about the Person from Porlock’, to Browning in ‘Childe

⁴¹⁰ Heath-Stubbs, ‘Introduction’ to *The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Verse* (London: Faber and Faber, 1953), p. 31.

⁴¹¹ Heath-Stubbs, p. 32.

⁴¹² David Wright, ed., ‘Introduction’, *The Mid-Century: English Poetry 1940–1960* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 15.

Rolandine', and to Racine in 'Song D'Athalie'. Her approach is always lively, although this is clearly not a Stevie Smith who could be termed 'light'.

It may have been partly as a result of Wright's advocacy that in 1966 Smith was represented in the first 'Penguin Modern Poets' iconic anthology-series, which was eventually to showcase 81 poets, grouped in threes. Her poems were now being published fairly regularly in the *New Statesman*, *The Listener*, and the *TLS*, and this Penguin anthologising marked her enhanced status as a poet. She wrote to her friend Rachel Marshall on 13th December 1964: 'I am going to be in the new Penguin three-poets-in-one volume series. I am becoming quite famous in my old age, isn't it funny how things come round?'.⁴¹³ In the entire series, only four of the poets included were women. Smith expressed her wish to be presented in a volume with two men rather than with two other women, as was first suggested, writing to series editor, Tony Richardson, when she had not had her co-poets confirmed: 'I trust this reticence does not mean that you have after all fixed me up with the girls.'⁴¹⁴ Eventually she was given Edwin Brock and Geoffrey Hill as stablemates in *Penguin Modern Poets 8*.⁴¹⁵ Clearly, it would have been reductive for her to have been 'annexed' in a 'women poets' corner' of the series and Smith, shrewd, and sufficiently concerned about her reputation, was keen to avoid this. She would have liked a single author paperback volume with Penguin, but Richardson, despite his enthusiasm for her poetry, did not consider this commercially viable. He explained: 'our previous one man efforts have been devoted to poets with – rightly or wrongly – really mammoth reputations, like Auden, or e.e.cummings [...] commercially speaking, I don't think it's on the cards – at least not just yet'.⁴¹⁶ Clearly the single volume Penguin collection was a male domain, despite the success of Smith's recent *Selected Poems* (1962) from Longman. A great advantage of a single-poet collection would have been the inclusion of her drawings. Although Tony Richardson appreciated Smith's drawings, he considered their inclusion inappropriate in a three-poet volume: 'I myself regret omitting the drawings, but as you say, a third of a book with illustrations would look a little strange and might be just a shade unfair on your co-contributors'.⁴¹⁷ Ideally Smith would have liked the

⁴¹³ Smith, letter to Rachel Marshall, 13 December 1964, included in *Me Again*, p. 313.

⁴¹⁴ Smith, letter to Tony Richardson, 9 January 1965. University of Bristol Library, Special Collections, The Penguin Archive, 1935-80. Editorial file for Penguin Modern Poets / Stevie Smith correspondence [Bristol, Penguin Archive], DM1107/D92.

⁴¹⁵ *Penguin Modern Poets 8: Edwin Brock, Geoffrey Hill, Stevie Smith* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970).

⁴¹⁶ Tony Richardson, letter to Smith, 17 June 1964. Bristol, Penguin Archive, DM1107/D92.

⁴¹⁷ Tony Richardson, letter to Smith, 24 June 1964. Bristol, Penguin Archive, DM1107/D92.

music score of the tunes to which she sang some of her poems to accompany them, in addition to the drawings: 'that will be an added complication, getting the music score in too, as well as the drawings'.⁴¹⁸

Reflective, imaginative and idiosyncratic, Smith more than holds her own in the company of the other two poets. She is more probing, flamboyantly imaginative, and linguistically striking than Edwin Brock, while sharing his directness and honesty. Like Geoffrey Hill, she has a sense of the revelatory, of the sacred, and she is also scholarly; but she is livelier, more accessible, and not at all portentous. While Smith's selection is kaleidoscopic in wit and range, her poems are always unmistakably hers. She relishes language in this memorable, destabilising group of poetry of enchantment and disenchantment. Her poems are not well behaved and their twists and turns make the reader uncomfortable, yet they are always humane and with a strong moral core. The thirty or so pages contain many of her 'lynch-pin' poems. They include 'Fafnir and the Knights' with its theme of cruelty and its sad, uncompromising ending; 'The Bereaved Swan', a spare poem of loss and despair with its spare, emblematic layout and plangent rhyming of monosyllabic words; the deeply questioning 'The Airy Christ'; the longer, explorative 'Come on, Come back (incident in a future war)' with its dreamlike, prophetic sense; and the finely-gauged poem of disappointed love 'Pad, pad'. Smith is presented as deeply reflective, as well as imaginative and idiosyncratic. The selection also shows her ability to 'morph', to fit in with editorial tastes or persuasions; the poems, shorn of the drawings, each allocated a page, appear slightly austere for all their imaginative richness, so that she both fits with, and stands out from, Hill and Brock.

Smith was included in both the 1970 and the 1985 edition of Edward Lucie-Smith's *British Poetry Since 1945*.⁴¹⁹ The second edition had (by his own admission) a more conservative flavour with experimental poets Anselm Hollo, Barry MacSweeney and Rosemary Tonks omitted, while other poets had been added, to better reflect what Lucie-Smith denoted as 'the mood of the time'.⁴²⁰ Stevie Smith's poems, perhaps because she was as popular as well as a modernist-influenced poet, survived the cull. Lucie-Smith's selection is very different from the immediately weightier and literary allusive selection of Wright's anthology. Smith's work

⁴¹⁸ Smith, letter to Tony Richardson, 9 November 1964. Bristol, Penguin Archive, DM1107/D92.

⁴¹⁹ *British Poetry Since 1945*, ed. by Edward Lucie-Smith (London: Penguin, 1985).

⁴²⁰ Lucie-Smith, ed., 'Introduction to the Revised Edition', *British Poetry Since 1945*, p. 23. First edn 1970.

was not included, however, in the historical-canonical anthologies *The Faber Book of Modern Verse* (revised with a new supplement of poems in 1965),⁴²¹ or in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Verse* (revised in 1961).⁴²² Her poetry is also absent from the 1970 first edition of the American *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, which included Larkin, Plath, Hughes, and Dylan Thomas, as representing British poets contemporary with Smith.⁴²³ Thus, despite significant areas of attention, her status as an important poet was unconfirmed by the most influential editors.

b) Later twentieth century

The anthologising of Smith was to rise after her death, with her work being featured posthumously in historical-canonical anthologies. In 1972 Helen Gardner, for instance, included 'Not Waving but Drowning' to represent Smith in *The New Oxford Book of English Verse 1250–1950*, her update of a classic anthology.⁴²⁴ Hidden amongst the hundreds of men there are five women represented (despite a female editor), the others being Aphra Behn, Emily Brontë, Christina Rossetti, and Anne Ridler. Ridler was Smith's contemporary and (for a time) Eliot's secretary, and her poetry was championed and published by him at Faber. Although Gardner was a woman editor, her own taste and reputation as a critic was significantly connected to her strong admiration for Eliot.⁴²⁵ While Smith's inclusion in Gardner's volume is to be applauded, given that one of this editor's aims in her 'Preface' was to redress the neglect of satire in the anthology's earlier incarnation, it would have been fitting for her to have additionally included examples of Smith's many satirical poems.

Larkin, advocate of Smith's poetry, although not always, as we have seen, a wholehearted one, includes six of her poems in *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* (1973).⁴²⁶ Larkin's choice is broad, but the book does not highlight poems with the myth and fairytale element that is strong in Smith but of less appeal to the Movement poetry to which Larkin is related. Although her work was accorded more space than any of the other few

⁴²¹ *The Faber Book of Modern Verse*, ed. by Michael Roberts (London: Faber and Faber, 1965).

⁴²² *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Verse*, ed. by Kenneth Allott (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970).

⁴²³ *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. by Arthur M. Easton (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1970).

⁴²⁴ *The New Oxford Book of English Verse 1250–1950*, ed., Gardner.

⁴²⁵ Gardner's critical work on Eliot included the landmark study, *The Art of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1949).

⁴²⁶ *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* ed. by Philip Larkin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).

women represented, Larkin allocated considerably more pages to the poems of men poets such as de la Mare and Betjeman, to whom she might be considered to be of at least comparable stature and popularity. The less guarded supporter of Smith's work, poet and editor D.J. Enright, opened *The Oxford Book of Contemporary Verse 1945–80* with a selection of twelve of her poems, emphasising the witty and the questioning.⁴²⁷ Admirably, and showing his knowledge of Smith's work, Enright aimed to avoid the more frequently anthologised poems because there were others that he considered equally good. He seeks to represent in the anthology 'The poetry of civility, passion and order'.⁴²⁸ This gives a clue as to why Smith was often championed, although in a slightly reserved way, by some of the poets, such as Enright himself, who were associated with the Movement group which endorsed these values. Aspects of Smith strongly appealed, yet she was also anarchic as a poet to an extent that could make them cautious in their praise. Elizabeth Jennings, the main woman poet of the Movement, is a marked contrast to Smith; not as satirical or playful. Jennings' poem 'Friendship' makes a strong tonal contrast with Smith's 'The Pleasures of Friendship' (discussed above, pp. 119–121).⁴²⁹ Jennings' poem starts with pointed irony:

If you have a secret tell it
To somebody on a train,
Somebody you won't meet
And who won't want to meet you again.

She then, however, continues with an evenly paced, resigned exploration of the disciplined restraint necessary for friendship, and the pain this may almost inevitably entail; a contrast with Smith's brief and deceptively celebratory poem, which becomes especially satirical when coupled with its accompanying drawing. Jennings' poem 'Energy' begins 'I have always revered it – energy leashed in / In those I love, in myself, in works of art.'⁴³⁰ This stance is in marked contrast to Stevie Smith's playful directness.

c) Anthologies of poetry written by women

The most striking development in anthologising in the latter part of the twentieth century, at least partly as a result of the rise of the feminist movement in Britain in the 1970s and 80s,

⁴²⁷ *The Oxford Book of Contemporary Verse 1945–1980*, ed. by D.J. Enright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

⁴²⁸ D.J. Enright, 'Introduction', *The Oxford Book of Contemporary Verse 1945–1980*, p. xxvii.

⁴²⁹ Elizabeth Jennings, 'Friendship', *Tributes*, (Manchester: Carcanet, 1989), pp. 52–53.

⁴³⁰ Jennings, 'Energy', *Tributes*, p. 116.

was the publication of anthologies of poetry written by women. The need to redress the imbalance, for writers and for readers, was urgent. Women writing poetry had, until then, lacked female role models and, importantly, the confidence that a literary tradition that recognised poetry written by women could instil. Dale Spender emphasised in 1986 that this lack of a literary history eroded women's confidence and that 'the reinstatement of women's meanings and achievements within the culture could make a very big difference'.⁴³¹

In the case of Smith, her early experience of growing up in a house of women may have been one helpful factor in giving her the confidence to pursue the writing and publishing of her poetry so determinedly. She alludes to this early experience of female capability in her poem 'A House of Mercy': 'It is a house of female habitation / A house expecting strength as it is strong'.⁴³²

Feminist literary scholar Jan Montefiore first stated in 1987: 'This absence of women from critical history is not because of a corresponding absence of relevant material.'⁴³³

Generations of women poets were in danger of being lost. In *Women's Poetry of the 1930s: A Critical Anthology* (1996), with the need to counteract this danger, Jane Dowson uncovered the women of the 'Auden Generation', exploring in her study how poets such as Stevie Smith, E.J. Scovell, and Anna Wickham were 'exiled from and need to be replaced into literary history'.⁴³⁴ Her 'critical anthology' proves that an exciting, often challenging, range of women's poetry was also being written and published during this decade. She asserted: 'What most unites all the poets of the period, regardless of age or gender, is a preoccupation with finding a language with which to marry the sense of the moment with a sense of tradition.' Dowson presents Smith as both ahead of her time, for instance in 'the irreverence of literary referentiality', and also in her time:

State control and organised religion were to be feared for being over tidy.

Individuality is again and again the message and medium of the sketch poems. Her opposition to institutionalised uniformity, her intolerance of social injustice and her

⁴³¹ Spender, 'Women and Literary History', p. 23

⁴³² 'A House of Mercy', *Collected Poems*, pp. 476-78.

⁴³³ Jan Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women's Writing*, 2nd edn (London: Pandora, 1994), p. 22.

⁴³⁴ Dowson, ed., *Women's Poetry of the 1930s*, p. 24.

sensitivity to the ill-treatment of artists make her clearly of her epoch and put her firmly within the conventional boundaries of Thirties poets.⁴³⁵

As an aspect of the consciousness of the women she features, Dowson describes how, as poets, they often construct monologues and dialogues, or a story with an enigmatic narrator. They write themselves out of the poem at the same time as they write themselves into it, so as to not lay themselves bare. Smith's semi-fictionalised approach in many of her poems was to influence later twentieth-century poets such as Sylvia Plath and Carol Ann Duffy. Dowson quotes Smith herself, who found such benefit in this approach:

You will say: But your poems are all story poems, you keep yourself hidden. Yes. But all the same, my whole life is in these poems ... everything I have lived through, and done, and seen, and read and imagined and thought and argued. Then why do I turn them all upon other people, imaginary people, the people I create? It's because ... it gives proportion and eases the pressure.⁴³⁶

As Dowson explains, Smith had by this time (the late 1990s) been frequently anthologised, but the range was narrow compared with the full and varied output of her poems. She includes in her selection one of Smith's best, but little-known poems, from the previously uncollected poems featured in *Me Again: The Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith* (1981); a poem that subtly reflected the eve of the outbreak of the Second World War, the haunted and haunting 'The Ballet of the Twelve Dancing Princesses: Hayes Court, June 1939'.⁴³⁷ Smith presents schoolgirls on the brink of adulthood and subtly allies this to a world on the threshold of war: 'in the trumpet sound of the icy storm overhead there is evocable / The advance of innocence against a mutation that is irrevocable'. The 'evocable' rhyme here offers an intriguing contradiction of its own meaning. Dowson followed this critical anthology with a 1997 essay on women and anthologies in which she further examined the crucial role of anthologies of poetry written by women in redressing an imbalance.⁴³⁸ Ironically, this study was included in a critical volume *British Poetry from the 1950s to the 1990s: Politics and Art* edited by Gary Day and Brian Docherty (1997) in which, even as

⁴³⁵ Dowson, ed., *Women's Poetry of the 1930s*, p. 140.

⁴³⁶ Smith, Radio Talk, 15 June 1966, quoted in Dowson, ed., *Women's Poetry of the 1930s*, p. 142.

⁴³⁷ *Women's Poetry of the 1930s*, p. 146.

⁴³⁸ Jane Dowson, 'Anthologies of Women's Poetry: Canon-Breakers; Canon-Makers', in *British Poetry from the 1950s to the 1990s: Politics and Art*, ed. by Gary Day and Brian Docherty (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1997), pp. 237-52.

comparatively recently as the late 1990s, women poets were treated as a minor category, grouped together, mainly in two of the fifteen chapters, with no woman being granted a chapter of her own.

Anthologies of poetry written by women helped to consolidate Smith's reputation and establish her place in literary history. One of the earliest of these map-making publications, *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets* (1985), featured eleven British writers with Smith and Plath being the two poets included posthumously.⁴³⁹ The publication starts with Stevie Smith, and includes the whole of her prose piece 'My Muse', as well as a representative selection of her poems (as far as twelve poems can be representative of this diverse, skilled and prolific poet). Editor Jeni Couzyn excludes the well-known 'Not Waving but Drowning' while favouring some significant lesser-known poems such as 'To Carry the Child'. With the rise of such anthologies, an increased range of Smith's poems was brought to the attention of a wider potential readership.

In her 'Introduction' to *The Faber Book of 20th Century Women's Poetry* (1987), Fleur Adcock emphasised that many women were writing, but that it was often at the expense of satisfactions such as that of family life.⁴⁴⁰ She included the example of Stevie Smith living with her aunt. We have seen that in Smith's case there was another 'cost'; the way in which her poetry was often rejected and disparaged for over a decade contributed to a period of severe depression. While Adcock does play into the myth of Smith, referring to her 'eccentric-English-lady tone, her weird, heartless little fables', she concludes that 'for all her freakish humour she was a serious writer'.⁴⁴¹ She shows her endorsement of her work by giving Smith the only comparable amount of anthology space to that given to each of the Americans: Plath, Moore, and Bishop. Adcock is drawn to Smith's satiric wit. She writes 'Wit should not, and in good poets does not, conflict with seriousness and humanity: it tends rather to enhance them.'⁴⁴² In accordance with this view, the fifteen Smith poems here include the satiric 'Infelice', 'Lady "Rogue" Singleton', and 'The Jungle Husband'. Adcock also features the raw, extremely direct poem, 'Goodnight', uncollected in Smith's lifetime, in

⁴³⁹ *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets: Eleven British Writers*, ed. by Jeni Couzyn (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1985).

⁴⁴⁰ Fleur Adcock, ed., 'Introduction', *The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Women's Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), p. 1.

⁴⁴¹ Adcock, ed., 'Introduction', *The Faber Book of 20th Century Women's Poetry*, p. 6.

⁴⁴² Adcock, ed., 'Introduction', *The Faber Book of 20th Century Women's Poetry*, p. 15.

which a dog licks the legs of a woman whose marriage is fraught: 'It's funny Tuggers should be so enthusiastic, said Horlick nastily, / It must be nice to be able to get so excited about nothing really'.⁴⁴³ It may be partly as a result of Adcock's endorsement that a landmark anthology of the next decade, *Sixty Women Poets* (1993), takes as its starting point the death of Stevie Smith in 1971, 'honouring her influence and importance'.⁴⁴⁴

Such side-lining of poetry written by women had also been prevalent in the highly significant, far-reaching educational publications in later twentieth century use. In her lifetime, Smith had been included in a group of poets in a Longman school anthology.⁴⁴⁵ Three years after her death, however, in 1974, a popular, attractively produced classroom poetry publication *Worlds* featured only men. Its prolific educationalist editor Geoffrey Summerfield authoritatively regretted in his introduction that no woman's work had been included because of 'the fact that Britain in the last fifteen years or so has not produced a woman poet of real stature'.⁴⁴⁶ This personal view is presented as if there could be no other. The anthology examination text *Poets of Our Time*, in common use well into the 1980s, contained no women.⁴⁴⁷

Significant and fluctuating changes have taken place in this education field from the late 1980s that have been, until recently, favourable to Stevie Smith. Julie Blake, in her valuable recent study of how the national curriculum shaped poetry-teaching, particularly in GCSE Literature, from 1988 to 2018, included data that identified the poems, or selection of poems, included in the GCSE specification from named anthologies during this period. The data for Smith identify an encouragingly wide range of her poems included in a wealth of anthologies nominated in the national GCSE curriculum in this period. 'Not Waving but Drowning' has frequently been set, but twenty others are also listed in the GCSE specification, including 'Away, Melancholy', 'Bog-Face', 'Fafnir and the Knights', 'To Carry the Child', 'Come On, Come Back', and 'Harold's Leap'. Blake's data confirm Smith as a 'strongly established poet who has been included five times in the six [most recent] examination series, but not in the

⁴⁴³ 'Goodnight', in Adcock, ed., pp. 81-82.

⁴⁴⁴ Linda France, ed., 'Introduction', *Sixty Women Poets* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1993), p. 14.

⁴⁴⁵ *Poetry 1900 to 1965*, ed. by George Macbeth (London: Longman English Series, Longman with Faber and Faber, 1967).

⁴⁴⁶ Geoffrey Summerfield, ed., 'Introduction', *Worlds: Seven Modern Poets* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p. 12.

⁴⁴⁷ *Poets of Our Time*, ed. by F.E.S. Finn (London: John Murray, 1968, repr. 1984).

current series 6'.⁴⁴⁸ The IGCSE (International General Certificate of Secondary Education) English Literature syllabus does, however, include 'Not Waving but Drowning' in its syllabus for 2020 and 2021 and the accompanying anthology, proving this poem's enduring popularity in the pedagogic canon.⁴⁴⁹

The late twentieth century also saw the rise in the publication of a wide variety of what might be loosely termed 'popular' anthologies. They frequently included Smith, indicating the breadth of appeal and enduring qualities of her poetry. In addition to 'Not Waving but Drowning', a range of her poems has been featured. The poet editors of *Emergency Kit* (1996), for example, offer an international range and emphasise 'poetry which strikes from new and surprising angles'.⁴⁵⁰ They feature 'Black March', one of Smith's finest late visionary poems. Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes, as editors, produced two compendious anthologies which, while aimed at school-age readers, were also valued more widely. The first of these *The Rattle Bag* (1982), aiming to expand the notion of what poetry is, included contemporary verse in translation, American poetry, and poetry from oral cultures.⁴⁵¹ Smith's 'Bog-face', in dialogue form, and 'The Jungle Husband', a monologue in letter form, fit well with the oral component. This anthology was followed by *The School Bag* (1997). It featured poets with whom editors Heaney and Hughes had 'gone to school in one way or another' and it includes the enigmatic monologue 'The River God', a choice that fits with Hughes' attraction to the elemental.⁴⁵² Again we see Smith's multi-faceted ability to appeal to poets of stature for very different reasons. The anthology *Poems on the Underground* (edited by Gerard Benson, Judith Chernaik, and Cicely Herbert in 1998) features the satirical 'Lady

⁴⁴⁸ Blake, 'What did the national curriculum do for poetry?' Grateful thanks to Julie Blake for allowing me access to data for Smith from the database she built for her 2019 PhD thesis. This data identified the poems, or selection of poems, included in the GCSE specification for named anthologies for GCSE from 1988 to 2018. Recent government prescription has resulted in a narrowing of the literature curriculum, and Smith's current exclusion. We see how the educational sphere can be important in keeping a reputation such as Smith's alive and how an individual reputation can be adversely affected by state-inflicted changes to the curriculum. We see also how, in the education system, the 'examination anthologies' have replaced, to an extent, the reading of 'real' poetry anthologies.

⁴⁴⁹ Mary Wilmer, ed., *Songs of Ourselves: Volume 1, Cambridge International Examination Anthology of Poetry in English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

⁴⁵⁰ Jo Shapcott and Matthew Sweeney, eds, 'Introduction', *Emergency Kit: Poems for Strange Times* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. xv.

⁴⁵¹ *The Rattle Bag*, ed. by Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber, 1982).

⁴⁵² Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes, eds, 'Foreword' to *The School Bag* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), p. xvii.

‘Rogue’ Singleton’.⁴⁵³ This choice of a witty, biting poem may have been influenced by Philip Larkin’s involvement at the outset of the enduring ‘Poems on the Underground’ scheme.⁴⁵⁴

d) Turn of the century historical-canonical anthologies

The period around the year 2000 sees the publication of several historical-canonical anthologies in which Smith is featured. Poetry written by women was by then more prominently represented, and Stevie Smith confirmed as a significant poet, although her representation in the gender-mixed anthologies does not always do her justice.

Simon Armitage and Robert Crawford, editors of *The Penguin Book of British Poetry from Britain and Ireland Since 1945* (1998), in which approximately one-third of the poets included are women, feature Smith as one of the poets represented by four or five poems whose work they hoped ‘would provide a spine for the anthology’.⁴⁵⁵ The editors affirm: ‘post-war poets as diverse as Philip Larkin, Ted Hughes and Stevie Smith wrote subtle, accessible and surprising poetry, communicating more directly with a wider public’.⁴⁵⁶ They offer the example of Smith’s ‘Piggy to Joey’. For the first time in the anthologising of Smith her drawings are included. Of the four poems included here, ‘Not Waving but Drowning’ and ‘Don’t Take Muriel Out’ are among her most powerful, each carrying existential weight. ‘The Jungle Husband’ and ‘Piggy to Joey’, however, while deft and memorable, are comparatively one-dimensional. Her more reflective poems are absent, as are her rich, explorative longer poems. Ultimately, this anthology makes it possible to dismiss Smith as comparatively lightweight.

In contrast, a more representative and very different sample of Smith’s poems are included in Michael Schmidt’s *The Harvill Book of Twentieth-Century Poetry in English* (1999), which takes Modernism as the defining movement of the twentieth century, ‘a call-to-arms, to *make*

⁴⁵³ *Poems on the Underground*, ed. by Gerard Benson, Judith Chernaik and Cicely Herbert (London: Cassell, 1998).

⁴⁵⁴ For a full discussion of Larkin’s involvement with this project see Tijana Stojković, ‘Unnoticed in the Casual Light of Day’: *Philip Larkin and the Plain Style* (New York/Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 61.

⁴⁵⁵ Simon Armitage and Robert Crawford, eds, ‘Introduction’ to *The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland since 1945* (London: Penguin, 1998), p. xxix.

⁴⁵⁶ Armitage and Crawford, eds, ‘Introduction’, *The Penguin Book of Poetry from Britain and Ireland since 1945*, p. xx.

it new'.⁴⁵⁷ Poems have been chosen because of their active relationship with language, rather than their subject matter. In accordance, Smith's selection includes the ingenious, loaded word-play of 'Tenuous and Precarious' (a popular piece with the earlier anthologies), and the longer 'A House of Mercy', in which Smith explores the values, in part Christian, that stemmed from her upbringing. Schmidt also includes 'The Donkey', one of Smith's best, but less well-known poems, through which she sets out the stages of a life and brings them to a surprising end in 'Death's odder anarchy'.⁴⁵⁸ Again, we see strongly the multi-faceted Smith's ability to 'morph', with different aspects of her poetry appealing to different editors. A choice such as Schmidt's moves closer than that of the Armitage and Crawford selection to presenting her as a subtle, probing and, at base, serious poet. Smith is in the company of other women poets who Schmidt prioritises from the Modernist period, such as Laura Riding and Lorine Niedecker.

A scholarly consideration of Smith is presented in Edna Longley's 'The *Bloodaxe Book of 20th Century English Poetry: from Britain and Ireland* (2000), in which Longley sees poetry as part of 'a living tradition' involving conversation with the great dead poets.⁴⁵⁹ She includes Smith as an important wartime poet and cites her post-war poem 'I Remember' (1956), along with poems by Ivor Gurney, Henry Reed, and Alun Lewis as examples of how 'pastoral poetry and love poetry are invaded by forces that question their premises'.⁴⁶⁰ Thus, Smith is presented as being, in part, of her time, and Longley gives her poetry deserved historical weight.

Smith rises to greater significance than previously in an update of the classic anthology *The Oxford Book of English Verse* (1999),⁴⁶¹ which follows on from Gardner (1972).⁴⁶² It includes 'Drama, Song and Hymn', a category with which editor Christopher Ricks associates Smith's poems. He adds a further five poems to represent 'the unique hauntings' of

⁴⁵⁷ Michael Schmidt, ed., 'Introduction' to *The Harvill Book of Twentieth-Century Poetry in English* (London: Harvill, 1999), p. xxvii.

⁴⁵⁸ Schmidt recently suggested that he would like to have published Smith's Collected Poems: 'I love her work and am sorry Faber got there before us.' Michael Schmidt, 'Stevie Smith', email to MA, 17 February 2020. Private correspondence. A Collected Poems from Schmidt's Carcanet Press would have emphasised Smith's unique relationship to Modernism and may well have helped to enhance her reputation among contemporary poets.

⁴⁵⁹ Edna Longley, ed., 'Introduction' to *The Bloodaxe Book of 20th Century Poetry from Britain and Ireland* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2000), p. 15.

⁴⁶⁰ Longley, ed., p. 18

⁴⁶¹ *The Oxford Book of English Verse*, ed. by Christopher Ricks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁴⁶² *The New Oxford Book of English Verse*, ed., Gardner.

Stevie Smith, indicating her importance to him.⁴⁶³ Unusually, the major anthology *The New Penguin Book of English Verse* (2000), edited by Paul Keegan, presents poems in order of when they first appeared (in book publication), rather than by poet, and again we can see how Smith reflects, if obliquely, her times.⁴⁶⁴ It is striking, for instance, when, following on from Norman Cameron's war poem 'Green, Green is El Aghir', we find Smith's 'Bog-Face' with its tenderness and despair of the world:

I am a Child of this World,
And a Child of Grace,
And Mother, I shall be glad when it is over,
I am Bog-face.⁴⁶⁵

Both poems are dated 1942. Keegan does not include Smith's drawings; an absence particularly obvious and regrettable because Edward Lear's are included.

A significant exclusion of Smith is from Sean O'Brien's compendious *The Firebox: Poetry in Britain and Ireland after 1945* (1998).⁴⁶⁶ This is an especially noticeable omission as the only woman included of the eighteen poets born before 1920 is Ruth Pitter, who thus becomes this editor's 'token woman poet' of that period. Perhaps O'Brien (mistakenly) considers Smith as a poet whose work became established before 1945 (one of his criteria for exclusion). It seems more likely, however, that he does not rate Smith sufficiently highly. Reviewing in 2004 the *Collected Poems* of Muriel Spark, a contemporary of Stevie Smith's better known for her fiction, he makes a passing comparison, unfavourable to Smith, between the two poets: 'There is something of Stevie Smith in Spark's poems at times, though the technique is surer.'⁴⁶⁷ Thus Smith misses out on the advocacy of this influential poet, critic, and editor. While a growing number of contemporary scholars have found much to admire in her technique, aspects of her stylistic unconventionality as a poet may have led O'Brien to an undervaluing of her work.

⁴⁶³ Ricks, ed., 'Preface: The Oxford Book', p. xxxvi.

⁴⁶⁴ *The New Penguin Book of English Verse*, ed. by Paul Keegan (London: Penguin, 2001).

⁴⁶⁵ Smith, 'Bog-Face', in Keegan, ed., pp. 294-95.

⁴⁶⁶ *The Firebox: Poetry in Britain and Ireland after 1945*, ed. by Sean O'Brien (London: Picador, 1998).

⁴⁶⁷ Sean O'Brien, review of *All the Poems: The Collected Poems of Muriel Spark* (2004) in *The Sunday Times*, 4 November 2004. Quoted on the Carcanet website. <<https://www.carcanet.co.uk/cgi-bin/scribe?showdoc=356;doctype=review>>[accessed 10 November 2021].

e) The twenty-first century

Smith is indicated as a highly significant poet in Rees-Jones' landmark double publication in 2005 of the critical work *Consorting with Angels*⁴⁶⁸ and its companion anthology *Modern Women Poets*.⁴⁶⁹ The selection of Smith's poems in the anthology is wide-ranging and highlights 'the dialogic' in her relation to male writers, and in her reworking of fairy tale and myth. She is indicated as a distinctly significant poet in the number and range of poems that are presented, with their accompanying drawings. Smith is given parallel prominence in the critical chapter devoted to her work in *Consorting with Angels*, in which Rees-Jones discusses the drawings and how, as an extension of the poetry, they elaborate on Smith's anxieties about writing and the position of the woman poet.⁴⁷⁰ Smith is presented as an influential modern poet: 'an essential, if inimitable, figure in the development of women's poetry'.⁴⁷¹ Disappointingly, a subsequent anthology *Women's Work: Modern Women Poets Writing in English* (2008), which attempts to bridge US, UK, and Ireland divides, includes only one poem by Smith, 'Not Waving but Drowning'.⁴⁷² The biographical note describes her as 'famously eccentric' and includes by way of an assessment a single, reductive, unattributed quotation: 'naïve and selfish in some ways and formidably intelligent in others'.⁴⁷³

Historically-based canonical anthologies are, generally, scarce from 2010 onwards. One anthology, however, *The Map and the Clock: A Laureate's Choice of the Poetry of Britain and Ireland* (2016), edited by Carol Ann Duffy and Gillian Clarke, assembles fourteen centuries of verse, blending a sense of a personal canon in dialogue with the received historical.⁴⁷⁴ That the three chosen poems of Smith's are all monologues perhaps reflects this mode in Duffy's own poetry, to which Smith's is an important forerunner.

A contemporary, revivalist group of anthologies that exhort the speaking aloud, or learning by heart of poetry, has been appropriately hospitable to Smith's poetry with its outstanding oral and dramatic qualities. The qualities that made her own performances popular, such as

⁴⁶⁸ Rees-Jones, *Consorting with Angels* (2005).

⁴⁶⁹ Deryn Rees-Jones, ed., *Modern Women Poets* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2005).

⁴⁷⁰ Rees-Jones, "'Tirry-Lirry-Lirry All the Same'", in *Consorting with Angels*, pp. 70-92.

⁴⁷¹ Rees-Jones, ed., *Modern Women Poets*, p. 78.

⁴⁷² *Women's Work: Modern Women Poets Writing in English*, ed. by Eva Salzman and Amy Wack (Bridgend: Seren, 2008).

⁴⁷³ Salzman and Wack, eds, p. 355.

⁴⁷⁴ *The Map and the Clock*, ed. by Carol Ann Duffy and Gillian Clarke (London: Faber & Faber, 2016).

the monologues and dialogues, and the savouring of often unpredictable rhymes and rhythms, also invite recitals from others and the learning of her poetry by heart. *Poems for the Day One: 366 poems, old and new worth learning by heart* (2001), edited by Nicholas Albery, includes ‘Not Waving but Drowning’ and ‘The Heavenly City’.⁴⁷⁵ The sequel, *Poem for the Day Two: 366 poems old and new to learn by heart* (2003), takes the decisive step of showcasing five of her poems.⁴⁷⁶ Only Keats, Tennyson, and Frost have five or more poems in this anthology’s generous selection of poetry, past and contemporary. Smith’s selection includes a lesser-known, directly personal poem ‘I do not Speak’, in which she presents herself as drawing inspiration from her aloneness: ‘Now I am strong and lapped in sorrow / As in a coat of magic mail’.⁴⁷⁷ More recently, her energetic morality fable ‘The Galloping Cat’, an oral *tour de force*, as are so many of her poems, was featured in *Poetry By Heart: A Treasury of Poems to Read Aloud*.⁴⁷⁸ First published in 2016 and edited by Julie Blake, Mike Dixon, Andrew Motion, and Jean Sprackland, this anthology is based on the successful secondary school recitation competition ‘Poetry By Heart’, which Blake co-founded with Sir Andrew Motion in 2012, in part to enhance the proscribed school poetry curriculum. The editors proclaim:

In its deepest traditions, poetry is an acoustic form. Praise-songs and battle-songs, history-narratives, love-chants and spells, ceremonial hymns: in the mead hall and thereabouts, all these things were delivered to their audiences with an assumption that the sound of words spoken aloud was an essential part of their meaning.⁴⁷⁹

Smith’s poetry, aligned to these traditions, was nourished by the formative childhood experiences of reading and reciting poetry at school. It was also influenced by the poetic in the cadences and music of the Christian religion, the tenets of which as an adult she came to strongly question.

⁴⁷⁵ *Poems for the Day: 366 poems, old and new worth learning by heart*, ed. by Nicholas Albery (London: Chatto & Windus, 2001). While ‘The Heavenly City’ (p. 275) is described in Albery’s footnote as an ‘untypically positive poem’ for Smith, in the context of her work as a whole, the poem’s edge is accentuated; the bliss and harmlessness of ‘the heavenly’ an implicit contrast with life on earth. Thus we see again how the reading of a single poem is changed and complicated by a wider knowledge of her work.

⁴⁷⁶ *Poem for the Day Two*, ed. by Retta Bowen and others (London: Chatto and Windus, 2003).

⁴⁷⁷ Smith, ‘I do not Speak’, in *Poem for the Day Two*, p. 293.

⁴⁷⁸ *Poetry By Heart: A Treasury of Poems to Read Aloud*, ed. by Julie Blake and others (London: Penguin Books, 2016).

⁴⁷⁹ Blake, and others, eds, ‘Introduction’, *Poetry By Heart*, p. xv.

Stevie Smith's poetry has also significantly been included in recent anthologies that present poetry as *useful* to readerships with a variety of concerns, one of them being the providing of emotional sustenance. Part of the ethos of such anthologies is that the transformation, the truth of feeling and the shaping that have been fruitful for the poet are valuable, in a related sense, for the reader; an ethos that is an important aspect of the enduring contemporary appeal of Smith's poetry. Anthologies that make claims for the usefulness of poetry may appear an easy target for their detractors. Critic David Kennedy, for instance, insists that poetry should be seen as an art form 'in its own right' and not be marketed (for commercial gain) as something other than poetry.⁴⁸⁰ In doing so, however, he makes prescriptive assumptions that art should not be useful and is only to be admired for its aesthetic qualities. Schneider, however, in support of such anthologies, indicates that, as art does not happen in a social and psychological vacuum, culture cannot be divorced from commodity: 'A genuine product of modern mass consumer culture, the popular anthology does not support artificial distinctions between culture and commodity, but suggests a symbiotic interdependence between the two.'⁴⁸¹ Cultural aims are negotiable and such anthologies answer to a need, as well as widen the sphere of interest and engagement. While anthologies that present poetry historically are obviously important to those tracing the history of poetry, other readers may wish to make other connections between poems.

One example of a 'useful' anthology, *Do Not Go Gentle: poems for funerals*, suggests: 'The right poem can help us share and bear the burden of immediate grief.'⁴⁸² It includes Smith's 'Come Death', surprising but not unfitting in this context; a poem to make you think, ending with the wry couplet 'Foolish illusion, what has Life to give? / Why should man more fear Death than fear to live?'⁴⁸³ Four of Smith's lesser-known poems, including 'To Carry the Child', are presented in another anthology *We have Come Through: 100 poems celebrating courage in overcoming depression and trauma* (2003).⁴⁸⁴ The cover, depicting Samuel Palmer's jewel-like visionary painting 'Coming from Evening Church' (1830), is suggestive of poetry as spiritual sustenance. This book, edited by the distinguished former editor of

⁴⁸⁰ David Kennedy, 'Styles of Resistance, Signs of Art: Thinking Through "The Crisis of Marginality"', *PN Review*, 30.10 (2003) 34-37 (p. 36).

⁴⁸¹ Ralf Schneider, 'Of Love, Cats and Football', in Korte and others, eds (2000), pp. 289-306 (p. 306).

⁴⁸² Neil Astley, ed., 'Introduction', *Do Not Go Gentle: poems for funerals* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2003), p. 9.

⁴⁸³ Smith, 'Come Death' in *Do Not Go Gentle*, p. 84.

⁴⁸⁴ *We Have Come Through: 100 Poems Celebrating Courage in Overcoming Depression and Trauma*, ed. by Peter Forbes (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2003).

Poetry Review, Peter Forbes, was published by Bloodaxe in association with Survivors' Poetry, an organisation that exists to help writers and readers of poetry combat mental distress. Of psychological pain and art, Hamish Canham and Carole Satyamurti state in their 'Introduction' to *Acquainted with the Night: Psychoanalysis and the Poetic Imagination*:

It is the apprehension of the artist's ability to bear the pain of a fractured inner world and of his or her achievement in depicting it and, sometimes, unifying it, that makes for a satisfying aesthetic experience. We could say that it is the degree to which the artist achieves this that makes the difference between good and less good art.⁴⁸⁵

An investigation into the anthologising of Stevie Smith has been revealing of the breadth of the active life of her poems, particularly their posthumous life. The protean quality of her poems is much in evidence where diverse editors have responded to different aspects of her poetry, as reflected in their selection of her poems. It is clear that Smith's value lies in a wide variety of her poems, much in excess of 'Not Waving but Drowning', her most famous poem. Central to the importance of her poetry is her skilled, resourceful, and witty transformation of tough inner conflict and pain, the pain that had its roots in her childhood. It is likely that the patriarchal legacy that includes an emphasis on Stevie Smith as 'eccentric', as one 'outside the circle', has detracted from the conveying of what it is to be human that is at the core of her work. The sense of being other and alienated, which Smith herself experienced, is integral to this. In Chapter Five I shall focus on her development of her poetry in service of its transformative power and ability to 'strike a chord' with many.

⁴⁸⁵ Hamish Canham and Carole Satyamurti, eds., 'Introduction' to *Acquainted With The Night: Psychoanalysis and the Poetic Imagination* (London: Karnac, 2003), pp. 1-7 (p. 6).

Chapter Five

Her Poetic Development

I Not only mediocrities develop

Stevie Smith develops significantly as a poet. The judgement that has sometimes been made, by writer and critic John Bayley, for example, that her poetry does not appreciably change or progress, diminishes her, if perhaps unwittingly, as a poet ambitious for her poems and rigorous in her dedication to the art. Eliot's poetry, for example, is often discussed as developing in phases, the phases being clear to perceive. Smith's poetic oeuvre, however, has not been given the level of attention that twentieth-century British male poets' work has received. Although she often sought editors' views on the redrafting of individual poems, she tended to develop her individualistic poetry privately, carving out a degree of self-sufficiency in a Woolfian 'room of her own'. She has been considered too idiosyncratic to develop, or, because there are excellent poems throughout her published poetry, this has unreasonably worked against the idea of an overall progression in her work. Smith first developed her poetry in the pre-publication period of her twenties. In her published poetry, I detect three clear, if to some extent overlapping, phases. The first phase features her two early poetry books *A Good Time Was Had By All* (1937) and *Tender Only to One* (1938), in which her original relationship to modernism is already striking, as is her technical skill. Taken together, these books contain a small number of her best poems. A middle phase is marked by a single volume, her wartime-influenced collection *Mother, What Is Man?* (1942) with its increased depth of enquiry and resonance. The third phase is a long one. It begins with her fourth collection *Harold's Leap* (1950), several poems of which were to become, in future years, well known. This entire third phase is characterised by poems that are often particularly lucid on the surface, and of visionary force, culminating in her posthumous collection *Scorpion and Other Poems* (1973). I shall explore, in this chapter, the stages of this development and what influenced it. I shall include Stevie Smith's own, briefly expressed, but perceptive views on her sense of progress in her poetry.

The question of Smith's development was raised twice by Philip Larkin. In his 1962 essay on Smith, he perceives a development and attempts to define it:

Although *Not Waving But Drowning* (1957) was very much the same kind of book as its predecessors, it seemed to me then, as it does now, more confident, surer in getting its effects, than they were [...] one has the feeling that she is improving – not, of course, becoming more consistent, for that is not her way, but dealing with stronger themes, having less to discard.⁴⁸⁶

In a later piece, his review in the *Observer* of Smith's posthumously published poetry book *Scorpion and Other Poems* (1972), Larkin reconsiders the matter. Citing as fitting in relation to Smith the quotation "only mediocrities develop", he reflects in this later consideration:

Did she truly not develop? Unless one has all the books, it's hard to be specific (a *Collected Poems* as soon as possible, please): in her later poems she became a little sadder and more ominous, and if this is development then to this extent she developed. But there was little or no change in style.⁴⁸⁷

John Bayley, in his 1975 review of Smith's first *Collected Poems* (1975), emphatically expressed the view that she did not develop: 'she never needed to do anything so banal as to develop'.⁴⁸⁸ Development in a poet, however, as in the case of Stevie Smith, is very often a natural outcome of changing life experiences, of the poet growing older, and, not least, of the poet working at, thinking about, and nourishing her art.

A poet's work can hardly avoid changing in some respect over a long period of time, from its earliest pre-publication beginnings. We can usually speak of the most mature work, and, as 'mature' suggests, this may well come at a middle or late stage of a poet's writing life. This is not to deny a strong possibility of the freshness of early successes. Maturity in later work may be a tendency, and, as with Stevie Smith, does not mean that every poem of this 'stage' will show the advance in achievement. Larkin's poetry, for example, progressed towards his three most achieved collections, the first of which *The Less Deceived* (1955) shows his poetic forms and voices already established.⁴⁸⁹ He achieved his mature, more supple and colloquial style after the early poems of 1938–45 and started to write the poems that were to establish his reputation. In the mid to late 1950s he produced a number of the poems that were to

⁴⁸⁶ Philip Larkin, 'Frivolous and Vulnerable', pp. 155–56.

⁴⁸⁷ Philip Larkin, "'Stevie, Goodbye', Stevie Smith", p. 264.

⁴⁸⁸ John Bayley, 'Obscure crucifixions', review of Smith, *The Collected Poems of Stevie Smith* (1975), *The Listener*, 2425 (1975) 21.

⁴⁸⁹ Philip Larkin, *The Complete Poems*, ed. by Archie Burnett, 2nd edn (London: Faber & Faber, 2018), pp. 25–45.

become well known, such as ‘Water’, ‘Mr Bleaney’, ‘An Arundel Tomb’, ‘The Whitsun Weddings’, ‘Home is So Sad’, and ‘Afternoons’. Each of these poems was to appear in *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964).⁴⁹⁰ The poems of this collection and Larkin’s next and final one *High Windows* (1974) attain lift off more consistently than his earlier published poems.⁴⁹¹ His most achieved poems are often characterised by acute everyday detail, bleak, but richly accumulated, and building to truths that have been hard-won in terms of the movement and cadences of the poetry. Such poems avoid the rhetorical air of some of his less successful poems. ‘Aubade’ (1977), one of his greatest poems, perhaps *the* greatest, an impassioned contemplation of life’s anticipated end, is both subtle and devastating.⁴⁹² It builds to climax after climax and falls away, ending with the stoical, laconic, but loaded, quotidian: ‘Work has to be done. / Postmen like doctors go from house to house.’ After the early period of his writing, Larkin’s books, in contrast to Eliot’s, are, however, relatively alike in voice and form.

Given the patriarchal nature of the poetry landscape during Smith’s lifetime and its legacy, it is unsurprising that scholars have not paid the same close attention to the development of Smith as they have done to Larkin’s life in poetry, for instance. Michael Schmidt, for example, in his compendium volume *Lives of the Poets*, pays significant attention to Larkin’s early development and to the broadening perspective he presents in his later work.⁴⁹³ While stating in his pages on Stevie Smith that she is ‘now undervalued’, Schmidt does not, however, give any attention to the development of her poetry.⁴⁹⁴ Yet Smith is equally fine, more productive, and a more consistently powerful poet. If close attention is given to her work, development can be clearly perceived, as I shall show. To take the case of Eliot, his poetry has often been discussed as developing in phases, the merits of each phase debated. As critic, essayist and editor, as well as poet, he drew this serious attention to his own work. He was himself preoccupied with making each poetry publication strikingly different and a new beginning, and the idea of new beginnings and their efficacy is woven into his work:

and every attempt
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words

⁴⁹⁰ Larkin, *The Complete Poems*, pp. 49-72.

⁴⁹¹ Larkin, *The Complete Poems*, pp. 75-95.

⁴⁹² Larkin, ‘Aubade’ (1977), *The Complete Poems* (2018), pp.115-16.

⁴⁹³ Michael Schmidt, *Lives of the Poets* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1998), pp. 806-11.

⁴⁹⁴ Schmidt, pp. 754-56 (p. 754).

For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
One is no longer disposed to say it.⁴⁹⁵

The male artist may have had a stronger need to re-invent himself markedly, as well as more encouragement to publicise this. As we have seen, critical attention for Smith in her lifetime and beyond has been variable, with twentieth-century commentators sometimes antagonistic. In view of this shortfall of serious scrutiny, attention to her development becomes all the more important. The recent publication *The Collected Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith* (2015), which brings together all her published poems, and her previously unpublished and uncollected poems with their accompanying drawings, provides an enhanced opportunity to reflect on the neglected matter of her development.

In her 1961 interview with Peter Orr, Stevie Smith agreed that her *attitudes* had not changed since she started writing: ‘No, they haven’t changed at all, I think.’⁴⁹⁶ She did, however, as I shall show, perceive that two collections showed particular overall advances in her work: her third and wartime collection *Mother, What Is Man?*, and then her fourth poetry book *Harold’s Leap*. The development in Smith’s poetry, across the three phases I identify, is reflected in a comparable development in her three novels. Her first, *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936), is lively, modernist in its stream-of-consciousness narration, proves Smith’s wealth of lightly worn learning and shows many of her recurrent themes. Her second, more powerful novel, the war-themed *Over the Frontier* (1938), is an intense investigation of power and cruelty in human nature and a world on the brink of war. *The Holiday* (1949), which was Smith’s personal favourite, is the most atmospheric of her novels, mournful, with a luminous, visionary edge. Expressing her preference for this novel over the more commercially successful *Novel on Yellow Paper*, Smith said: ‘it hasn’t got those mannerisms, and also it’s a period when I was older.’⁴⁹⁷ Clearly, maturity itself and the increased experience that is part of it, including experience of writing, may account for artistic development. In Smith’s poetry, as in her fiction, broadly speaking, there is a changing of emphasis from lively and modernist-influenced, to a war-time greater depth and breadth of concern, and, finally, to a more consistently visionary poetry.

⁴⁹⁵ T. S. Eliot, ‘East Coker’ (1940), ‘The Four Quartets’, *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, pp. 189-223 (p. 202).

⁴⁹⁶ Smith, interviewed by Peter Orr, ‘Stevie Smith’ (1961), in *The Poet Speaks: Interviews With Contemporary Poets*, ed. by Orr (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), pp. 225-31 (p. 227).

⁴⁹⁷ Dick, *Ivy and Stevie*, p. 73.

With due awareness of the continuity across Smith's work, I shall illustrate the three discernible, though not discrete, phases of her published poetry, through broader comment followed by analysis of some significant poems. For Phase 1, I shall analyse a small group of poems to show Smith's early achievement and enduring range. For each of Phases 2 and 3, I shall select two poems to show her advancement. I shall begin, however, with an indication of Smith's pre-publication developing of her poetry and how this illuminates her work.

II Earliest developments

a) Reading

Although Stevie Smith wrote occasional poems as a schoolgirl, she dated her first adult poetry writing as starting 'about 1924'.⁴⁹⁸ At that time she was working as a secretary, but also reading voraciously with a view to self-education.⁴⁹⁹ Significantly, her first reading notebook is also dated January 1924, indicating how crucial her reading was to her poetry. She read theology, history, the classics and travel, for example, as well as modernist novels by Lawrence, Woolf, Kafka, and Proust. Building on the poetry she had been introduced to at school, she read, or reread, and inscribed in her notebook a range of 'classic' poems, such as Herbert's 'Love' [perhaps, 'Love III'], Shelley's 'Ozymandias', Byron's 'We'll Go No More A-Roving', Tennyson's 'Mariana', poems by Hardy, and Robert Bridges' 'Angel of Sleep', plus several ballads, a form that was to feature prominently in her own writing.⁵⁰⁰ Her diary also tells us that in 1924 Smith was reading Homer in Greek, and that she bought G.K. Chesterton's book on Blake and made annotations in the margin, revealing that she had already familiarised herself with the details of the life of a poet who was to influence her. A school teacher introduced her to Dadaist poetry. She added to her sister's collection of Shakespeare's plays.⁵⁰¹ Smith was to become formidably well-read, the beginnings of this reading apparent in her early adulthood. Throughout her life she was to build on this wide range of reading, which was particularly augmented by her industrious work as a reviewer.

⁴⁹⁸ Smith, letter to Hans Häusermann, 17 October 1957, quoted in Barbera and McBrien, *Stevie*, p. 47.

⁴⁹⁹ Barbera and McBrien, *Stevie*, pp. 46-47.

⁵⁰⁰ Barbera and McBrien, *Stevie*, p. 47.

⁵⁰¹ Spalding, pp. 57-59.

b) Poetry writing

Smith's first adult poems were more conventional than might be expected from the poetry she was eventually to publish in the 1930s. This is one indication of how hard she was to work to develop her individualistic style, and the extent to which it was a conscious art. Biographers Barbera and McBrien reasonably conclude: 'These verses from the 1920s indicate that Stevie spent a decade and more finding her own original voice before appearing as a poet in print.'⁵⁰² They offer examples of her poetry writing from the 1920s that exist in a typescript dated 1924–1927.⁵⁰³ One poem 'Lines addressed to the Fountain In [*sic*] Fuller's Restaurant Regent Street, West side' begins:

Pale marble mortuarial muniment
Of all the spirits that in bondage come
To sup on silence and to crunch the bones
Of solitary sad remembering⁵⁰⁴

The title is lively and there is Smith's evident pleasure in the texture of a range of language from the high-sounding, alliterative 'mortuarial muniment' with its curious archaic diction to the onomatopoeic 'crunch of bones'. The verse indicates an early introduction of her preoccupation with death, an important theme. These rather verbose iambic lines might seem to give little indication of the deft, playful touch for which Stevie Smith was to become known. In 'muniment', however, we see Smith's fascination with the archaic language that she was to use playfully in her future poetry. The evocation 'His teeth tear sausages, pig unto pig / Rears up and happy is that conjugation' suggests something of the directness and irony that Smith was to develop and her unsentimental view of human nature. A longer poem, mock-epic in style, features the story of 'Morbid Maltravers' who lived in Jermyn Street, looked after by a Mrs Job whose life had now fallen on harder times (as had Smith's own family):

Her happier days had never seen her do
What she did now for gilded gentlemen.
In those more sumptuous days her doing was
A little needlework, a little chat,
A little caring for an unresponsive cat,

⁵⁰² Barbera and McBrien, *Stevie*, p. 49

⁵⁰³ Barbera and McBrien, *Stevie*, pp. 48–49. See also 'Notes' to *Stevie*, p.321.

⁵⁰⁴ Tulsa Archive, 1976.2.3.2.31.001. Smith has written "'24–'27?" at the side of the typescript of this poem, suggesting that it may belong to the period of writing 1924–27.

Then came the crash.⁵⁰⁵

These direct, buoyant lines with their Augustan wit are more in accord with aspects of Smith's future published poems. The rhythms are irregular and finely controlled. The line-ending of the third line at 'was' gives a deft emphasis to Mrs Job's reduced circumstances, and her predicament is then clinched by one of Smith's typically resounding rhyming couplets. This is swiftly followed by the short, dramatic line indicating financial downfall: 'Then came the crash'. Her narrative skill is already at work, as is her skill and pleasure in inventing a character.

Spalding, citing from this early period, gives a foretaste of another direction Smith was to take in her poetry:

This is my bed
Hereon [*sic*] I slept
And wept
and slept and wept
and went and slept and woke to weep again⁵⁰⁶

Here Smith is inspired by Caliban's speech of Act III, Scene 2 of *The Tempest*, ending: 'The clouds methought would open and show riches [...] I cried to dream again'.⁵⁰⁷ This fragment exemplifies Smith's daring love of repetition, sometimes with short lines, and her playful concision: 'and went and slept and woke to weep again'. By introducing her own rhythms, she brings to the parodic a note of personal sadness. As Spalding suggests, this poem could well be a forerunner of the tight brevity of 'Croft', for instance, in *Mother, What Is Man?* (1942).⁵⁰⁸

Smith's gradual process of moving away from conformity helps to explain how, once she started to write her strikingly original poetry, she was keen to conserve it as such. Retaining that originality meant safeguarding it from the influence of her contemporaries, although her published poetry, taken as a whole, is dense with the inter-textuality of 'borrowings' from earlier poets. She remarked in a 1961 interview with Peter Orr:

⁵⁰⁵ Barbera and McBrien, *Stevie*, p. 48.

⁵⁰⁶ Spalding, p. 61.

⁵⁰⁷ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, in *Shakespeare: Complete Works*, ed. by W. J. Craig, 1905 edn (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), III.2.152-155.

⁵⁰⁸ 'Croft', *Collected Poems*, p. 218. See discussion below on p. 164.

I don't read the contemporary poets, really not so much out of arrogance as that I feel one ought not to. One will get the lines crossed and begin writing their poems and they will begin writing one's own.⁵⁰⁹

This originality, in evidence through all the collections, from the first to the last, provides a distinct sense of continuity across her published poetry, a continuity that does not, however, preclude continued development.

III Publication and Phase 1: Wit, seriousness and unconventionality

The poems included in Stevie Smith's first collection *A Good Time Was Had by All* (1937) were selected from a very large number. The reader from the agency Curtis Brown reported: 'There is more verse here than is put out by most poets in half a lifetime.'⁵¹⁰ As well as how prolific she was, this early output indicates how persistently Smith worked at her art, experimenting over more than a decade. This persistence was to continue, and throughout her life Smith was to draft and redraft her poems, sometimes seeking editorial advice on them. At one point she expressed a wish for 'a litmus paper test' to reveal the quality of a poem.⁵¹¹ In her first poetry book, as a result of the intensive early developing of her work, many features integral to her poetry are already in place, such as her use of narrative to convey major concerns, her disrupted rhythms and lightning shifts of tone. The book jacket comment announces 'a talent which can easily be savoured but not easily described'. The difficulty in defining Smith's poetry, observed at this early stage, is a part of its success. The comment continues, however, by pinpointing Smith's sharpness of vision and her characteristic directness: 'Stevie Smith's eye is unerring and her arrows fly swift and straight to their mark.'⁵¹²

Smith's concerns in this early published poetry characterise her, in part, as a poet associated with the 1930s. Dowson discerns as much in her introduction to her selection of Stevie Smith's poetry in *Women's Poetry of the 1930s*: 'Her opposition to institutionalised uniformity, her intolerance of social injustice and her sensitivity to the ill-treatment of artists make her clearly of her epoch and put her firmly within the conventional boundaries of

⁵⁰⁹ Smith, interviewed by Peter Orr (1961), in Orr, ed., 1966, p. 228.

⁵¹⁰ Curtis Brown's Reader's Report by E.B., Tulsa Archive, 1976.012.2.4.17.

⁵¹¹ Smith, letter to Rosamond Lehmann, undated, but sent during Smith's period of publication by Cape: 1937-42. KCC, RN Lehmann Archive, 1938.02.04.1968.01.15, GBR/0272/RNL/2/569.

⁵¹² Jacket flap to *A Good Time Was had By All* (1937).

Thirties poets.’⁵¹³ Dowson also indicates, however, that stylistically, Smith was in advance of her time: ‘the irreverence of her literary referentiality, the indiscernible shifts between parody and pastiche and the disregard for conventional distinctions between disciplines or cultures, smack of postmodern practice’.⁵¹⁴

Smith could be considered an experimental poet who did not ever wish to ally herself with any of her contemporaries.⁵¹⁵ As well as with the poets of the historical canon, she was, however, familiar with the work of some key modernist poets whose writing lives overlapped hers. It is likely that some of the features of their work were incorporated into her poetry in some measure, to contribute to its sense of being in advance of its time. She had read, for example, poems by Edith Sitwell and included her poetry in her 1928–30 notebook, and she also attended at least one of her poetry readings.⁵¹⁶ From Sitwell she may have been encouraged in her own playfulness, which included word-play and the archaic or arcane. In this respect, her very early poems could be compared to, for example, Sitwell’s ‘Façade’. Sitwell’s emphasis on sound patterning would accord with Smith’s idea of the poem as a ‘sound vehicle’.⁵¹⁷ Clearly Smith would have seen in Sitwell’s work the extent to which a poet could be unconventional and make her own world via her poetry. Sitwell believed that poems written by women should have ‘a fantastic element, a certain strangeness to their beauty’.⁵¹⁸ This was to become increasingly characteristic of Smith’s poetry.⁵¹⁹ In her 1928–30 notebook she wrote of her enthusiasm to borrow Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922) from the library.⁵²⁰ She may have been influenced and encouraged by Eliot’s incorporation in ‘*The Waste Land*’ of fragments of earlier poetry, his introduction of characters, collaging of voices, the drama of the work and the pastiche Augustanism of, for instance, the typist episode. Her poetry, however, did not reflect any single mode or tradition, and she constantly overturned expectation.

⁵¹³ Dowson, ed., *Women Poets of the 1930s*, p. 140.

⁵¹⁴ Dowson, ed., *Women Poets of the 1930s*, p. 140.

⁵¹⁵ Smith was to lament in 1955: ‘One has to be à la nowadays in poetry I think – à la Eliot, Spender etc. & soon I fear à la Dylan [Thomas]!’ Smith, letter to L. P. Hartley, 5^h January 1955, published in *Me Again*, p. 300.

⁵¹⁶ Spalding, p. 165.

⁵¹⁷ Smith, interviewed by Orr, p. 226.

⁵¹⁸ Edith Sitwell, quoted in Rees-Jones, ed., *Modern Women Poets*, p. 56.

⁵¹⁹ Smith may also have been influenced by the theatricality of Edith Sitwell’s self-presentation when performing her poetry.

⁵²⁰ Spalding, p. 87.

The poems of Smith's 'first phase' are lively, the wit shot through with seriousness. Although they are often short, the poetry as a whole is densely allusive. Naming just a few of the references and sources indicates their variety and Smith's resourcefulness: the Irish mythological hero Cù Chulainn, known as 'The Hound of Ulster'; Seneca; the German philosopher Theodore Lessing; Samuel Johnson's *The Vanity of Human Wishes*; El Greco's paintings; and Zemlinsky's opera. Poets whose words are echoed by Smith and transmuted by her include Herrick, Wordsworth, Blake, Tennyson, and Eliot. Although the poems can usually be enjoyed without familiarity with the allusions and extensive reading that Smith draws upon, knowledge of her sources highlights the reflective and scholarly aspect of her work, presented, however, with a mercurial touch. From her earliest published work her strategies are in place; the characters through which she often writes, for instance; her unstable rhythm and rhyming patterns; and her anarchic, challenging approach to the conventions on which she draws. Also in evidence is her emotional range, and her lightning tonal changes. Particularly striking overall is the voice that is both her own and that of the numerous characters she theatrically conjures. Through this refracted 'voice' an underlying tone is discernible, as the early reviewer in the *Granta* notes: 'the further control of a reserve tone which forms the unifying background of reference'.⁵²¹ We might develop this observation by defining the reserve tone as one of experience, of knowingness, often a sad knowingness – far from the naïve.

A main thematic thread, somewhat at variance with her first book's cheerful presentation with its drawings and yellow cover, is bereavement, reflecting, if often obliquely, Smith's premature loss of her mother. A related concern, which was to become a major theme of her poetry, was religion. Her doubts are expressed succinctly in 'The Reason': 'I can't make up my mind / If God is good, impotent or unkind.' Further preoccupations of the collection include marriage and relationships. It was a period when Smith would have been considering whether marriage would be viable for her – and in the process of deciding that it was not. Her emphasis on women and children, pointed to a concern with disadvantaged otherness, a concern that, as Jane Dowson, points out, women poets of the 1930s brought to poetry.⁵²²

While Smith's first two collections mark the first phase of her published writing, the two books have a slightly different flavour. The word 'hope' recurs in Smith's first book, even if

⁵²¹ Review in *Granta*. See p. 88 above.

⁵²² Dowson, ed., *Women's Poetry of the 1930s*, p. 140.

the reference is to its loss. In her second, *Tender Only to One* (1938), it is notably absent and there is a stronger emphasis on death, a theme that she is to develop with more striking and consistent success in later collections. This volume does, however, contain several poems of distinction, including the monologue 'Infelice', Smith's *tour de force* of deluded love.

Considered together, the two collections contain, at this early stage, as well as ample evidence of Smith's already accomplished technique, a number of her most striking poems. Analysis of these poems will indicate the early achievement on which she was to build. They demonstrate variously Smith's wit, irony, fierceness, swift changes of tone, and her characteristic sad undertone.

a) 'Papa Love Baby'⁵²³

This directly personal poem relating to her father's desertion of the family is an example of how Smith already excels at keeping a poem buoyant, despite bleak raw material, while, at the same time, retaining a sad and serious core. The title itself is arresting and ironic, rather like the signing off of a letter, while it is also infant-speak. In the context of the poem, the title may also hint that 'Papa' loves the 'baby', despite the 'baby' not returning the feelings.

The poem is both direct and ironic in tone. It begins jauntily with the full rhyme:

My mother was a romantic girl
So she had to marry a man
with his hair in curl

but there is irony in the 'had to', which emphasises her mother's foolishness. This is followed by the humour and honesty of 'my / unrespected papa', the break in the rhyme scheme and the change of rhythm, adding weight to the phrase. In the second stanza, Smith explodes the myth that daughters are always supposed to be in love with fathers ('What folly it is'). Four short chiming lines rhymed abab then subvert any expectation of another rhyming couplet:

I couldn't take to him at all
But he took to me
What a sad fate to befall
A child of three.

They may be a conscious echo of A.A. Milne's poem for children 'Disobedience' (1924), which begins: 'James James / Morrison Morrison / Weatherby George Dupree / Took great /

⁵²³ 'Papa Love Baby', *Collected Poems*, p. 5.

Care of his mother / Though he was only three.’⁵²⁴ Peggy Smith was indeed three when her father left the family and went away to sea. She may have felt some responsibility for her mother’s happiness after the desertion, particularly as her mother was an invalid.⁵²⁵ The poem’s third stanza is marked by a witty, clinching rhyming couplet in which, in a playful, but sharply adult tone, the infant is imagined asserting herself: ‘I sat upright in my baby carriage / And wished mama hadn’t made such a foolish marriage.’⁵²⁶ While some poets might have ended here, with this resonant immediacy, Smith continues the poem with two reflective, near-rhymed lines: ‘I tried to hide it, but it showed in my eyes unfortunately / And a fortnight later papa ran away to sea.’ The tone has changed from one of protest to the sadness of the child trying unsuccessfully to hide her difficult feelings. In the final stanza, the weary sadness in the tone: ‘It was always the same’ when the father would return home on leave is followed by the paradoxical ‘I could not grieve’. The abab rhyming pattern of this quatrain with the unexpected longer last line adds contemplative weight to the poem’s ending; a child’s unreasonable, yet typical, feeling of guilt and responsibility for a parental break-up. The final line: ‘But I think I was somewhat to blame’ suggests Smith’s residual guilt in not being able to love her father, and, perhaps, for being unforgiving. She was to give various reasons for disliking him, but she may have realised that his desertion was the main one, and the result of her parents being unsuited. Smith’s unreasonable feeling of guilt is also apparent in the sadness in her comment to Kay Dick in 1971: ‘poor Daddy took one look at me and rushed away to sea’.⁵²⁷

⁵²⁴ A. A. Milne, ‘Disobedience’, *When We Were Very Young* (London: Egmont, 2016), p. 30. First published, London: Methuen, 1924.

⁵²⁵ Smith, interviewed by Jonathan Williams (1963): ‘My mother was an invalid and my aunt came to look after us.’ Williams, ‘Much Further Out Than You Thought’, in Sternlicht, ed. (1991), pp. 38-52 (p. 41).

⁵²⁶ Eliot’s poem ‘A Cooking Egg’ may have been an influence: ‘Pipit sat upright in her chair’. *Collected Poems: 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber), p. 46.

⁵²⁷ Dick, *Ivy and Stevie*, p. 65.



Figure 4

The drawing that accompanies the poem in May's *The Collected Poems* shows a small girl, centrally placed, yet alone, on top of a hill, standing beneath a leafless tree (Figure 4). She looks perturbed, glancing askance at a church with a steeple situated below, as in a valley. Churches are often situated on top of a hill, but in this case, as befits Smith's religious doubt, she positions it beneath her. It was the pain of Smith's family situation and of her mother's death that may well have played a large part in her questioning of the goodness and power of God. The drawing suggests the reverberations for Smith of her father's desertion. It may have been 'a long time ago now' but it had enduring implications for Smith. We see here an example of how her drawings often present her rawer feelings; this may well have been a reason why they were particularly valued by Smith.

b) 'The Bereaved Swan'⁵²⁸

In 'The Bereaved Swan', an emblematic poem of her first collection, its shape giving an impression of a swan reflected on the water, Smith is at her most inventive while at the same time drawing on her personal circumstances. The swan becomes one of her early characters. Poetry with imagined characters became for her an emotional necessity. Ironically, although Smith's fiction tends towards the obviously autobiographical, in her poetry she is adept at using her imagination in service of her art. As she herself was to admit:

⁵²⁸ 'The Bereaved Swan', *Collected Poems*, p. 35.

In a poem you can turn the emotions and feelings onto someone else, onto different characters. You can invent stories. You'd think you could do that in a novel. Other people obviously can, and have. *But I can't*. The poem can be about a cat but it is really about yourself.⁵²⁹

While a reader would not necessarily at once think of this as a personal poem of Smith's, 'The Bereaved Swan' did, almost certainly, arise partly from her early loss of her mother. As well as presenting the experience via the mourning swan, she also changes the gender and the relationship – the swan is male, mourning a mate. The rhyming monosyllabic words on the short, incantatory lines ('Wan', 'Swan' and 'lake', 'cake') are playful, and sound-led as much as meaning-led; a swan floating 'Like a cake of soap' is arresting, both fitting and not quite fitting. The sudden change to an archaic diction with the swan's spoken words undercuts expectation. The inclusion of 'O would that I were dead' and 'saith' humanises the poem, and gives dignity to the swan's suffering.

Will May includes Tennyson's 'The Dying Swan', Sir John Suckling's 'Why So Pale and Wan, Fond Lover?' and Thomas Hood's 'The Two Swans' in his enumeration of the poem's possible influences.⁵³⁰ Added here should be Tennyson's 'Mariana', the refrain of which Smith's 'O would that I were dead' almost replicates.⁵³¹ Smith's resourcefulness with the historical poetry canon is evident, as well as the extent to which she is able to transmute this material, making a succinct and playful poem, post-modern in flavour, in which the stark, central line nevertheless makes an emotional impact: 'He has abandoned hope.' Through her rhythmic skill, ear for cadence, a sense of atmosphere, and the poem's sorrowful undertone born of necessity, Smith is able to blend these disparate registers into a whole. As with very many of her poems, the pleasure that Smith gains from sadness is set against the bleakness of despair. In her modernist second novel *Over the Frontier* (1938) she writes of 'this pure element of sadness that is quiet and touching and in its quality eternal', which she contrasts with 'the real sadness of désespoir'.⁵³² 'The Bereaved Swan', a melancholy yet agile poem, seems weightier than its eighteen short lines.

⁵²⁹ Smith (1963), interviewed by Jonathan Williams, in Sternlicht, ed. (1991), p. 46.

⁵³⁰ May, ed., 'Notes' to *The Collected Poems*, p. 746.

⁵³¹ 'I would that I were dead', 'Mariana', in *Tennyson: Selected by Kingsley Amis* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), pp. 23-25 (p. 23).

⁵³² Smith, *Over the Frontier* (repr. London: Virago, 1980), p. 28.

As a development in the presentation of the poem, heightening its emblematic aspect, the two drawings that accompany the poem were added at a later date by Smith when it was reprinted in *The Frog Prince and Other Poems* (1966).⁵³³ The first drawing shows the swan with its bowed head and miserable expression. The second shows the swan serene on the water, or, possibly, only appearing serene while the legs are swimming hard beneath the water, perhaps like the bereaved Smith, trying to keep afloat. Smith was undecided about the poem, Will May notes.⁵³⁴ She omitted it from the *Selected Poems* (1962), before including it in *The Frog Prince*. She confessed to her editor at Longman's: 'I never really liked that "cake of soap"'.⁵³⁵ When she performed it at readings, however, May notes that it was popular. He also notes that in a 1960 performance script of the poem she had changed 'wrapped' to 'hid'. This indicates, as well as the care that Smith took over details of her poems, the outward greater simplicity and clarity that was to become a mark of the development of her poems over time, while never denying their complexity. Peter Howarth, in his discussion of Marianne Moore's performances of her poems, writes of performance as an 'an extension and intensification of the creating and editing process' with the poet hearing and reacting to their own poems anew.⁵³⁶ Smith's alteration to this poem suggests that the move towards greater surface simplicity and the increased overall resonance of her poetry were aided by the performances she gave, which would have encouraged this aspect of the fine-tuning of her poems.

c) 'Major Macroo'⁵³⁷

'Major Macroo' is one of Smith's outward-facing, socially aware poems, although behind it is her personal preoccupation with the riskiness of marriage. The personal in this poem is suggested by, as well as its strength of feeling, the drawing beneath it of the head of a young woman with a resemblance to Smith, looking both angry and unhappy.⁵³⁸ As a young woman

⁵³³ The importance to Smith of the accompanying drawings is conveyed in May's note (*Collected Poems*, p. 744) in that, to the 27 drawings originally appearing in this first collection, a further 17 were added for the poems republished in her *Selected Poems* (1962) and in the *The Frog Prince* (1966).

⁵³⁴ May, ed., 'Notes', *Collected Poems*, p. 746.

⁵³⁵ Smith, letter to Cyprian Blagden, 28 April 1961. Quoted in May's 'Notes' to *The Collected Poems*, p. 746.

⁵³⁶ Peter Howarth, 'Marianne Moore's Performances', in *ELH (English Literary History)*, 87.2 (2020), p. 561. *Project MUSE*, [doi:10.1353/elh.2020.0018](https://doi.org/10.1353/elh.2020.0018) [accessed 15 October 2021].

⁵³⁷ 'Major Macroo', *Collected Poems*, pp. 75-6.

⁵³⁸ This drawing was added with the publication of *The Frog Prince*, 1966.

poet, a preoccupation of hers was inequality in relationships between women and men. Dowson emphasises: ‘Stevie Smith’s feminism, as her socialism, is in her portraits of powerlessness.’⁵³⁹ In many respects, marriage in the 1930s continued to be more advantageous for men than for women.⁵⁴⁰ A divorce was difficult to obtain for various reasons, financial and other. It was not until 1937 that MP A. P. Herbert presented a Matrimonial Causes Bill that was to allow reasons other than adultery, such as cruelty and habitual drunkenness, as grounds for divorce. Barbera and McBrien detail Smith’s concern, how she ‘paraphrases for pages in her journal [...] Lord Birkinhead’s account of the reform of divorce laws in England’.⁵⁴¹ In the semi-autobiographical *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936), she writes via her alter ego the character Pompey, of the decision she had to make about marriage, and her growing resolve against matrimony: ‘it galls and wounds us, this marriage game, and in our hearts we are beginning to think: Never can we marry.’⁵⁴² The early breakdown of her own parents’ marriage would, no doubt, have contributed to her fears.

Smith brings psychological as well as social perception to this poem, showing how unhealthy and painful for the woman marriage could be. Macroo is a man whom Smith describes sardonically as choosing his wife ‘Very wisely’. She likens his nameless wife to Chaucer’s patient Griselda, a woman who suffers, and patiently endures, cruelty at the hands of her husband. There is a religious humility behind the Griselda of Chaucer’s ‘The Clerk’s Tale’. Although Smith does not refer directly to the ‘patience’ of Macroo’s wife as being influenced by religious piety, the comparison hints that this kind of wifely forbearance and endless forgiveness may have its roots in Christian piety. Smith worked at that time for Newness and Pearson, a publisher of women’s magazines, and she would have been personally acquainted with the ideology of domesticity that these magazines promoted. They ‘preached’ the idea that women should be understanding and forgiving. About male infidelity, for instance, an article in *Women’s Own* (4 March 1933) advised: ‘Men get these attacks like kiddies get measles ... Let him have his fling and he’ll come back a thousand times more in love with

⁵³⁹ Dowson, *Women’s Poetry of the 1930s*, p. 141.

⁵⁴⁰ Pugh, in his portrait of marriage during this period, conveys the continued existence of marital inequalities, despite how in some respects marriage was becoming more companionable. Far fewer middle-class households employed servants, for example, and women effectively took their place. p. 146.

⁵⁴¹ Barbera and McBrien, *Stevie*, p. 47.

⁵⁴² Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper*, p. 167.

you than ever.’⁵⁴³ When Smith’s Major Macroo was unfaithful with boyfriends, his wife’s reaction was:

And she thought it was nice for him to have them,
And she loved him and felt that he needed her and waited
And waited and never became exasperated.

Despite this endurance, she was, however, sad and alone for months on end. Ironically, the half-rhyme of the repeated ‘waited’ with ‘exasperated’ emphasises and draws out ‘exasperated’, suggesting Smith’s own feelings of exasperation.

The theme of male cruelty and power over women in heterosexual relationships was also to be explored in ‘Infelice’ in her second collection, a dramatic monologue spoken by a woman who deludes herself that her unfaithful lover ‘Sir Rat’ loves her despite all: ‘No Madam, he left no message, ah how his silence speaks, / He loves me too much for words, my heart is singing.’⁵⁴⁴ This poem is regular in rhythm, its long lines, many of which end in a participle, ‘coming’, ‘singing’, ‘waiting’, carrying a powerful forward momentum. The repeated ‘my heart is singing’ adds a painful, pitiable note, driven by the poet’s compassion.

In contrast to ‘Infelice’, ‘Major Macroo’ is a formally irregular poem in which Smith more typically avoids the tidy, yet nevertheless is able to command and hold the attention of the reader or listener.⁵⁴⁵ The poem opens with a comically rhythmic name: ‘Major Hawkaby Cole Macroo’ which seems almost a direct echo of A. A. Milne’s ‘Disobedience’ (‘James, James / Morrison Morrison / Weatherby George Dupree’).⁵⁴⁶ Swiftly Smith undercuts this rhythm with varying line lengths (also in the Milne poem), unexpected line breaks and irregular rhyming. She deploys rhyme and half-rhyme edgily, playing these against the varied line lengths and rhythms. An insertion, for example, of a couplet with repetition as rhyme, and a particularly extended second line, has great verve:

And if she wept she was game and nobody knew it
And she stood at the edge of the tunnel and waved as his train
went through it.

⁵⁴³ Quoted in Pugh, p. 142.

⁵⁴⁴ ‘Infelice’, *Collected Poems*, p. 114.

⁵⁴⁵ See, for example the formal irregularity of Smith’s posthumously published poem ‘Angel Boley’, discussed in Chapter Six below.

⁵⁴⁶ A. A. Milne, ‘Disobedience’, *When We Were Very Young*, p. 30.

The long second line is like a train gathering speed, the tunnel it enters is rather like the dark narrowness of the life of the woman who is being constantly abandoned. Smith may also be implying some darkly playful sexual symbolism. The couplet emphasises Smith's anger at the woman's helplessness and passivity. The poem's final quatrain marks a change in tone and a psychologically astute observation:

Such men as these, such selfish cruel men
Hurting what most they love what most loves them,
Never make a mistake when it comes to choosing a woman
To cherish them and be neglected and not think it inhuman.

The first two lines are almost end-rhymed, containing as well as the assonance of 'men' and 'them', the repeated 'm' almost giving a repetition of 'men'. They show Smith at her most angry, her point underlined by the rhythmic repetition and the conversational stance in which 'selfish' is followed by 'cruel'. We hear her 'own' protesting voice. The next line 'Hurting what most they love what most loves them' is elegant in its doubling back, while emphasising the psychological tortuousness of the relationship. Here Smith is a typically clear-eyed observer of human society and its cruelties. Feminist literary critic Janet Montefiore points out that the poem 'articulates a post-Freudian awareness of the complexities of a sado-masochistic relationship'.⁵⁴⁷ As we have seen, this is a sado-masochism part-encouraged by the marital norm of the inter-war period. Smith's unexpected use of 'what' instead of 'who' or 'whom' stresses the dehumanising that is involved in such marriages. Ironically, the woman involved does not think the man's neglect 'inhuman', the sexism reinforced by this near-rhyme of 'woman' and 'inhuman', which strikes a note of tenderness and emphasises Smith's compassion, contributing a sad end-note to the syllable-packed velocity of that last line.

IV Phase 2: War – and a transitional collection

An identifiable middle phase of Smith's poetic development is encapsulated in a single collection; her wartime-influenced *Mother, What Is Man?* (1942). In a letter to Kay Dick (1943), Smith herself considered it her best collection so far: 'it is Mother what is man that is the best, though, of course, there are some very good pieces in the other'.⁵⁴⁸ Overall, this

⁵⁴⁷ Janet Montefiore, *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The dangerous flood of history* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 130-133 (p. 130).

⁵⁴⁸ Smith, letter to Kay Dick, March 1943. St Louis Archive, MSS103.2.1.

collection has a greater depth and resonance, and, as Smith implies, it contains a much higher number of outstanding, memorable poems. The book, with its wide-ranging themes, is sharpened by a pervasive sense of the human condition at a time of conflict. I shall consider the development evident in this collection against a background of Smith's experience of wartime London and her attitude to the war-time period during which it appeared.

a) Smith and wartime

Smith, born in 1902, lived through two world wars. As she remarked when interviewed by Peter Orr in 1961: 'the world of my childhood was split with war too. So aren't we being rather unphilosophical, parochial really, about this idea that life is so different today?'⁵⁴⁹ Of the World Wars, she may well have agreed with her war-time friend, the writer Naomi Mitchison: 'It seemed unfair. Such a short time since 1918.'⁵⁵⁰ War may have seemed, to one of Smith's generation, almost a condition of life.

Smith showed a practical commitment in the Second World War. She attended first-aid lectures and volunteered as an air-raid warden and fire-watcher, dangerous work during the London Blitz. Sternlicht describes the degree of her commitment; how, after work, she would return to Palmers Green in the evening for supper with her aunt, then take the Piccadilly line back to central London to fire-watch all night in the building she guarded.⁵⁵¹ Her daily office work in central London enabled this eye-witness account of London in the blitz, an element of ironic beauty amidst all the destruction:

That was a blitz, and London looks very knocked about now I can tell you [...] Yesterday morning we paddled to our offices through piles of broken glass, in the sunshine the streets sparkled like diamonds with the stuff, smashed so small, looking like diamonds and frost. There is a large bomb crater in the road just outside what is left of St. James's Piccadilly, it's deep, all London clay and with fountains of water cascading down into it from broken mains; smells of gas and burning everywhere, but all that has been dealt with now, I mean the gas, water and burning.⁵⁵²

⁵⁴⁹ Smith, interviewed by Orr (1961), Orr, ed., 1966, p. 227.

⁵⁵⁰ Naomi Mitchison, *You May Well Ask: A Memoir: 1920-1940* (London: Flamingo, 1986), p. 222.

⁵⁵¹ Sternlicht, ed. (1991), 'Introduction' to *In Search of Stevie Smith*, pp. 1-27 (p. 12).

⁵⁵² Smith, letter to Rachel Marshall, 18 April 1941, published in *Me Again*, p. 278.

Smith's war-time view tends towards the practical and stoical, an aspect of the English response. In her review of Vera Brittain's autobiographical *England's Hour* (1940) she lamented: 'it is unfortunate that never once does she catch the authentic voice of England, as little hysterical as the growl of her guns'.⁵⁵³ The practical and clear-eyed are important aspects of Smith, the survivor. Naomi Mitchison, devoting a chapter in her memoir to Stevie Smith, notes such characteristics of her friend. For Mitchison, Smith is 'Wise Stevie' (the title of her piece). She begins by giving a particularly perspicacious view of Smith, likening her to 'one of the plain-coloured English birds, restless hedge-skirmishers, good survivors in any weather [...] But what she said was anything but birdlike; it was witty, full of meaning, one-off from a packed mind.'⁵⁵⁴ One aspect of Smith's ability to survive, her attitude to war, and an understanding of her wartime poetry collection, is encapsulated in a letter to Naomi Mitchison, from which Mitchison quotes at length:

If there are these forces of evil you see you are siding with them in allowing your thought to panic. Your mind is your own province – the only thing that is [...] There is a sort of hubris in this unreal worrying. For if you have achieved peace in your own mind when the worst happens (if it does) you will have reserves of strength to meet it. And if you have not achieved peace in your own mind how can you expect the world to do any better. You are the world and so am I. And at the moment the world is a great deal too articulate!

She underlines this stance further:

Yes, our times are difficult but our weapon is not argument but silence and a sort of self-interest, observation and documentation (I was going to say not for publication but I am hardly in a position to say that!).⁵⁵⁵

Smith's reasoned, deeply felt, anti-hysterical approach is clear. It is, at least partially, an explanation behind the controversial words in her poem 'The Poets are Silent': 'And I saw that it is to the poets' merit / To be silent about the war.'⁵⁵⁶ Nevertheless, Smith was not

⁵⁵³ Smith, 'Brittain and the British', review of Vera Brittain's *England's Hour* (1940), repr. in *Me Again*, pp.176-77 (p.177). (First published, *Aeronautics*, 1941).

⁵⁵⁴ Mitchison, p. 153.

⁵⁵⁵ Mitchison, pp. 155-56. She is quoting from a letter she received from Smith. The letter is undated, but Mitchison implies that it was written in 1937.

⁵⁵⁶ Smith, *Collected Poems*, p. 236. See May's note to this poem: 'Smith was encouraged to revise or omit this poem from *Mother, What Is Man?* by her editor at Cape, who worried that its "defeatist" tone would be seen to be "hindering the war effort"', p. 775.

always silent about the war. Her novel *Over the Frontier* (1938) addressed war, human cruelty, and responsibility directly, while the war-time background was in evidence, if often indirectly, in her third poetry collection.

b) *Mother, What Is Man?* (1942)

The title of Smith's transitional, often more complex, deeper collection, indicates her overriding concern with the human condition, with questions of the darker regions of the human heart prompted by the war, and also Smith's more intimate concerns, on which wartime would have impacted. An important thread in this collection is her exposure of primitive instincts, those customarily held in check, but sanctioned by war. To illuminate this facet, I shall draw here on psychoanalytic theory. Freud, in Part I of his paper 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death' (1915), examines how, in war, the state allows itself to commit acts of violence that would, in peacetime, disgrace individuals.⁵⁵⁷ He concluded that these baser, more primitive instincts, alive in our dreams, have merely been held in check in the service of civilisation:

Civilization has been attained through the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction, and it demands the same renunciation from each newcomer in turn. Throughout an individual's life there is a constant replacement of external by internal compulsion.⁵⁵⁸

In Part II of this paper, Freud focuses on our primitive urge to kill. The strength of this urge is exemplified, in Freud's view, by the necessity of stating 'Thou shalt not kill' as one of the Ten Commandments; if the urge in us was not strong, there would be no need to prohibit it.⁵⁵⁹ Smith's ability to harness and explore such instinctual feelings comes to the fore in several poems in this war-time collection particularly. Her preoccupation with the instinctual can further be understood in terms of Kleinian psychoanalytic theory. Building on Freud's work, Melanie Klein focuses on the two positions that, she claims dominate our lives from infancy; the *schizoid position* in which the child turns the object by which she or he feels persecuted (originally, in Kleinian theory, the mother) totally bad, and the more mature

⁵⁵⁷ Sigmund Freud 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death' (1915), Part I 'The Disillusionment of War', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, XIV, ed. and trans. by James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), pp.275-88 (p. 279).

⁵⁵⁸ Freud, 'Thoughts For the Times on War and Death', Part I, p. 282.

⁵⁵⁹ Freud, 'Thoughts For The Times on War and Death', Part II 'Our Attitude Towards Death', pp. 289-300 (p. 295).

depressive position in which the child is able to synthesise a mother, neither wholly good nor bad, and make reparation.⁵⁶⁰ In Kleinian terms, Smith is able, in these war-time poems, to carry out activity in the angry *schizoid position* while she makes reparation in the *depressive position* through the compassion and art of her poetry.

It is also illuminating, of this collection particularly, to draw on Lyndsey Stonebridge's psychoanalytic study of modernism *The Destructive Element* (1998) in which she includes an analysis of Smith's war-themed novel *Over the Frontier* (1938).⁵⁶¹ Stonebridge explores how modernist thinkers salvage something of value from the destructive element. In a time of war, for instance, culture finds something satisfying in the production of its own destructive impulses: 'We hold on to our destructive elements because [...] we feel we have something to gain by them.'⁵⁶² In her study of *Over the Frontier*, Stonebridge shows how Smith, breaking down habitual boundaries, enacts parts of herself to explore the destructive element inside and outside.⁵⁶³ Thus, Smith is able to elucidate the power and cruelty that lie within each of us and how 'in its weakness only is there the sweetness of love'.⁵⁶⁴ Smith's novel could be considered as issuing a warning, as, in part, could *Mother, What Is Man?* It is an element that the jacket-flap comment to the first edition of this collection which is, at least in part, in Smith's voice points out, with reference to the question of the book's title: 'In these new poems and drawings Stevie Smith gives an answer that is tender, savage, hilarious and cautionary.'

One answer to the central question posed by her book title is suggested by the poem 'A Man I Am' in which a wolf-like man, overtaken by instinctual feelings of hate, commits a dreadful crime, perhaps the equivalent of a heinous war crime.⁵⁶⁵ As is often the case in her poetry, Smith draws on animals to convey our instinctual life. Smith's use of the first person indicates that this 'man' stands for an aspect of mankind:

I ran into the forest wild,
I seized a little new born child,
I tore his throat, I licked my fang,

⁵⁶⁰ Melanie Klein, 'Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms' (1946), in Juliet Mitchell, ed., *The Selected Melanie Klein* (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 176-200.

⁵⁶¹ Lyndsey Stonebridge, *The Destructive Element: British Psychoanalysis and Modernism* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

⁵⁶² Stonebridge, p. 1.

⁵⁶³ Stonebridge, 'Frames, Frontiers and Fantasies: 'Nasty Ladies Within' – Marion Milner and Stevie Smith', in *The Destructive Element*, pp. 142-72.

⁵⁶⁴ Smith, *Over the Frontier* (1980), p. 272.

⁵⁶⁵ 'A Man I Am', *Collected Poems*, p. 228.

Just like a wolf. A wolf I am.

After centuries of running wild the man (or mankind) is remorseful and appeals to God to relieve him of the burden of his sin. It is only in death, however, that he gains peace:

Upon the silt of death I swam
And as I wept my joy began
Just like a man. A man I am.

The implication is that mankind, with its capacity for cruelty, is finally wracked by the human condition. It is the release of death, not of religion, that provides solace in this poem. There is an energetic abandon in Smith's description of cruelty here, her fierce Muse uncompromisingly at work. Smith is a writer who, in Stonebridge's words, 'has something to gain' from the destructive element.

Smith also explores feelings of personal anger, even aggression (a poem in her 1957 collection *Not Waving But Drowning* is entitled 'Anger's Freeing Power').⁵⁶⁶ She is capable of enjoying the energy of anger. Her lines in 'In the Night' enact a typically swift tonal change, this time from loneliness and despair to invigorating attack: 'And now in the desolate night / I think only of the people I should like to bite.'⁵⁶⁷ Again, there is a suggestion of the instinctual and the animal. Significantly, Smith thought that merely 'being alive was like being in enemy territory'.⁵⁶⁸ This comment would have been influenced by a sense of threat induced by the traumas of her early life, a sense of threat that would surely have been exacerbated by having lived through two World Wars.

Mother, What Is Man? is characterised by hope and desire, as well as despair. The book's jacket flap comment begins: 'She [Stevie Smith] thinks' and seems to be Smith's own voicing of her thoughts: 'These poems show us very clearly what we are, and so they are full of the most buoyant hope. For if we are like this, we must surely wish to be something different.' These words end in a Christmas message: 'And in this way the poems may truly be said to embody the spirit of Christmas love and hope for the New Year.' The message may, at first, appear to be part of the book's packaging for its release just before Christmas. There is, nevertheless, a sense of liberation to be had in this collection, in that a poet can face human problems, to include those inherent in the human condition, so honestly and directly.

⁵⁶⁶ 'Anger's Freeing Power', *Collected Poems*, pp. 369-70.

⁵⁶⁷ 'In the Night', *Collected Poems*, p. 231.

⁵⁶⁸ Dick, *Ivy and Stevie*, p. 71.

This third collection is, overall, less densely textured in ambience than the two earlier poetry books; the poems' scholarly sources tend to be more entirely subsumed in the poems' urgency. The range of inspirational sources is still wide, however, encompassing, for instance, Seneca, Thomas De Quincey and French folk song. Poets echoed and transmuted by Smith include the Romantic poets Coleridge, Blake, and Tennyson. Some poems are directly inspired by war, or international conflict. 'Voices against England in the Night', for example, presents a multi-faceted view of England and history, ending with voices crying words that are prophetic in terms of the end of British rule in India in 1947:

Could not England, once the world's best,
Put off her governing garment and be better dressed
In a shroud, a shroud? O history turn thy pages fast!⁵⁶⁹

'The Little Daughters of America' bears the inscription 'Pearl Harbor, 1941' and presents an ironic female angle on war: 'I am sorry that all the little daughters of America / Should be involved in a thing like this; upon my word.'⁵⁷⁰ In 'No More People', a pilot wonders briefly whether the angels are looking sideways 'because they know / That they will live to see the day when there are no more people?''⁵⁷¹ Then, as if casually (in brackets), he commits an act of destruction that indicates Smith's own anger and despair: '(I drop my bomb upon a church steeple.)' The formerly uncollected poem, written on the eve of the war, 'The Ballet of the Twelve Dancing Princesses', dated 1939, also persuasively indicates the extent of Smith's poetic development during the wartime period.⁵⁷²

Mother, What Is Man? also contains, in thematic continuity with her first two poetry books, poems of love, of longing, and of marriage presented in an unfavourable light. In 'Autumn', late love is bleakly and satirically rendered:

'Let us get married shortly,'
He said. 'I am no longer passionate,
But we can have some conversation before it is too late.'⁵⁷³

⁵⁶⁹ 'Voices against England in the Night', *Collected Poems*, p. 249. As May points out in his note on p. 756, Celia, in Smith's novel *The Holiday* (repr.1979), p. 128, recites the poem in relation to Indian Independence.

⁵⁷⁰ 'The Little Daughters of America', *Collected Poems*, p. 202.

⁵⁷¹ 'No More People', *Collected Poems*, p. 243.

⁵⁷² 'The Ballet of the Twelve Dancing Princesses', *Collected Poems*, pp. 705-06. See the discussion on p. 129 above.

⁵⁷³ 'Autumn', *Collected Poems*, p. 189.

This is a poem that Larkin rightly called a ‘capsule novel’.⁵⁷⁴ The collection contains poems of solitude, and of the loneliness that is a part of solitude for Smith, a theme to which she now brings increased depth. In ‘Forgot!’, for instance, she writes: ‘There is a fearful solitude / Within the careless multitude’.⁵⁷⁵ On reflection, however, this poem’s male persona concludes that the isolation is a part of the human condition: ‘The solitude lay all within; / he longed for some interior din’. Religion, characteristically for Smith, cannot ease the earthly suffering of this life, and what is beyond earthly life is uncertain. With the poem ‘The Face’, she conjures a frightening image:

It is a human face that hides
A monkey soul within,
That bangs about, that beats a gong,
That makes a horrid din.⁵⁷⁶

For this poet, what it is to be human is never comfortable. In a time of war, even the soul is revealed as primitive and animalistic. Conflict for Smith is revealed as internal as well as external.

The poems of this collection are frequently very short and piercing. Some are terse and epigrammatic. ‘If I lie down’, a questioning, uncertain couplet poem, succinctly exposes Smith’s doubt in the afterlife, one of the tenets of the Christian religion, and shows what she can achieve in this form: ‘If I lie down upon my bed I must be here, / But if I lie down in my grave I may be elsewhere.’⁵⁷⁷ In ‘Croft’, Smith harnesses a repeated rhyme to lock this possibly homosexual figure into his loneliness. It is poem as ‘sound vehicle’, memorably making its point:

Aloft,
In the loft,
Sits Croft;
He is soft.⁵⁷⁸

While Croft is masculine, the accompanying drawing widens the poem by presenting a more gender-ambiguous isolated figure. The poem might be a veiled reference to Smith’s own

⁵⁷⁴ Larkin, ‘Stevie, Goodbye’, p. 263.

⁵⁷⁵ ‘Forgot’, *Collected Poems*, p. 227.

⁵⁷⁶ ‘The Face’, *Collected Poems*, p. 195.

⁵⁷⁷ ‘If I lie down’, *Collected Poems*, p. 196.

⁵⁷⁸ ‘Croft’, *Collected Poems*, p. 218.

sexuality.⁵⁷⁹ Again, in this collection, with the introduction of a range of characters, Smith employed a distancing device, enabling her to explore her own feelings.

While an overview gives an indication of the increased overall force, scope and universality of this third collection, I shall now analyse closely two contrasting short war-time poems to indicate more closely Smith's communicative force and skill, at this stage of her development. Typical of many of the poems in this book, each is both short and powerful.

c) 'The Failed Spirit'⁵⁸⁰

This is an allusive, compressed wartime poem with a striking linguistic range. It exemplifies the increased depth of Smith's enquiry:

The Failed Spirit

To those who are isolate
 War comes promising respite
 Making what seems to be up to the moment the most
 successful endeavour
 Against the fort of the failed spirit that is alone forever.
 Spurious failed spirit, adamant wasture,
 Crop, spirit, crop thy stony pasture.

At first, war holds out hope, in the communal war effort, for example, of making the lonely feel less alone. By the end of the poem's fourth line, however, Smith has made it clear that this optimism is proved doomed to fail. War may seem to be 'the most successful endeavour so far' to assuage loneliness, but the human spirit is ultimately cut off in its impenetrable 'fort' and condemned to solitude. This, it is implied, is the human condition. The poet's injunction to the 'failed spirit' to 'crop thy stony pasture' seems harsh, an instinctual voice reflecting the cruelty inherent in life, as exemplified by war. Smith's own, much later comment in an article on writing poetry, with specific reference to this complex poem, helps to elucidate it:

Many of my poems are about the pains of isolation, but once the poem is written, the happiness of being alone comes flooding back. In this poem the lonely person was so foolish as not to recognise his nature and its solace. He should have remembered the

⁵⁷⁹ Smith, letter to Kay Dick, March 1943. Smith includes 'Croft' as one of the poems in the collection that comprises 'the self portraits'. St Louis Archive, MSS103.2.2.1.

⁵⁸⁰ 'The Failed Spirit', *Collected Poems*, p. 251.

schoolroom tag: *Fata nolentuem trahunt, volentem ducunt* (the fates drag the unwilling, the willing they lead). Instead he tried to do some war work [...] It is not a stony pasture.⁵⁸¹

Smith herself, as we have seen, like the person she refers to here, undertook some war work. Perhaps she hoped it would assuage loneliness and found that it did not. The pasture in the poem remains 'stony', but Smith's comment suggests that the emphasis in that line may be on 'crop' and that this pasture has possibilities for the isolated human spirit, for creativity, for instance. In her revision to the poem, Smith removed an exclamation mark from the end of its last line, thus more strongly suggesting an emphasis on 'crop' and giving the poem a more reflective, less exclamatory ending.⁵⁸² The pasture can still be cropped and the poem is proof that this 'cropping' will feed her poetry.



Figure 5

The poem's accompanying drawing (Figure 5) highlights isolation while it also hints at some pleasure to be had. An isolated female figure wearing a crown stands on a railway line. In a

⁵⁸¹ Smith, 'What Poems Are made Of', in *Me Again*, pp.128-29 (p. 128). (First published, *Vogue*, 15 March 1969).

⁵⁸² May, ed., *Collected Poems*, note to 'The Failed Spirit', p. 756. (In the poem as included in 'What Poems Are Made Of' (1969) as included in *Me Again* (1981), the early version of the poem remains unchanged.)

transcript for a radio broadcast, Smith described this as a disused railway track.⁵⁸³ Without this elucidation from Smith, however, it does look as if this woman with an anguished face is endangering her life. The luggage truck is empty and the station name appears to be missing letters. The remaining letter 'LOTT WU' might be shorthand for 'a lot of woe', while also containing an abbreviated reference to 'The Lady of Shalott' and her plight. Animals stand to the side of the track. In Smith's words, 'a she-ass licks the nose of her young foal.' Actually, however, in the drawing the young foal does not appear to be having its nose licked, but looks happily outward, away from its mother, an optimistic aspect to the drawing. This does suggest some youthful enjoyment of life. It could also connect with Smith's comment that she is able to enjoy life because she keeps herself a little apart: 'I love life. I adore it, but only because I keep myself well on the edge.'⁵⁸⁴ This is Smith's way of achieving peace in her own mind.

'The Failed Spirit' is written impersonally, without direct reference to an 'I'. While this creates a distancing effect and helps to broaden the poem's application, the emotional quality is such that the poet seems to lend the poem the weight of personal experience. This can be pinned down to the way the poem speaks, the weight that is given to the words 'that is alone forever', occurring at the end of the long sentence, 'ever' rhyming forcefully with 'endeavour'. In the revised version of the poem, Smith took out all the commas from this first sentence, emphasising the relentlessness of the movement towards the 'forever'.⁵⁸⁵ The voice is then further augmented by the change of tone of the energetic, almost merciless command 'Crop, spirit, crop thy stony pasture.' Smith has fully entered a drama in which the spirit in the poem has become, in one of Smith's lightning changes of tone, one of her characters. It is a horse that she urges to graze, both the human spirit and her own spirit.

One association with eating and appetite for Smith is that of a primitive voraciousness. At the opening of *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936), for instance, the horse, Kismet, who her alter ego Pompey rode for a year in Cornwall, is described: 'He was a great eater, was Kismet. No sooner pause than crop the verdure.'⁵⁸⁶ It seems that in the poem there is the optimism that

⁵⁸³ Smith, 'Poems and Drawings II', script for BBC Radio Third Programme broadcast of 18 October, 1951. Quoted in Barbera and McBrien, *Stevie*, p. 147.

⁵⁸⁴ Dick, *Ivy and Stevie*, p. 70.

⁵⁸⁵ May, ed., *Collected Poems*, note to 'The Failed Spirit', p. 756.

⁵⁸⁶ Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper*, (1936), pp. 1-2.

the ‘Spurious failed spirit’, in a sense falsely failed, will, at Smith’s persuasion, feed as determinedly as Kismet.

Religion is questioned in the poem, while it is also, typically for Smith, a touchpoint. At the poem’s opening, ‘those who are isolate’ might refer to a group of human sufferers, but in view of the ending of the poem it becomes an aspect of being human. The ‘failed spirit’ can be both a human spirit who has failed morally, in religious terms, to reach Heaven or the Elysian fields of classical mythology, and someone for whom spiritual nourishment has been scarce. A ‘failed spirit’ also suggests someone who has given up, whose spirit has, in this way, failed. The addressing of the spirit/horse as ‘thy’ emphasises a traditional Christian connotation. In accord with this Christian emphasis, the stony pasture recalls its opposite, the verdant pasture in the would-be comforting psalm ‘The Lord is My Shepherd’: ‘He maketh me to lie down in green pastures’.⁵⁸⁷ Thus in Smith’s poem, personal despair, as well as courage, is heightened by her religious ambivalence.

The poem, as a poem must be, is on the side of life. It has vitality in its making. There is vigour in the command ‘Crop, spirit’ and in the poem’s twists and turns, rhymes, half-rhymes and well-deployed line-endings. There is relish in the unexpected choice of words, in the use of ‘spurious’, for example, for the failed spirit, and in instances of her use of archaic and unfamiliar language reminiscent of her very early writing. The archaic ‘adamantine’, as well as indicating stubbornness, carries its original meaning of hard and diamond-like, suggesting perhaps that something beautiful has been wasted. It rings out triumphantly with its assonantal ‘a’ sounds and it adds a note of the historical continuity of pain. Very likely, as May points out in *The Collected Poems*, Smith ‘talks back’ here to Thomas Gray’s poem ‘Hymn to Adversity’ (1742): ‘Bound in thy adamant chain / The Proud are taught to taste of pain’.⁵⁸⁸ The fact that the word contains the name Adam, and its placing at the metrical climax of the poem, may hint, in this spiritually orientated poem, at the Fall of Man. Through such a half-rhyme as the playfully invented word ‘wasture’ with ‘pasture’, Smith creates a strong sense of opposition; wasture (an archaic form of ‘waste’) becomes locked in with its opposite, ‘pasture’. Ultimately, Smith’s poem is dynamic and distinctly alive.

⁵⁸⁷ *The Bible*, The Book of Psalms, Psalm 23.

⁵⁸⁸ May, ed., note to ‘The Failed Spirit’, *Collected Poems*, p. 756.

d) 'Bog-Face'⁵⁸⁹

In contrast to the more obvious complexity of 'The Failed Spirit', the frequently anthologised 'Bog-Face' is a dialogue poem of utter lucidity, though also subtle. It points forward to the surface clarity and visionary force of the third phase of Smith's development.

Bog-Face

Dear little Bog-Face,
Why are you so cold?
And why do you lie with your eyes shut? –
You are not very old.

I am a Child of this World,
And a Child of Grace,
And Mother, I shall be glad when it is over,
I am Bog-Face.

In 'Bog-Face', Smith perfectly balances the fierceness of, in Freudian terms, less civilised feelings with a compassion that is extended to the human race. One of her most moving and most frequently anthologised poems, it has a sense of being open; there is nowhere to hide. To an extent it is a Blakean poem; May, in his note to this poem, cites in its connection Blake's 'song of innocence', 'Infant Joy' (1789), in which the two-day-old infant is given the name of 'joy'.⁵⁹⁰ The child named Bog-Face is, however, joy's opposite and, a child of, in Blakean terms, 'experience' as much as 'innocence'. Thus, the poem could at least equally be likened to Blake's 'Infant Sorrow' and its foreboding: 'Into the dangerous world I leapt'.⁵⁹¹

Smith's poems, in general, contain many obvious echoes of Blake; in her titles, for instance, 'Little Boy Lost' and 'Little Boy Sick', and in the tiger image that occurs in poems such as the poem of forsaken love 'Pad, Pad', and 'The Photograph', which begins 'They photographed me young upon a tiger skin'. She was aware of the danger of Blake's influence: 'I've always had the feeling one should be on one's guard there [...] His are very easy echoes to catch.'⁵⁹² Aspects of Smith have a commonality with Blake. There is, for example, her visionary edge, particularly in her later work; the making of artwork integral to her poetry;

⁵⁸⁹ 'Bog-Face', *Collected Poems*, p. 191.

⁵⁹⁰ May, ed., note to 'Bog-Face', *Collected Poems*, p. 753.

⁵⁹¹ 'Infant Sorrow', (1794), *William Blake: The Complete Poems*, ed. by Alicia Ostriker, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 129.

⁵⁹² Smith, interviewed by Jonathan Williams (1963), in *Sternlicht*, ed., 1991, p. 43.

her self-education; her directness; her use of dialogue; her religious questioning (as opposed to Blake's non-conformity); and her voice of protest. Blakean elements indicate aspects of Smith's popularity with the sixties generation of poets who championed Blake and with whom Smith was to perform. In 'Bog-Face', the two mirroring quatrains, each with its extended third line, the one stanza answering the other, seem Blakean, as does the protest: 'I shall be glad when it is over'. There is also, in Smith's poem, a Blakean preoccupation with religion. Bog-face is 'a Child of Grace', that is of God's love and mercy, but no such love, however, is alleviating the child's distress. Rather, it is 'this World' that has imprinted itself mercilessly on his being. Unusually for Smith, she keeps to a (Blakean) regular rhyme pattern and rhythm. This formal elegance here, while beautiful, also carries a sense of human entrapment; the poem is tight shut.

Smith's individuality is in evidence in the poem in the inspired choice of name 'Bog-Face', which might, on the one hand, be an affectionate name for a child, but is also suggestive of the elemental, or primeval. The tenderness of Smith's address 'Dear little Bog-Face' strikes an arresting note while the ugly-tender name Bog-Face, sounding also like an insult, serves to highlight the world's lack of care. Bog-Face appears dead at first, cold, eyes shut.



Figure 6

Figure 7

The surprise is that the child is not dead, but in despair, as Smith's accompanying drawing below the poem with the child, hand to head, accentuates. The full-breasted female figure in the drawing above the poem (Figure 6) bends her

head, as if looking down tenderly, but she is alone against the curve of the earth, in front of sparse trees. In the drawing below, a female figure bends over, her arms held out as if to rescue the despairing child, but Bog-Face seems beyond her grasp (Figure 7). The 'it' which the child wishes to be over is left open, but the implication is that it is life itself. Smith's clarity communicates a mystery, that sense of the inexpressible that is at the heart of poetry; the despair is also left open. It could be despair at the condition of the world, or at life itself. Ironically the child speaks like an adult, or the child-in-the-adult as featured by Smith in her

poem 'To Carry the Child'.⁵⁹³ Smith's Bog-Face is, at once, both the name of the vulnerable child and a reflection of the beleaguered human race.

V Phase 3: Vision and lucidity

Stevie Smith, as we have seen, considered her fourth collection *Harold's Leap* (1950) a development in her poetry, because it was 'perhaps simplified & more direct'.⁵⁹⁴ In this respect, it can be considered an early book of Smith's poetic maturity, to be followed by the three remaining collections: *Not Waving But Drowning* (1957), *The Frog Prince and Other Poems* (1966) and the posthumous *Scorpion and Other Poems* (1972). In a radio interview in 1970 she was to describe her work as 'deeply serious' yet 'simply cast'.⁵⁹⁵ The positive connotations that 'simpler' and 'direct' had for Smith can be aligned with her love of Greek tragedy, Racine's *Phèdre* being a particular favourite. She explored this admiration in her first publication *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936), her alter ego Pompey remarking: 'for the tragedy and simplicity of *Phèdre* I have a very profound feeling [...] The plot of tragedy must be bone-straight and simple.'⁵⁹⁶ That this realisation came so early to Smith as a reader and writer suggests that this simplicity is something that she might have wanted to work towards. She found in classical tragedy a serenity in which poetry and emotion are indivisible, and it was this that she thought brought about a catharsis: 'the verse and the emotion are perfectly at one, they fuse perfectly and effect the purgation which is the essence of tragedy'.⁵⁹⁷ Additionally, Smith, whose poetry so often took death as a point of reference, would surely have been struck by the battle of the forces of life and death, a central preoccupation of her own, as presented, for example, in Racine's *Phèdre* (given here in Ted Hughes' version):

OENONE	This longing for death is going to kill us both. I exhaust myself to keep you alive When all you are doing is trying to die.
PHÈDRE	I want to be hidden in a dark wood I want to see the chariot go bounding past In a fearless cloud of dust. ⁵⁹⁸

⁵⁹³ 'To Carry the Child', *Collected Poems*, pp. 505-06. See my discussion of this poem in Chapter One.

⁵⁹⁴ Boulton's 'Questionnaire' (1951). Tulsa Archive, 1976. 012.115.002.

⁵⁹⁵ Smith, 'Poet Talking', BBC Radio interview on 'Woman's Hour', February 1970, quoted in Spalding, p. 277.

⁵⁹⁶ Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper*, (1936), p. 155.

⁵⁹⁷ Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936), p. 155.

⁵⁹⁸ Jean Racine, *Phèdre*, a version by Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 10. Originally:

The surface simplicity that Smith developed and refined is an outstanding feature of this ‘third phase’ of her poetry, in which her numerous fully achieved poems have a lucid, visionary quality, at the same time as they are alive with thought and feeling. When the pool is clear, one might say, it reveals its depth. We have already seen intimations of this powerful simplicity, in the short earlier poem ‘Bog-Face’, for instance. In future collections, Smith was able to achieve this imaginative force in many poems, including more extended poems. Increasingly, she harnessed the clarity and power of fairy tales and of legends, their imaginative reach and outward ingenuousness.⁵⁹⁹ As well as drawing on given fairy tales and legends, she created her own myths and fantasies. Many such poems of vision stand out across these four collections. In *Harold’s Leap* alone there is, for instance, the subtle, dynamic title poem, the language of which could scarcely be simpler; the incantatory ‘Do take Muriel Out’ with its bitter-sweet flavour; and the enigmatic ‘Voices about the Princess Anemone’ with its fairytale atmosphere in which Smith is able to suggest the weight of a life, while hinting that difficult feelings can be gold for a poet. Smith’s fifth collection *Not Waving But Drowning* (1957) has a notably high concentration of such achieved poems. This ‘mature’ phase culminates, however, in a group of outstanding visionary poems in her posthumously published book *Scorpion and Other Poems* (1972).

The jacket-flap comment to this collection suggests: ‘*Scorpion and Other Poems* is likely to be considered her finest volume of poetry.’ The collection does indeed contain a cluster of her very finest poems. They focus on death, although they take very varied imaginative angles, and are stylistically diverse. What unites them is, as well as their edge, a particular luminosity and depth of feeling, which makes them poems of life as much as of death. That they were written near to the end of Smith’s life (she died at the age of sixty-eight in 1971) may well have contributed to their atmosphere and particular sense of urgency. Poems of this visionary group include the title poem ‘Scorpion’, ‘Cockadoo’, ‘Francesca in Winter’, ‘Grave

ŒONE	Quoi! Vous ne perdez point cette cruelle envie? Vous verrai-je toujours, renonçant la vie, Faire de votre mort les funeste apprêts?
PHÈDRE	Dieux! Que ne suis-je assise à l’ombre des forêts! Quand purrai-je, au travers d’une noble poussière, Suivre de l’œil un char fuyant dans la carrièr?

Jean Racine, *Phèdre* (France: Gallimard, 2000), I.3.173-178.

⁵⁹⁹ See my discussion of fairy tale in Chapter Six in relation to ‘Angel Boley’ for a consideration of Smith’s use of this genre.

by a Holm Oak', 'The Ass' and 'Black March'. In the longer poem 'The Ass', for instance, Eugenia, after labouring in the witch's bothy where she had been happy, eventually runs into waves as if 'Into her tomb', but also as if 'coming home'. Smith has conjured here a very specific sense of place, the Norfolk coastal marshes:

The sun fell hot upon the causeway
That was not very wide
And the mórass sopped and shuffled
Either side.

And the little beetles ran
About, and all the gnats and the mosquitoes sang
And the mórass was as sweet a green
As Eugenia had ever seen.⁶⁰⁰

This vivid depiction of the landscape becomes an aspect of Smith's valuing of life while welcoming death. In 'The Donkey', a retired donkey's 'sweet prairies of anarchy' become 'Death's odder anarchy' in which the poet declares: 'Though precious we are momentarily, donkey, / I aspire to be broken up.'⁶⁰¹ Like this donkey, Smith herself is now 'full of mature truth'. The very short 'Grave by a Holm Oak' is an elemental poem of utmost visionary simplicity in which the poet asks pressingly: 'Where have the dead gone? / Where do they live now?', the answer a resounding: 'Ask not, cries the holm-oak, / Weep, says snow.'⁶⁰²

Also featured in this posthumous book and allied to this group, is the long, ambitious, poem 'Angel Boley' in which, via a gripping fairytale narrative, Smith explores her religious and moral concerns. I shall focus on this poem in Chapter Six. I shall conclude my discussion of 'Phase 3' by considering in detail two of the outstanding and highly individualistic shorter poems of this late stage of Smith's maturity: 'Scorpion' and 'Black March'.⁶⁰³

a) 'Scorpion'⁶⁰⁴

⁶⁰⁰ 'The Ass', *Collected Poems*, pp. 602-04. Spalding recounts how at Blakeney Point (a spit of land about 5 miles long enclosing an estuary) Smith had a presentiment of her death. Spalding, p. 295.

⁶⁰¹ 'The Donkey', *Collected Poems*, p. 616.

⁶⁰² 'Grave by a Holm Oak', *Collected Poems*, p. 655.

⁶⁰³ These two poems do not have accompanying drawings.

⁶⁰⁴ 'Scorpion', *Collected Poems*, p.593.

Extreme circumstances towards the end of Smith's life gave rise to one of her most memorable late poems, one of wit as much as of despair. On 3rd October 1970, six months before her death, she added, as an afterthought in a letter to Kay Dick:

Did you see Scorpion in the N.S. [*New Statesman*] ... My poor beloved unspeakable (just like my tum) Scorpion? It's just what I feel like. Except that one feels so much better for having said it.⁶⁰⁵

Smith had spent three months in Devon looking after her older sister, and juggling this with poetry readings. A stroke had left Molly Smith with a paralysed left arm and she could only walk with a frame. Smith's own health was now also poor. In the same letter she had written: 'I go about living with bottles of this and that in the way of ghastly drugs which make me feel even worse.' Thus her deteriorating physical condition, plus tough practical and emotional life circumstances were added to Smith's long-held sense of death as a possible welcome release.

'Scorpion' opens with the speaker, felt to be Smith herself, reflecting in frustration on God's words from St. Luke's Gospel: "'This night shall thy soul be required of thee'".⁶⁰⁶ She muses on the irony: '*My soul is never required of me / It always has to be somebody else of course*'. The full rhyme of the opening couplet (followed in the poem by more haunting half-rhymes) makes the frustration resounding. She has, as she herself wrote: '*found a new grievance. I don't remember anyone else feeling aggrieved on just this point.*'⁶⁰⁷ The poem's speaker is impatient, wondering 'Will my soul be required of me tonight perhaps?' At the same time as she registers impatience, and, by implication, her despair of earthly life, she also evokes the mystery of death – that our own can never be fully countenanced; death happens to other people. Smith then briefly conjures a down-to-earth scene in an Out-Patient's Department, and, as has so often been a feature of her poetry, introduces characters to portray aspects of her own feeling, enlivening the poem with dialogue and the conversational. Here the speaker is, potentially, Mrs Briggs: "'Are you Mrs Briggs, dear?'" Mrs Briggs is a kind of 'everywoman' who, in this case, is really Scorpion: 'No, I am Scorpion.' There is wit in the word-play of one *impatient* to die being cast as a hospital *patient*. The 'Out-Patients'

⁶⁰⁵ Smith, letter to Kay Dick, 2 October 1970. St Louis Archive, MSS103.2.7.54. Spalding has read 'my tum' as 'my turn', but I think the former decoding of Smith's handwriting more likely in view of the emphasis on Smith's health in the letter. Spalding, p. 294.

⁶⁰⁶ *The Bible*, Luke, 12.20, '*Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee*'.

⁶⁰⁷ Smith, letter to Anthony Thwaite, undated, quoted in Barbera and McBrien, *Stevie*, p. 288.

Department' also suggests the going-out that death involves and is reminiscent of Smith's poem 'Not Waving but Drowning': 'I was much too far out all my life / and not waving but drowning.'⁶⁰⁸ By characterising herself as Scorpion (a scorpion has a deadly sting in its tail), Smith presents a wry and typically unsentimental view of human nature. This casting as Scorpion can also be further illuminated by an incident preceding the writing of this poem during which Smith reportedly lost her temper over the difficulties of looking after her sister, and of problems arising from her sister's temperament.⁶⁰⁹ Hence light is shed on Smith's 'unspeakable Scorpion' of her letter above to Kay Dick.

Smith described this poem: 'though rooted in utter despair has alas perhaps come out as funny, or rather funny'.⁶¹⁰ It is, however, a fine late example of her ability to transmute painful feelings into a vibrant poem, dark humour contributing to its piercing effect. As is customary, it is Smith's fluid shifts of tone that contribute strongly to the poem; the shift from the beauty of the biblical language, for instance, to a protesting, querulous voice. Another shift, from Mrs Briggs to the venomous Scorpion persona, then adds a note of unexpected fantasy. That the concept of the soul could in itself be thought of as the ultimate human fantasy adds to the poem's luminosity. Smith continues by elaborating on an imagined afterlife: 'To waft over the grass till it comes to the blue sea' (rather as in the poem 'The Ass' described above). Ironically, however, this 'afterlife' can only be described in the most practical earthly terms: 'I am very fond of grass, I always have been'. And what of the problem of unwanted 'Other souls'? With very human frustration, Smith decrees that they must simply 'find somewhere *else*'.

While exposing the absurdity of her vision, Smith pleads with God, who is still a part of her thinking: 'O Lord God please come'. Her reference to 'thy Scorpion' is tender, as if she is still one of God's creatures. The plaintive last line carries the weight of Smith's despair and longing: 'Scorpion so wishes to be gone.' In this finely balanced poem, a full tonal array is played out against her skilled use of an irregular stanzaic form. The first and third stanzas, which develop the idea of the soul and its fantasised journey, are quatrains, with the bracketed more comic 'Out-Patients' Department' set between them. The poem then 'thins' into two couplets, and ends with the force of a short, isolated line, the final 'gone' a half-echo of the earlier 'come'. It is as if Scorpion has already half-disappeared, so fervent is the wish.

⁶⁰⁸ 'Not Waving but Drowning', *Collected Poems*, p. 347.

⁶⁰⁹ The incident is detailed in Spalding, p. 294.

⁶¹⁰ Smith, letter to Elizabeth Popley, 15 June 1976, quoted in Spalding, p. 293.

b) 'Black March'⁶¹¹

'Black March' is one of Smith's most poised and atmospheric final poems. It manages to be both delicately spring-like while suggestive of the end of the known world. The editors of *Emergency Kit* (1996), the anthology which features 'Black March', draw attention in their 'Introduction' to the inclusion of poems 'which appear to contain whole new worlds, parallel universes'.⁶¹² 'Black March' is one such poem; it is as if Smith creates her own world.

Gradually she builds an ambiguous picture in which 'a friend / At the end / Of the world' whose name is, paradoxically 'a breath // Of fresh air' takes on the ghostly characteristics of death, while also offering the relief of companionship. The idea of death as a part-romantic figure has been notable in her thinking. She wrote, for instance, in a letter to her friend Helen Fowler in 1959: 'But I do often feel rather ineffectual [...] & then one gets romantic about old Death'.⁶¹³ In Smith's radio play *A Turn Outside*, broadcast in the same year, the male 'Interlocutor' is gradually revealed as death personified.⁶¹⁴ In this play, as in the poem, Death is an ambiguous figure, offering thankful release, while also contributing a sinister undercurrent: 'Come along, dear. We shall soon be outside now, just a turn of the key and there we are.'⁶¹⁵ While 'Black March' is light in touch, tilting in one respect towards a strange and refreshing friendship, the enormity of death at the end of our known world and the ultimate change is set against this, as is the poem's title, which is revealed to be the name of the friend in the poem, and suggests spring, but is a reversal of the traditional spring-like expectations of rebirth.

This ambiguous friend, subtly revealed as death in the unfolding poem, appears to be dressed in grey chiffon with 'a / Peculiar look, like smoke', while his eyes are 'pretty and bright'.⁶¹⁶ Smith's unusual choice of the commonplace and conventionally feminine word 'pretty' to describe this male friend's eyes adds to the delicacy of the description, but also alerts the

⁶¹¹ 'Black March', *Collected Poems*, pp. 653.

⁶¹² Shapcott and Sweeney, eds, 'Introduction' to *Emergency Kit*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 1.

⁶¹³ Smith, letter to Helen Fowler, 21 May 1959. Published in *Me Again*, p. 305.

⁶¹⁴ Smith, *A Turn Outside*, (BBC, Third Programme, 23 May 1959), included in *Me Again*, pp. 335-57.

⁶¹⁵ *A Turn Outside*, p. 357.

⁶¹⁶ In *A Turn Outside* the Interlocutor, Death, has 'beautiful eyes', p. 345.

reader to strangeness. In her earlier poem 'Pretty', Smith disorients the reader by divesting 'pretty' of its usual connotations and giving it its opposite meaning: 'the pike stalks // He stalks his prey, and this is pretty too'.⁶¹⁷ She concludes 'Pretty' by asserting: 'And so to be delivered entirely from humanity / This is prettiest of all, it is very pretty'. In his 1991 essay on Smith and language, Richard Nemesvari detects in her work a preoccupation with the role of language itself.⁶¹⁸ Drawing on Derrida, he analyses 'Pretty' and discusses how she exposes that language is arbitrary and constantly on the move, even containing its opposite: 'language always carries within it the very contradictions it attempts to deny'.⁶¹⁹ The word 'pretty', in Smith's poem of that name, comes to mean both nothing and everything. Applying Nemesvari's observation to 'Black March', the word 'pretty' conjures an instability, as if Smith is questioning whether 'pretty' can really have its conventional meaning when attached to death, the repeated blackness of black twigs, and the 'Black March' of the poem's title.

Colour was of great importance to Smith in her poetry writing. Her 1969 article 'What Poems Are Made Of' began: 'Colours are what drive me most of all, colours in painted pictures, but, most strongly, colours out of doors in the fresh cool air.'⁶²⁰ The colours of this poem are, from the outset in the title, black, grey and 'Uninterrupted / Cambridge blue as cold as snow'. In terms of this colour palette, the positive attributes of the 'old friend' are less certain. The only thing that can really be ascertained about death is that it will be 'A change'; irrevocably, it will end life. How delightful the change will be is questionable in the poem's subtext. The lightness of tone, the idea of fresh air and the brightness of the friend's eyes contribute to the poem's buoyancy and its poetic delight. That 'breath' has an unseen (shadow) rhyme in the poem with 'death', a word never mentioned, is one of the poem's ironies. Like the month of March itself, the poem has one foot in winter with its black twigs and cold blue sky. It seems an eerie portent as Smith was to die in March of 1971.

An unpublished piece of Smith's poetry in three parts, quoted by biographers Barbera and McBrien, points to a possible precursor of this poem. Here is Part 1:

He comes to my room
He is as tall & grey as the morning
He stands silently

⁶¹⁷ 'Pretty', Smith, *Collected Poems*, pp. 542-43.

⁶¹⁸ Richard Nemesvari, 'Work It Out For Yourself: Language and Fictional Form' in Stevie Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper*, in *Dalhousie Review*, 71.1 (1991), 26-35.

⁶¹⁹ Nemesvari, p. 28.

⁶²⁰ Smith, 'What Poems Are Made Of', repr. in *Me Again*, pp. 127-29 (p. 127). First published in *Vogue*, 15 March, 1969.

He has a silent look
He stands by my bed.

He takes my shoulders in his hand
His hand is as flat and grey as the morning
Speak to me!
He does not say a word
I have never heard his voice.⁶²¹

This list-like fragment makes Smith's stylistic accomplishments of the more ambiguous 'Black March' shine out in contrast, particularly the final poem's relaxed story-telling tone: 'I have a friend'. The first stanza break is critical: 'His name is a breath / Of fresh air'. It enacts the taking of a breath. The word 'bright', to be echoed in the assonance of 'By and by', gives a luminosity to this 'friend / At the end / Of the world'. The musing about a scarf gives a sense of the vision as being newly glimpsed by the poet: 'At least / I think it is chiffon.' Varied line lengths control the pace while the short lines help to create the freshness and openness of the vision – it is a poem with plenty of breathing spaces. Ballad-like, the poem has a base of the quatrain, although irregular in stanzas. Another marked change from the probable early draft is that in 'Black March', Smith, as she so often does to effect, harnesses the dramatic power of speech. Rather than the earlier 'He does not say a word', the friend of the final poem speaks in the fifth, and again, in the last stanza, the poem ending with haunting subtlety:

I am
A breath of fresh air,
A change for you.

There are sinister shadows in the cheering, friendly phrases.

I have shown how a close reading of Smith's *Collected Poems* (2015) conveys a sense of development, from her earliest pre-publication beginnings through three discernible phases. These phases are clear, despite, as is the case with the work of most fine poets, containing strong poems at each stage. As with many creative artists, a special maturity is to be found in the late work. Smith's work culminates in a group of posthumously published poems in which beauty, wit, delight and melancholy, even despair, are in the balance. They speak to the human condition, as well as being unmistakably Smith's. I shall include, in my final chapter, a discussion of 'Angel Boley', a longer poem from Smith's posthumous collection.

⁶²¹ Barbera and McBrien, *Stevie*, p. 233. No primary source is given.

As well as providing a unique example of the development of Smith's poetry in this 'third phase', it also served as direct inspiration for my own poetry sequence *Fairoz*, the making of which I shall explore.

Chapter Six

‘Angel Boley’, The Making of *Fairoz*, and Some Concluding Thoughts

I ‘Angel Boley’: Stevie Smith’s dark material

Stevie Smith’s longer poem ‘Angel Boley’ is a *tour de force* in which she responds to the ‘moors murders’, a notorious series of crimes of twentieth-century Britain, concerning the murder of children.⁶²² ‘Angel Boley’ was published in 1972 in the posthumous *Scorpion and Other Poems*. The collection includes some of her most searching work, such as the ‘essay’ poem ‘How do you see?’, which precedes ‘Angel Boley’, and in which, with intellectual rigour, she asks probing questions of the Christian religion.⁶²³ With its more multi-faceted approach, ‘Angel Boley’ also shows a depth of moral and religious enquiry. Here, Smith focuses on a murderous pair and an avenging ‘Angel’. With the concepts of good and evil at its heart, and appropriately, as this poem is concerned with the vulnerability of children, Smith employs fairy tale. Potently, she situates ‘Angel Boley’ at the point where fairy tale and religious myth converge. Powerfully also, she combines the traditional language of fairy tales with the colloquial, the scientific and the language of religion. This dynamic, buoyant poem was an important source of inspiration in the writing of my poetry sequence *Fairoz*, as I shall explore in Part II.

The so-called ‘moors murders’ provided Smith’s raw material.⁶²⁴ Ian Brady and his girlfriend Myra Hindley were each sentenced to life imprisonment in 1966. Brady was found guilty of what Mr Justice Fenton Atkinson called ‘three calculated, cruel, cold-blooded murders’.⁶²⁵ Hindley was found guilty of two of the murders and was proved to have been an accomplice in the other. The victims were aged between ten and seventeen. In 2017, journalist Charlotte Kroll wrote in the *Telegraph*: ‘The sadistic crimes of Ian Brady and Myra Hindley shocked

⁶²² ‘Angel Boley’, *Collected Poems*, pp. 610-15.

⁶²³ ‘How do you see?’, *Collected Poems*, pp. 596 – 601.

⁶²⁴ Dick, *Ivy and Stevie*, p. 78. Smith remarked in connection with her visit to Buckingham Palace in 1969 to receive the Queen’s Gold Medal for Poetry: ‘I’d just written that very long one based on the moors murders case’.

⁶²⁵ Reported by Geoffrey Whiteley: ‘Life sentences for Brady and Hindley’, *Guardian*, 7 May 1966. <<https://www.theguardian.com/century/1960-1969/Story/0,,106456,00.html>> [accessed 3 March 2019]

the nation to its core. Across Britain there was an outpouring of loathing for the pair who snatched children off the street, sexually abused them and tortured them to death.⁶²⁶ Years later, in 1987, the pair were to confess to two further murders of children, the body of one of whom has never been found. These murders were crimes that emerged from the dark, impoverished underside of Britain. The luring of children to their death by a murdering pair, the moorland setting, and the concealing of the victims' bodies, were aspects on which Smith was to draw. As well as compassion and anger, Smith's relish of a primitive destructive impulse brings a sense of urgency to her narrative poem. I shall explore this psychic terrain and, in doing so, focus on Smith's use of fairy tale and on the allied religious and moral elements in Smith's poem. Analysing Smith's resourceful and subtle technique, I shall show how aspects such as her flexible use of the poetic line and her anarchic, destabilising tonal and vocal shifts, contribute to the poem's dramatic impact and unity.

One significant change Smith makes to the original 'moors murders' crime is that Malady is Angel's mother and Hark is Angel's husband, rather than the two perpetrators being girlfriend and boyfriend, like Hindley and Brady. Nevertheless, Malady and Hark behave rather like the actual couple in the poem and Angel is the outsider. Although married to Hark, in relation to the couple, Angel is rather in the position of their child. In an earlier version of the poem which Smith performed on 29th November 1968, she included the idea of Malady and Hark being mistaken for Angel's parents: 'who they [the police] thought were officially her parents'.⁶²⁷ Like the adult in Smith's 'To Carry the Child', Angel is condemned to play the role of a child, never permitted to properly grow up.⁶²⁸ The killing by Angel of Malady and Hark then becomes a symbolic act of vengeance visited on parents. Showing a murderous strength of feeling, Smith wrote in 'To Carry the Child':

You would say a man had the upper hand
Of the child, if a child survive.
I say the child has fingers of strength
To strangle the man alive.

⁶²⁶ Charlotte Kroll, 'How the Moors Murders by Ian Brady and Myra Hindley shocked the Nation'. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/05/16/moors-murders-ian-brady-myra-hindley-shocked-nation/> [accessed 3 March 2019].

⁶²⁷ Smith, 'Angel Boley', included in 'The Spoken Word: Stevie Smith' BBC/British Library CD, 2009.

⁶²⁸ 'To Carry the Child', *Collected Poems*, p. 505.

In 'Angel Boley', Smith is able to give vent to such primitive urges as those that occur also in this earlier poem.

Often in Smith's poetry there is a recurrence of a death-wish, a form of despair that can be viewed as anger turned against the self. Such an impulse, however, also contains anger against significant others. Freud presents this aspect succinctly in his 1917 paper 'Mourning and Melancholia':

If one listens patiently to a melancholic's many and various self-accusations, one cannot, in the end, avoid the impression that often the most violent of them are hardly at all applicable to the patient himself, but that with significant modifications they do fit someone else, someone whom the patient loves or has loved or should love.⁶²⁹

In 'Angel Boley', Smith is able to turn the feelings of rage, the psychic energy of destructiveness, against parental figures. At the same time she is able to take on through her vengeance-seeking and compassion the role of the children who are the victims of cruelty. Angel is 'punished' for her crime in that she is committed to an asylum where she soon dies of typhoid fever. The *good* that came of the crime in which she gave vent to primitive feelings enabled, in her terms, other children to survive. Eventually the words were allowed to remain on Angel's tombstone: "'She did evil that good / Might come'". Thus future children (or the child in Smith and in all of us) have been given freedom to live. It is this engagement of Smith with primitive feelings that contributes to the poem's force and urgency. Though she, doubtless, brings her own personal psychological pressures to bear on 'Angel Boley', the residue of the tough, in a sense cruel, events of her childhood, the important end result is the universality of the poem. We all, for instance, have very likely harboured such primitive destructive feelings, while also desiring to protect our child self from harm.

a) Fairy tale

The fairytale motif is an important strand in Smith's poetry of enchantment and disenchantment, with such poems as 'Voices about the Princess Anemone', 'The Frog Prince', 'Fairy Story' and 'The Castle' being among her most memorable and subtle. Captivating her

⁶²⁹ Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1915), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, XIV, ed. and trans. by James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 243-59 (p. 248).

as a child, fairy tales were to remain a touchstone for her throughout her life. After she died, a copy of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* in German was found beside her bed at Avondale Road.⁶³⁰ In a BBC scripted broadcast in 1961, she explains:

It is for their reasonableness the stories frighten and hold, for their matter-of-fact, almost gay exploration of hazards, the easy cruelties being no more than is to be expected, if you do not behave yourself.⁶³¹

Thus fairy tales resonated with Smith's practical, down-to-earth side, and her preoccupation with morality and human cruelty, as well as with her imaginative self. She praised the simplicity and directness of Grimm's fairy tales and thought them more cruel in the German than in the English: 'the English often make the ending a little less harsh'.⁶³² Fairy tales would have chimed with her sense of being alive as being in enemy, or alien, territory.⁶³³ Freud, in a 1919 paper, explores the psychic origins of the uncanny: 'It may be true that the uncanny [*unheimlich*] is something which is secretly familiar [*heimlich-heimisch*], which has undergone repression and then returned from it, and that everything that is uncanny fulfils this condition.'⁶³⁴ He then, however, concludes more specifically: 'an uncanny experience occurs either when infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed.'⁶³⁵ In fairy tales, according to Freud, many instances of primitive or magical thinking are not uncanny, as they would be in real life, because the genre enables us to 'adapt our judgement to the imaginary reality imposed on us by the writer'.⁶³⁶ Thus, via fairy tale, the uncanny is made bearable and can be explored. In her study *Fantasy*, Rosemary Jackson points out that the term *das Unheimlich* (the opposite of familiar, homely) indicates the uncanny as 'a feeling of estrangement, of not being "at home" in the world'.⁶³⁷ An instance

⁶³⁰ Spalding, p. 21.

⁶³¹ Smith, script of her talk 'What A Poet Likes to Read', for 'The World of Books', BBC Home Service broadcast, 18 March 1961. BBC Written Archives, HS 18.3.61.,

⁶³² Smith interviewed by John Horder, 1963. BBC Written Archives, HS.2.263.

⁶³³ Dick, p. 71.

⁶³⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' (1919), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, XVII, ed. and trans. by James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 217-52 (p. 245).

⁶³⁵ Freud, 'The Uncanny', p. 249.

⁶³⁶ Freud, 'The Uncanny', p. 250.

⁶³⁷ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy* (London: Methuen 1981), p. 65.

of Smith experiencing this sense of estrangement, or disorientation, is conveyed in this excerpt from her 1956 essay 'Too Tired for Words':

Riding home one night on a late bus, I saw the reflected world in the dark windows of the top deck and thought I was lost forever in the swirling streets of that reflected world, with its panic corners and the distances that end too soon; lost and never to come home again.⁶³⁸

Her poem 'Fairy Story' suggests that her poetry provides temporary release from such alienation. After a time lost in a darkening wood, a 'little creature' allows her to return home after singing a song; on returning, however, the experience is one of alienation: 'But now I am home again there is nobody I know.'⁶³⁹ The incorporation of fairy tale into her poetry would have allowed Smith to engage fruitfully with such feelings of estrangement and with the otherworldly.



Figure 8

Smith's raw material of the 'moors murders', the cruel luring of children, suggests the fairy tale 'Hansel and Gretel', but without the traditional happy ending. The 'Hansel and Gretel' story is echoed in Smith's poem, and also in the first accompanying drawing (Figure 8) where

⁶³⁸ Smith, 'Too Tired for Words', *Me Again*, p. 112.

⁶³⁹ 'Fairy Story', *Collected Poems*, p. 562.

two children are portrayed sticking close together, as if in adversity. The objects they are carrying are difficult to identify, but might be surreally large stones with which they are armed. ‘Angel Boley’ also suggests a despised and neglected ‘Cinderella figure’; the cooking in the household was always left to Angel: ‘and that they thought was all she was fit for, / To cook and keep house.’ Fairy tales, usually first met in childhood, provide maps of the dangers of our world and often involve children and their difficult path through life. They could be said to belong to all of us in their presentation of archetypal or symbolic figures. Thus, Smith’s use of the genre provides ‘a point of entry’ by which she side-steps both any sense of *appropriation* of the extremity, and any sense of the *private* horror, of ‘the moors story’. Fairy tales reflect the conflicts of the unconscious and this is important to an enquiry into the strength and underlying complexity of Smith’s poem.

In ‘Angel Boley’, Smith draws on the power of various characteristics of fairy tales, as outlined by Marina Warner; the authoritative, impersonal language, for instance, and the matter-of-fact approach to wonders and the shrinking of time.⁶⁴⁰ The poem begins impersonally: ‘There was a wicked woman [...] Who lived with [...] In a house’. It is a familiar pattern. Smith sets her narrative in an imagined distant past, removing it from the specificity of the Moors crimes: ‘In the middle of the last century’, a version of *once upon a time*. (Eerily, this is now the historical distance of the Moors Murders to us.) Miraculously the words “She did evil that / Might come” on Angel’s tombstone keep magically reappearing after they have been erased. A ghostly world is near to hand. Smith shrinks time abruptly when she describes Angel’s fate: ‘So they put her in a lunatic asylum and soon she died.’ An aspect of fairy tale is its lack of overt psychological emphasis, as Walter Benjamin comments in his essay ‘The Storyteller’:

The most extraordinary things, marvellous things, are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks.⁶⁴¹

⁶⁴⁰ Marina Warner, *Once Upon A Time: A Short History of the Fairy Tale* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. xviii-xxvi.

⁶⁴¹ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller’ in *Illuminations* (London: Vintage, 2015), pp. 83-107 (p. 89).

In Smith's narrative we do not know, for instance, why Angel made her unwise choice of husband. Neither do we know why Hark forsook Angel and became 'partner in crime' with her mother.

Smith does, however, make revealing departures from the traditional fairytale mode. Angel is described, for instance, as one 'who was not happy and so / Lived out her life in a dream of absentmindedness'. This unusual psychological 'cause and effect' perhaps stems from Smith's own psychological reality, a possible sense of not feeling quite 'at home' when at home.⁶⁴² Her truer 'home' may have been within her poetry, as her poem 'Fairy Story' implies. The traditional fairytale 'happy ending' is absent from Angel Boley. The 'wicked' Hark and Malady are punished, but then so is Angel. The usual fairytale moral simplicity is absent here, as Angel certainly did wrong in terms of the law, although the reader may sympathise and consider her actions understandable, rather than simply *wrong*. Smith places extended focus on the mushrooms with which Angel poisoned the murdering couple and the sudden more scientific description surprises, along with the slowing of pace as if to relish the detail:

She became at once very practical and went out into the woods
and fields
And gathered some A. Phalloides, commonly called the 'white'
or deadly
Amanita, a mushroom of high toxicity.

This departure from the language of traditional fairy tales suggests an authorial glee in the destructive capacity of the mushrooms. This sense of pleasure is illuminated by Freud, who wrote in 'Civilization and Its Discontents':

The feeling of happiness derived from the satisfaction of a wild instinctual impulse untamed by the ego is incomparably more intense than that derived from sating an instinct that has been tamed.⁶⁴³

Smith's writing is driven by this element of wild belligerence, through which it gains, as well as force, a sometimes joyous sense of release. Anna Freud's thinking is also applicable to Smith's vengeful stance. She builds on Freud's theory in her writing on aggression. Her paper

⁶⁴² Andrew Sclater, whom Smith befriended when he was a schoolboy, noted in his memoir of the poet: 'I certainly had the impression of someone out of place in her own home.' Andrew Sclater, "'Yet Not Light Always": The Critical Mass of Stevie Smith', in *The Dark Horse*, 36 (2016) 8-28 (p. 15).

⁶⁴³ Freud, 'Civilization and Its Discontents', p. 79.

‘Identification with the Aggressor’ explores how, as a means of assimilating unpleasant or traumatic experiences in infancy, the child will take on the active role and pass on the experience to another.⁶⁴⁴ Adults can also employ this method of dispelling anxiety. Stevie Smith’s avenging Angel draws on the magnetic force of this identification as outlined by Anna Freud. For the Kleinian-influenced psychoanalyst Hannah Segal writing on aesthetics, the destructive impulses are crucial to a satisfying and powerful work of art. The artist, she writes, must create ‘Out of all the chaos and destruction [...] a world which is whole, complete, and unified’.⁶⁴⁵

Smith’s unexpectedly scientific description of the mushrooms marks a dramatic, destabilising shift in the voice and tone of the poem. It demonstrates clearly that this is not a children’s poem but a story told to adults. It shows Smith as knowingly and nimbly in control, and it makes it impossible, at this point, to feel comfortable reading her text, as might be the case if a more conventional fairy tale were being told. At this point of the poem, Smith’s use of the formal feature of the line break is striking. The powerful aspects that make up the fabric of the poem – psychological urgency, the fairytale and religious elements, the narrative and its drama – are held together by Smith’s flexible use of the line. The poetic line is, arguably, the main distinguishing feature of poetry from prose. James Longenbach, in his study of this formal unit, states:

Poetry is the sound of language organized in lines. More than meter, more than rhyme, more than images or alliteration or figurative language, line is what distinguishes our experience of poetry as poetry, rather than some other kind of writing.⁶⁴⁶

Overall, Smith creates a fairytale swiftness, with her use of line breaks and enjambement carrying tensions, controlling suspense and distributing emphasis in the long narrative poem. At the mushroom-gathering part of the poem, we see how Smith’s anarchic stance is also evident in this aspect of her stylistic technique, in combat with more traditional poetry, yet always in the service of her idiosyncratic poem. She, for example, slows down the opening of the stanza, beginning it with the very short line ‘As soon as Angel’, putting emphasis on the

⁶⁴⁴ Anna Freud, ‘Identification with the Aggressor’ (1936), in *Anna Freud: Selected Writings*, ed. by Richard Ekins and Ruth Freeman (London: Penguin Classics, 2015), pp. 13-23.

⁶⁴⁵ Hannah Segal, ‘A Psychoanalytic Approach to Aesthetics’, in *Reading Melanie Klein*, ed. by John Phillips and Lyndsey Stonebridge (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 203-22 (p. 216).

⁶⁴⁶ James Longenbach, *The Art of the Poetic Line* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2008), p. xi.

name 'Angel' and suggesting its symbolic resonance. The second short line ends with, and thus emphasises for the second time, her role as the 'Angel of Death'. This marks an abrupt change in the poem's voice, again blending the religious with the fairytale. Smith then immerses the reader, or listener, by means of longer enjambed lines, in the busy activity of the gathering of mushrooms and their identification. The reader now feels the enjoyment of the destructive element too, and momentarily believes with Angel the necessity of her action; action taken, ostensibly, because, as the children's bodies have disappeared, there would be no evidence of Hark and Mother Lure's crimes and further children would be at risk. Thus Smith achieves strongly here, that which Freud, in his study of Michelangelo's statue of Moses, suggests as the artist's aim: 'to awaken in us the same emotional attitude, the same mental constellation as that which in him produced the impetus to create.'⁶⁴⁷

Will May points out, in his note to 'Angel Boley', that the drafts were partly in prose.⁶⁴⁸ The prose-like rhythms of these lines work well in emphasising Angel's urgent practical activity, actually bringing it to life. In my view, 'Angel Boley' contrasts with another, less successful, long poem from this collection, 'The House of Over-Dew', which has prose roots, but is flattened by its prose rhythms.⁶⁴⁹ In 'Angel Boley', Smith displays a sure touch with the redrafting of prose elements. My scrutiny of an earlier draft reveals, for example, these lines she later omitted: 'a variety of inedible mushroom of which the toxicity [*sic*] / Is very high and the prognosis bad, the mortality of those partaking / Being from sixty to a hundred per cent'.⁶⁵⁰ These lines would have encumbered the poem and halted the pace.

If all fairy tales contain, in Tolkien's phrase, a 'sudden joyous turn', then the poisonous mushrooms ironically mark that point in 'Angel Boley'.⁶⁵¹ This appetite for destructiveness surely contributes to the sense of adventure and relish in this narrative, with Angel's anarchic feelings as a source of energy. Her assertiveness points forward to the challenging heroines of Angela Carter's subversive fairy tales in *The Bloody Chamber*, which appeared in 1979. Carter's prose reveals a comparable appetite for the destructive. The mushrooms in 'The Erl-King' are both savoured and deathly:

⁶⁴⁷ Sigmund Freud, 'The Moses of Michelangelo' (1914), in *The Standard Edition of the Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, XIII, ed. and trans. by James Strachey (Vintage: London, 2001), pp. 211-36 (p. 212).

⁶⁴⁸ May, ed., note to 'Angel Boley', *Collected Poems*, p. 777.

⁶⁴⁹ 'The House of Over-Dew', *Collected Poems*, p. 637-43.

⁶⁵⁰ Draft of 'Angel Boley' (undated). Tulsa Archive, 1976.012.2.5.9.2.002.

⁶⁵¹ J. R. R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (London, Unwin, 1964), p. 60.

He knows which of the frilled, blotched, rotted fungi are fit to eat; he understands their eldritch ways, how they spring up overnight in lightless places and thrive on dead things.⁶⁵²

Carter's swift tonal change is comparable to Smith's alert instability; the harmless-sounding 'frilled' gives way to the unsavoury 'blotched, rotted' and finally to the sinister 'dead things'. Such is the secretive, ambivalent force of mushrooms. Freud, also aware of their symbolic power, likens to a mushroom growing out of the meshwork of its mycelium, the passage resistant to interpretation in a dream, otherwise fully analysed. From the mycelium the dream-wish may eventually develop: 'It is at some point where this meshwork is particularly close that the dream-wish grows up, like a mushroom out of its mycelium.'⁶⁵³ In 'Angel Boley', the mushrooms also emerge at the critical point.

Angel commits her act of vengeance determinedly. The accompanying three drawings (Figures 8, 9 and 10), however, indicate a more ambivalent stance. Two of the three drawings might represent Angel herself, each portraying a single female figure. The first of these



Figure 9



Figure 10

⁶⁵² Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), pp. 84-91 (p. 86).

⁶⁵³ Sigmund Freud, 'The Interpretation of Dreams: First Part' (1900), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, V, ed. and trans. by James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), p. 525.

(Figure 9) presents a woman in motion, her body pointing in one direction as if in quick and eager motion. She is wearing a small hat with feathers to its side, suggesting flight. Hats often denote a feeling of liberation in Smith's poems.⁶⁵⁴ Here, however, the woman's face is looking the other way, out towards the reader, as if she is quickly pausing, on the alert. In the drawing opposite the poem's final page (Figure 10), a younger-looking woman or girl is seated. She holds, almost as a shield, an oval-shape, perhaps a stone, that has partly obliterated her. Her face is mournful, ill-looking. At variance with this, her large hat with its long feathers suggests potential vitality, energy. Her raised arm might be that of an angel gesturing 'Behold! She seems ready to walk, one heel raised. This drawing indicates both animation and suspended animation. To return to the first accompanying drawing of the two children (Figure 8), the girl figure looks active, focused on the possible stone she is holding, and away from the despondent, inactive child behind her. I am reminded of the polarities of despair and anarchy as presented in Smith's earlier poem 'To Carry the Child', the poem in which she presents the two facets of an emotional predicament with which she engages very completely.⁶⁵⁵ 'Angel Boley' itself gives vent to more anarchic behaviour while the law intervenes to provide a different view.

b) Religion and morality

Stevie Smith was well aware that fairy tale and religion overlap in some essentials. Both are concerned with the polarities of good and evil, and with human cruelty. Both contain wonders, both have an interest in punishment and redemption, and make potent use of symbolism. It is not unusual for religion to play an overt part in a fairy tale, in the stories of Hans Andersen and Oscar Wilde, for instance. In her questioning long poem 'How do you see?' (preceding 'Angel Boley' in the same posthumous collection), Smith displays intellectual rigour and fierceness of argument.⁶⁵⁶ She asks: 'How do you see the Holy Spirit of God?' She then exposes the idea of the Holy Ghost as 'a beautiful fairy story' that she considers harmful if taken literally. 'Angel Boley' explores, and partially subverts, ideas of Christian morality.

⁶⁵⁴ See, for example, 'The Hat', *Collected Poems* (2015), p. 313: 'And when I am married I shall wear my hat and walk on the palace wall'.

⁶⁵⁵ 'To Carry the Child', *Collected Poems*, p. 505.

⁶⁵⁶ 'How do you see?', *Collected Poems*, pp. 596-601.

As we have seen, as a child Stevie Smith enjoyed the religion about which, as an adult, she was to become so ambivalent. Speaking of this ambivalence to John Horder in the 1963 BBC interview, Smith commented on both religion's necessity, and its impossibility:

But to have somebody interested in one, even if only to damn one, as against this huge ... indifferent universe. Man must have religion: how can he get on without it? And yet he must have to get on without it, you see.⁶⁵⁷

She wondered about the limits of God's mercy and disputed how a God of Love could condemn even the most wicked person to eternal punishment. In conversation with Kay Dick in 1970, a year after she had been working on 'Angel Boley', Smith reflected despairingly, 'I think one feels that this ultimate good, God, has abdicated his power in this world.'⁶⁵⁸

The concept of evil in 'Angel Boley' is connected with Angel's crime and with the crimes that were originally committed by her husband and mother. In popular opinion, the 'moors murderers' were considered *evil*. In Smith's poem and in the original crimes, murderers are punished. The descriptive naming of Smith's characters underlines the poem's morality. As well as 'Angel', there is also 'Hark' (rhymed here with 'Dark'), Smith playing with the imperative connotations of this unusual name; it is as if he, and the reader (and Angel herself), must listen out for evil. Malady Festing's name suggests something sick and festering, in an individual and more broadly, perhaps, in humankind.

Angel, in Smith's poem, becomes, an avenging angel who kills and declares authoritatively: 'I am the Angel of Death'. A strong Angel is one evocation of Stevie Smith's fierce Muse: 'She is Thetis and Hermes, the Angel, the white horse and the landscape.'⁶⁵⁹ Smith draws on the warlike power of biblical angels, commissioned by God to punish and destroy in a moral cause, as in Revelation 9.15, for example: 'And the four angels were loosed, which were prepared for an hour, and a day, and a month, and a year, for to slay the third part of men.'⁶⁶⁰ A pronouncement from an angel could be terrifying. In Revelation 10.3, the angel 'cried with a loud voice, as when a lion roareth: and when he had cried, seven thunders uttered their voices'.⁶⁶¹ Angels feature in several of Smith's poems, one of their roles being that of presiding over, or beckoning the poet-persona to, the release of death. In an earlier poem

⁶⁵⁷ Smith interviewed by John Horder, 1963, pp. 1-12 (p. 3). BBC Written Archives, HS.2.63.

⁶⁵⁸ Dick, *Ivy and Stevie*, p. 71.

⁶⁵⁹ Smith, 'My Muse', p. 126.

⁶⁶⁰ *The Bible*, Revelation, 9.15.

⁶⁶¹ *The Bible*, Revelation, 10.3.

‘From the Coptic’, for example, also conjuring an ‘Angel of Death’, Smith wrote: ‘I am Death, said the angel, and death is the end’, to which Smith has Man respond gratefully: ‘I am Man, cries clay rising, and you are my friend.’⁶⁶² A development in ‘Angel Boley’ is that the poem’s human protagonist *becomes* the ‘Angel of Death’, taking on its role. In embodying its power, Smith is able to enjoy the instinctual impulse, its avenging, destructive force.

Angel’s avenging act in the poem was lawless; in ‘civilised’ society we are not supposed to ‘take the law into our own hands’ in this way. She “did evil that good / Might come”, but she is punished, her behaviour cannot be sanctioned. The poem’s moral complexity culminates in the gravity of its closing plea ‘May God be merciful’, perhaps an echo of the opening of Psalm 57: ‘Be merciful unto me, O God’. These words are also, in Britain, associated historically with the law courts and the passing of the death sentence, with the appeal to God as the highest judicial authority: ‘May God have mercy on your soul.’ (The death penalty was abolished in Britain in 1965, the year before Brady and Hindley were sentenced to life imprisonment.) Smith’s use of this phrase, so weighty in its context, is reminiscent of Milton’s description in ‘Paradise Lost’ that, because of the scale and force of the battle of good and evil, the world is ‘Under her own weight groaning’.⁶⁶³ On a smaller scale, Smith’s achievement in her narrative poem, drawing on a Christian morality that she partly undercuts, is considerable. The poem asks, rather than answers, questions. For Angel Boley herself, for the ‘wicked’ pair in Smith’s poem, for the cruelty of the ‘moors murderers’ and for humankind’s sins or wrongdoings, for the destructiveness in our natures, can there be mercy? What is mercy in a human, as well as a religious, sense? Will God be merciful where we cannot be? Has a virtuous and forgiving God been ‘a player’ in the poem? How far is the voice that utters ‘May God be merciful’ the poet’s voice invoking God? In ‘Angel Boley’ Smith interweaves, dynamically, strands of good and evil, justice and mercy, belief and doubt.

⁶⁶² Smith, *Collected Poems*, p. 323.

⁶⁶³ Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Book XII, line 539. *The English Poems of John Milton*, ed. by H.C., intro. by Charles Williams (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 382. An excerpt from *Paradise Lost* (‘Now Came Still Evening On’) is included by Smith in *The Batsford Book of Children’s Verse* which she edited in 1970.

The poem is a complex example of how, for Stevie Smith, God was frequently a point of reference although she questioned religion intensely. This is apparent in her final poem 'Come, Death (2)' in which Death, not God, is the saviour:

I'd ask God to have pity on me,
But I turn to the one I know, and say:
Come, Death, and carry me away.⁶⁶⁴

Death, in this poem, is 'the only god', all that can be proven, and the only god who will come when called; the paradox is that Smith likens 'sweet Death' to a god, making Death sacred.

The final word of 'Angel Boley' is the loaded 'merciful'. Smith brings the poem to a resonant end with a line consisting of two complete short sentences, the first quoting the words of the grateful villagers that appeared on Angel's tombstone in appreciation of her lawless act: 'She did evil that good might come'. The other is the religious plea in a voice that is only in part the poet's: 'May God be merciful'. In the early draft of the poem, Smith continued this ending with lines she later omitted:

And not allow the cruel saying of unmerciful men to be proved true:
That in the life hereafter, the punishment of evil doers will be
To be closely confined
In the company of those they have done evil to. (May
Keep us, God, from the folly of our dears.)⁶⁶⁵

Beneath these typed lines are barely legible penned words that I decipher as 'May God be merciful to us all.' Finally, however, Smith chose to end 'Angel Boley' with the single, cadenced, suggestive line. While creating a sense of closure, it sends the reader back into her searching poem. In Part II, I shall show how such features of 'Angel Boley', such as this deft touch with complex or difficult raw material, suggested an approach to my writing of my poetry sequence *Fairoz*.

II The making of *Fairoz*

I shall now show, through the example of my own poetry collection *Fairoz*, how Stevie Smith has served as a source of inspiration for a contemporary poet, in a comparable way to, for example, how Elizabeth Bishop has been cited as opening up possibilities for 'New

⁶⁶⁴ 'Come, Death (2)', *Collected Poems*, p. 658.

⁶⁶⁵ Draft of 'Angel Boley'. Tulsa Archive, 1976.012.2.5.9.2.002.

Generation Poets' of the 1990s.⁶⁶⁶ I am keen to counteract any notion that Smith is too 'idiosyncratic' to serve in this way. Although Stevie Smith has been an important poet for me since, as a teenager in the early 1970s, I first encountered her poems in the Penguin Modern Poets series, I had never, until now, written poetry directly inspired by her work.⁶⁶⁷ As I have indicated, however, she was an important forerunner of subsequent influential twentieth-century poets. Plath, for example, who was a fervent admirer of her work, may well have been influenced by the older poet's use of personae and myth to convey the personal. It is also likely that Smith's poetry would have been an important precursor, for instance, to the dramatic monologue in Carol Ann Duffy's work. I was initially attracted, for the poetry-writing aspect of my thesis, to Smith's theme of religious ambivalence and her preoccupation with the cruelty committed in religion's name, a cruelty that she perceived as an abiding, intrinsic element of the Christian religion. It struck me that her exposure of this ruthlessness has a contemporary resonance with the cruel acts carried out in the twenty-first century, in the name of, for instance, Islam. My idea was to draw on aspects of religion and morality in my own British/Pakistani background in an exploration of the attraction, for some, of violent extremism.

Another important aspect of Stevie Smith's work which is echoed in my sequence *Fairoz* is Smith's broad human sympathies and concern for those whom society stigmatises. Experiencing a sense of being an outsider herself, she was sympathetic to marginalised and alienated others. In her poem 'Valuable', for instance, she considered unmarried girls to whom babies were born, babies who were termed in the 1960s when this poem was published 'illegitimate'. She asks of the girls: 'Why do you not put some value on yourselves, / Learn to say, No?''⁶⁶⁸ As Smith does for the alienated, I give Fairoz a voice. My aim was to bring some understanding to this imagined schoolgirl who experiences both societal racism and emotional coldness at home, is susceptible to online grooming and becomes drawn to extremism. In 'Angel Boley', Smith is concerned with perpetrators, as well as victims, of inhuman acts, and I also show such concern in *Fairoz*.

Fairoz includes Islamic symbols, such as that of 'the stoning of the devil', a ritual of the Hajj pilgrimage, alongside symbols from Western fairy tales. This juxtaposing gives an echo of

⁶⁶⁶ As discussed in my thesis Introduction, pp. 9-10.

⁶⁶⁷ Smith, in *Penguin Modern Poets* 8.

⁶⁶⁸ 'Valuable', *Collected Poems*, pp. 518-19.

the fragmented and, in some respects, alienating post-colonial environment which Fairouz, growing up as a Muslim girl in Britain, experiences. Hers is a position which might well have resonated with Smith who felt culturally and psychologically an outsider to the norms of British life in the mid-century. As her novels in particular make clear, Smith was fearful of state control, and against what she called ‘national arrogance’.⁶⁶⁹ Through the characters in *The Holiday* (first published in 1949, two years after India regained Independence) she explored and critiqued imperialism as an aspect of human oppression and possessiveness. That she was critical of colonialism is also suggested by her poems ‘A Shooting Incident’ and ‘Under Wrong Trees... or Freeing the Colonial Peoples’.

a) Cultural sensitivities

Fairoz has been written, and will be published, at a time of heightened cultural sensitivities.⁶⁷⁰ The recent autumn 2021 issue of the journal *PN Review* comments on this in its editorial: ‘This an age of manifest – and manifested sensitivities. We are alerted to cultural, sexual and medical improprieties of expression [...] Magazines, newspapers, books and social media are now commonly in the firing line’.⁶⁷¹ The editorial highlights the need for contemporary writing and publishing to become more deeply reflective in order to counter possible forms of racism, ableism, sexism and homophobia, transphobia and Islamophobia, for example. I was aware of the necessity to avoid any inadvertent wounding of cultural sensitivities, particularly as regards my portrayal of Islam in *Fairoz*. Adrienne Rich identified a similar period of awakening consciousness, particularly with regard to feminism, in her 1972 essay ‘When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision’.⁶⁷² Rich was aware that it was both inspiring and risky to write at such a time: ‘It’s exhilarating to be alive in a time of awakening consciousness; it can also be confusing, disorientating and painful.’⁶⁷³ She felt that she needed a strategy, and that for her, formalism was an important part of it: ‘like

⁶⁶⁹ See the ending of Smith’s *Over the Frontier*, p. 272.

⁶⁷⁰ MA, *Fairoz* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2022)

⁶⁷¹ Michael Schmidt and John McAuliffe, Editorial, *PNR (Poetry Nation Review)*, 48.1 (2021), pp. 1-2 (p. 1). This editorial discussion was prompted by media responses to the work of poet, anthologist and teacher Kate Clanchy who, in the words of the editorial, ‘unmaliciously, but carelessly’ used epithets in her book *Some Kids I Taught and What They Taught Me* that ‘propagated racial and other stereotypes’.

⁶⁷² Adrienne Rich, ‘When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision’, in *Essential Essays: Culture, Politics and the Art of Poetry* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2018), pp. 3-19.

⁶⁷³ Rich, p. 3.

asbestos gloves, it allowed me to handle materials I couldn't pick up barehanded'.⁶⁷⁴ I too felt the need for the contemporary equivalent of asbestos gloves for approaching my potentially flammable raw material of a teenage girl vulnerable to extremism.

The area of writing has an element of cultural resonance with me in that I was born in Pakistan and grew up in the UK with mixed parentage, an English mother and a Pakistani father. With a Muslim father, other Muslim relatives and Muslim family friends, I have some insights into some of the cultural pressures and conflicts that Muslim girls might feel, including the experience of racial prejudice. Important to this writing, also, were my many years of full-time teaching of girls, some of whom were from Muslim backgrounds, in an inner-city comprehensive school. I am also, however, exploring through *Fairoz* what is little known to me so as to gain a better understanding.

Fairoz is not poetry of witness and it does not pretend to be so. I have been transparent and framed the sequence as an imaginative work. Nevertheless, it was important that my approach was a well-informed one. To this end, I carried out as much research as possible, to include extensive reading of newspaper articles, journalistic and other non-fiction books, novels, plays and government anti-terrorism information. Drawing a portrait of an adolescent and asking how far we can understand and be merciful, I am presenting imagination and empathy as an ethical necessity. I am also concerned with how world views that might seem incomprehensible can be activated and positions adopted.

b) Beginning *Fairoz*

Ideas alone do not make poems, however, and I was not able to focus immediately on this territory in my poetry writing or to find 'a way in'. Instead, I spent the summer of 2018 immersing myself in *The Collected Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith* (2015) and responding with some poems of my own on a variety of themes. I enjoyed this writing, and Smith's poems seemed to invite an immediate response, a poetic dialogue in which I could take part. I knew, however, that these early attempts were too derivative of Smith and far from my original idea of drawing on Smith's religious ambivalence. In retrospect, however, I feel that this early writing was valuable. It helped me to engage with Smith's poems

⁶⁷⁴ Rich, p. 9.

intimately, acquainting myself closely with features of her style, her use of full rhyme, for instance, her strong and often irregular rhythms, the conversation and argument of her poems.

In October of that year, rereading a newspaper story of 28 June 2018 with the headline ‘Teenage girl guilty of planning gun attack on British Museum’, I was inspired to return to my original proposal for poetry writing, and to place at the heart of a series of poems an imagined schoolgirl, susceptible to extremism.⁶⁷⁵ That the teenager in the news, Safaar Boular, had lived with her mother, and that her sister had also been implicated in the plotting, reminded me of Stevie Smith’s poem, arising partly from her childhood circumstances, ‘A House of Mercy’, beginning ‘It was a house of female habitation’. It is a house that Smith is to describe as ‘at heart / A house of mercy’.⁶⁷⁶ I started to make a ‘plan’, very provisional and skeletal, for my poetry writing – that I would produce a sequence of poems to show different aspects and varied poetic responses to my imagined schoolgirl’s story. Apart from the configuration of the house of three women in Smith’s poem, I was also interested in the idea of mercy. I did not want my poetic response to my chosen theme to be all terror and horror; I also wished to consider the concept of mercy and to show some understanding of the predicament of a vulnerable teenager.

Initially it was Smith’s bold questioning in her late discursive poem ‘How do you see?’ that provided the stimulus for the idea of *Fairoz*. Here, Smith asked probing questions about the Christian religion and the Christian God, to include ‘Can perfection be less than perfection? / Can the Creator of the Devil be bested by him?’⁶⁷⁷ She predicts the extreme danger of an unquestioning adherence to what she perceives as religious ‘fairy stories’; that ‘armed as we are now, we shall kill everybody / It will be too much for us, we shall kill everybody’. It was, however, ‘Angel Boley’ with its potent blend of religion and fairy tale, written partly in response to the Moors Murders of the 1960s, that provided the key to how I might embark on my sequence.⁶⁷⁸ I was able to see how, in ‘Angel Boley’, Smith made the source material of

⁶⁷⁵ Nadia Khomani, ‘How London teenager plotted attacks with all-female terror cell’, *Guardian*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/jun/04/teenage-girl-boular-guilty-plotting-terror-attack-london-british-museum>> [accessed 11 November 2021].

⁶⁷⁶ ‘A House of Mercy’, *Collected Poems*, p. 476-78. Smith’s ‘house’ in the poem is one of ‘warmth’ and ‘expecting strength’; it is ‘at heart / A house of mercy’. In the poem’s accompanying drawing, the house is leaning and propped up, indicating its fragility. Smith would, presumably, have been aware of the connotations of a ‘House of Mercy’ as ‘a charitable institution for lodging, retrieving, or reclaiming those in distress or disgrace’: *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. “house of mercy”. <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/house%20of%20mercy>> [accessed 18 March 2022].

⁶⁷⁷ ‘How do you see?’ *Collected Poems*, pp. 596-601.

⁶⁷⁸ ‘Angel Boley’ *Collected Poems*, pp. 610-14.

the Moors Murders part of her personal vision, and thus how far a poem could ‘take off’ from its origins in a publicly known, notorious event. Fairy tale, with its broad application to human emotions and predicaments, and its adaptability, was central to Smith’s approach. I thought that, likewise, I could make it integral to *Fairoz*. At the same time as gaining inspiration from Stevie Smith’s poems, I was also beginning to imagine Fairoz as a girl I might have taught, and this helped me to develop some sympathy for her and some understanding of her predicament.

A fabular approach as a response to a public event was one that I had undertaken in a small way in a series of twelve short poems published in 2008 and written after 9/11.⁶⁷⁹ ‘Angel Boley’, however, indicated to me just how forcefully fairy tale might be drawn on and integrated into a capacious poem or poem sequence, reflective as much as narrative, and with questions of religion and morality at its core. Far from whimsical, fairy tales can be strong and robust. What appealed to me was that fairy tale, as Smith shows, has the element of serious play, through which writer and reader can attempt to process tough concerns. This element of play, even of delight, would I hoped, help to bring a vibrant world of imagination to the unpalatable nature of my raw material. I also thought that fairy tale would help to lend a timeless quality to the writing, while also allowing an updating to incorporate aspects of the modern world and the concerns of our time. Within a contemporary fairytale atmosphere, for instance, Fairoz could have a mobile phone – or even be invited by a woman in a wood to sew a suicide vest. I hoped that fairy tale would help to give a kind of beauty to a dark terrain, while also helping to counter the danger of putting my own customary words and thoughts into a teenager of my own invention. An approach via fairy tale’s mythic structure would help to provide a shield, an equivalent of Adrienne Rich’s ‘asbestos gloves’, to help me handle *Fairoz*. An important aspect of fairy tales is that they, and the matters they address, belong to all of us, and I felt that this would help give validity to my approach. I would incorporate into my sequence elements of familiar fairy stories, such as ‘Red Riding Hood’ and ‘The Snow Queen’, while making them my own. This transformation of the familiar stories would be part of the pleasure of the writing. Part of the attraction of fairy tales, on which I wanted to draw, as Marina Warner highlights, is their deeply sensuous quality and its impact on the reader:

⁶⁷⁹ MA, *How the Stone Found Its Voice* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2005), pp. 9-20.

the symbolism comes alive and communicates meaning through imagery of strong contrasts and sensations, evoking simple, sensuous phenomena that glint and sparkle, pierce and flow, by these means striking recognition in the reader or listener's body at a visceral depth.⁶⁸⁰

With the fabular as a major part of it, my sequence would take place on the boundary of what was real and what was not, with the unreal, I hoped, illuminating the real.

c) Initial research

At the outset of *Fairoz*, I visited the British Museum's Albukhary Foundation Gallery of the Islamic World, which, timely for my work, opened in 2018. I was struck by a piece of contemporary artwork by Idris Khan, his '21 Stones', inspired by the Muslim ritual of 'the stoning of the devil' which takes place annually at Mecca.⁶⁸¹ This exhibit consisted of a scattered formation of 'stones' stamped with blue oil-paint on the gallery wall in a splattering of star-shapes, each one depicting, in tiny print, a poem of the artist's. Khan's installation suggested one of the starting points of my own sequence, a poem 'Driving the devil away' in which the devil is personified: 'He had to be stoned repeatedly. / The problem was the devil wouldn't die.'⁶⁸² Eventually, I would place this poem first in the sequence.

As background reading for my initial sections of *Fairoz*, I began to make a dossier of related newspaper articles on topics of radicalisation and race. Key texts included those of verbatim documentary theatre, a form of theatre composed of the words of real people. I read the play script of Gillian Slovo's *Another World: Losing Our Children To Islamic State*.⁶⁸³ Slovo spent many months researching Islamic State, meeting people affected by the organisation and involved in combatting it. I also read Robin Soans's *Talking To Terrorists*, another example of verbatim documentary theatre in this Oberon series of plays.⁶⁸⁴ In Soane's work, wanting to learn what made people commit extremist acts, writer and actors interviewed people from around the world who had been involved in terrorism. Saheeda Warsi's *The Enemy Within* also provided important background material in its portrait of a diversity of

⁶⁸⁰ Warner, p. xxi.

⁶⁸¹ Idris Khan, '21 Stones' <<http://islamicworld.britishmuseum.org/audio/23>> [accessed 11 November 2021]

⁶⁸² 'Driving the devil away', *Fairoz*, p. 5.

⁶⁸³ Gillian Slovo, *Another World: Losing Our Children To Islamic State* (London: Oberon Books, 2016).

⁶⁸⁴ Robin Soans, *Talking To Terrorists* (London: Oberon, 2005).

British Muslims and its highlighting of a range of reasons that might draw people to extremism.⁶⁸⁵ I read novels, for example Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*, that portrayed boldly and convincingly how young people could become caught up in extremist acts.⁶⁸⁶ In his many-angled narrative of the short, densely packed novel *The Association of Small Bombs*, Karan Mahajan portrays a wide range of lives variously affected by violent extremism.⁶⁸⁷

d) Developing the sequence

'Angel Boley' helped to suggest a range of registers and tones that I could use in a single series of poems. While beginning in fairytale mode ('Once there was a wicked woman'), Smith's poem, as I have shown, slides between different kinds of language; the colloquial, for example ('it is time / To take another couple of children / Into our kitchen'); the scientific of the 'A. Phalloides mushrooms'; and the biblical final plea, or prayer 'May God be merciful.' This tonal variety was a departure for me from my previous poetry sequences which had been, tonally, on a comparatively single note, the poems of the one register.

From the outset, I thought that *Fairoz* might take the form of a kind of collaging, and that the thinking of the poem could wander in various directions. The sequence as a whole would, I envisaged, have a narrative backbone, rather in the way that 'Angel Boley' has a narrative backbone, without being a solely narrative poem. I was keen for my imagined Fairoz to be an intelligent, strong-willed teenager. I wanted the sequence to be fairly open-ended in terms of her future, rather than to end completely negatively, without hope. Despite the darkness of the topic, I envisaged the poetry as lively and various, so as to sustain my own interest and enjoyment of experimenting, and, in part, as a response to the liveliness of Smith's poetry, despite its dark and mournful aspects. My aim was for a book-length sequence, anticipating that it might be possible to achieve this with a many-faceted approach to the theme.

I decided that I would draft the poems in groups, poems that would, I hoped, be various and 'bounce off', or be energised by, each other, with juxtaposition an important aspect of the sequence. I began to aim for a prismatic effect of a blend of tonally diverse material within the sections. Eventually, I would draw on more realist modes of writing as well as on the fabular. I would also draw on theatre and the novel, in addition to the poetic tradition. I

⁶⁸⁵ Saheeda Warsi, *The Enemy Within: A Tale of Muslim Britain* (London: Penguin, 2018).

⁶⁸⁶ Kamila Shamsie, *Home Fire* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

⁶⁸⁷ Karan Mahajan, *The Association of Small Bombs* (London: Vintage, 2016).

thought that the book might comprise about ten groups of poems. In preparation for each group, I would carry out as much research as possible and then aim to produce a first draft of the section over a period of a few weeks. I would then return frequently to work on these initial drafts. Each group of poems represented a different time period in the sequence and the stages in Fairoz's involvement with Tahir, and each had its own atmosphere.

At first I gave the sections overall headings and numbers. This was useful for perceiving each group of poems as distinct and helping me to negotiate my way through the 'forest' of the sequence. A late editorial decision, however, was to insert a blank page between each section to further emphasise the stages of events, and I removed the section numbers and titles in a move towards greater simplicity. These blank pages help to suggest the sequence as a constellation of moments, while also emphasising stages in the narrative and in the characters' thinking. Although the sequence has a story-telling backbone, it is, ultimately, reflective, as much as narrative. The poems are placed one to a page even when very short, and this makes for a large amount of white space in the collection, in addition to the blank pages. Breathing space is provided so that a reader can digest the implications of thoughts and events. Also, this glancing quality of the sequence emphasises, in contrast to the steadier, or head-on stare of a poetry of witness, that which cannot be known, as opposed to that which has been personally observed or endured. A light touch, echoing the light touch of Stevie Smith's poems, as well as being my own generally preferred mode, seemed fitting. Smith remarked in a 1970 radio interview that her poems were 'deeply serious' yet 'simply cast'.⁶⁸⁸ I wanted to characterise my sequence as having a Calvino-esque light touch: 'of literature as an existential function, the search for lightness as a reaction to the weight of living'.⁶⁸⁹

As in Stevie Smith's poetry, I began to combine aspects of religion, morality and fairy tale. A key poem 'In the present tense' in the opening group featured the internet as a wood, the place where Fairoz would encounter Tahir, the man with extremist views. Here she would find out more about violent extremism and why, as she said, 'people do what they do'.⁶⁹⁰ Vulnerable, as well as explorative, a kind of Red Riding Hood, 'She sets off down the paths // without so much as a basket.' This 'internet wood' was to become a motif through the sequence. Another poem 'Indoors' in the initial section, presents the mother of Fairoz and her

⁶⁸⁸ Smith, 'Poet Talking', BBC 'Woman's Hour', 16 February, 1970. Quoted in Spalding, p. 277.

⁶⁸⁹ Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 26.

⁶⁹⁰ 'In the present tense', *Fairoz*, p. 6.

sister, Annat, as ‘a version of the Snow Queen’.⁶⁹¹ The emotional coldness of the girls’ home became a contributing feature of Fairoz’s wish to change her life. I did not, however, wish to lay ‘blame’ with the mother for Fairoz’s involvement with Tahir, and it was partly for this reason that she and her younger sister were to develop in the sequence as having different responses to the idea of ‘doing good’ in the name of Allah, with Fairoz drawn to extremism and Annat to charitable activity.

In the second group of poems, I added new aspects to the collaging, including, for instance, a poem ‘The Devil’s soup’ that depicted a conversation between God and the Devil as folkloric characters.⁶⁹² These short poems featuring God and the Devil, often in conversation, act as a kind of chorus, a thread partly inspired by Smith’s dialogue poems, particularly ‘God and the Devil’ in her first collection *A Good Time Was Had By All* (1937). This poem questions the Christian myth of creation and begins ‘God and the Devil / were talking one day / Ages and ages of years ago.’⁶⁹³ My own folkloric poems involving God and the Devil became a way of touching on issues of good and evil throughout *Fairoz*, while also lending, I hoped, a wry touch to a dark subject. I aimed to keep the sequence buoyant by introducing into each group of poems some work that was unexpected in form or approach.

With the third group of poems I had to make a decision about how I was to convey the narrative element of the collection. I decided that I did not want to develop *Fairoz* as an elaborate narrative, nor did I want to have to describe features of the ‘internet wood’ as the setting every time Fairoz and Tahir had a conversation. I decided that one way to advance the narrative, as well as the thinking element in the sequence, was to introduce brief, strategic pieces of dialogue between Fairoz and Tahir. I set these out as a play script (although simply and without stage directions) and positioned them lower on the page and to the right, to convey the dialogue as if overheard. I had the opportunity, at an early stage of writing *Fairoz*, to see Nyla Levy’s dynamic *Does My Bomb Look Big In This?* in its 2019 West End production.⁶⁹⁴ Levy’s drama also featured the susceptibility of an unhappy and disaffected teenage girl to extremism. On reading the play script afterwards, I was struck by how incisive the exchanges were between Levy’s characters and how each exchange contributed to the play’s action. This proved a useful exemplar. With conflict at the heart of my sequence, it

⁶⁹¹ ‘Indoors’, *Fairoz*, p. 7.

⁶⁹² ‘The Devil’s soup’, *Fairoz*, p. 15.

⁶⁹³ ‘God and the Devil’, *Collected Poems*, p. 26.

⁶⁹⁴ Nyla Levy, *Does My Bomb Look Big In This?* (London: Methuen, 2019).

seemed natural to incorporate this aspect of theatre. I came to think of these snatches of dialogue as activity taking place at the edge of the poem, a little in the way that Smith's drawings provide an oblique commentary on her poems or suggest another dimension.

In the summer of 2019, I was pleased to be invited to write a group of poems for a Southall Black Sisters' publication *Turning the Page*, in response to stories written by women 'survivors' who had been helped by the organisation.⁶⁹⁵ I wrote the poem 'Ripe', in which girls wanted to be independent in choosing their partners, partly with *Fairoz* in mind, and I included it in the sequence.⁶⁹⁶ This invitation was timely. Reading the women's stories, which often portrayed very chaotic, traumatic lives, as well as informal conversation after the readings about the organisation's work, enlarged my understanding of the tough family circumstances of the women who received support from Southall Black Sisters. The experience of the event at which the writers of the stories read their poems was influential in that afterwards I tended to opt for more powerful language in my sequence of poems. In 'It was long ago', for instance, I wrote that the mother 'forced' a piece of ice into her daughter's hand, rather than the milder 'pushed' that I had at first contemplated.⁶⁹⁷

I was aware, however, of the limits of my knowledge of the characters and events I was portraying. Increasingly, although without weighing the poem down with self-consciousness, I wanted to make this awareness an aspect of the writing, to emphasise that the sequence was, foremost, a work of the imagination and to include, within the poem, the risks and inadequacies that this involved. The final poem 'My imagined Fairoz' stressed this limitation and the fact that I had followed this teenage girl, in my imagination, further than I really could.⁶⁹⁸ I decided to preface the whole sequence with the question in this final poem: 'How far can I follow her / my imagined Fairoz..?' In a related vein, to emphasise the large part played by the imagination in the sequence, I added two further poems. I positioned 'Listening to Fairoz and Tahir' in the third group of poems when I first started to incorporate, as if 'to overhear', the snatches of dialogue between Fairoz and Tahir.⁶⁹⁹ I tried to show the kind of 'eavesdropping' process that this was and that it could only result in an approximation of

⁶⁹⁵ *Turning the Page: Writings from Southall Black Sisters Survivors Group*, ed. by Rahila Gupta (London, Southall Black Sisters publications, 2019). Southall Black Sisters is an organisation established in 1979 to meet the needs of Black (Asian and Caribbean) women in challenging gender-related violence against women and empowering them to take more control over their lives.

⁶⁹⁶ 'Ripe', *Fairoz*, p. 33.

⁶⁹⁷ 'It was long ago', *Fairoz*, p. 46.

⁶⁹⁸ 'My imagined Fairoz', *Fairoz*, p. 94.

⁶⁹⁹ 'Listening to Fairoz and Tahir', *Fairoz*, p. 24.

what might have been said. Another self-reflexive poem of this kind is ‘What runs under her skin’, which prefaces the first of several (italicised) pieces in which I convey Fairoz’s inner thoughts.⁷⁰⁰ Even attempting to convey Fairoz’s deeper thoughts and feelings directly was not something I would have felt able to do in the initial groups of poems, but through the writing I felt that I was getting to know my imagined Fairoz better – that, increasingly, she was becoming ‘her own entity’ and leading the way. In ‘What runs under her skin’, however, I portray how, in a sense, this imagining was an impossibility for me. I could only attempt to let her thoughts unfold by listening closely for some similitude of ‘her’ voice, and my attempts at conveying her thoughts could only be provisional, a ‘something like’.⁷⁰¹

Voice is multiple or fractured in *Fairoz*, as in Smith’s multi-vocal poetry. The sequence includes various narrative voices: an authorial voice denoting fairy tale, for instance; a more personal authorial note of reflection; the narrative voice splintered into the voices of Fairoz and Tahir; an authorial ‘voicing’ of Fairoz’s thoughts; and the imagined exchanges of God and the Devil – all these ‘voices’, both mine and not mine. I have included two vocal pieces that are, to a strong degree, found poems. The first, ‘Pilgrims’, comprising the voices of pilgrims at Hajj, is composed of variants on, for instance, ‘Hajj Stories’ from the British Museum’s exhibition: Hajj: Journeys to the heart of Islam’.⁷⁰² ‘Witnesses’, a second predominantly ‘found’ poem towards the end of the sequence, mirrors ‘Pilgrims’ in its form and layout, and was derived from numerous newspaper accounts of terrorist attacks.⁷⁰³ These poems with their direct realism proved to be pivotal to the sequence.

As I continued with the groups of poems, my investigations expanded to include reading government documents on countering violent extremism. This later research also incorporated watching brief police videos alerting the public about what to look out for in terms of suspicious activity. One of these videos was to form the basis of the poem ‘The eye’, which features a close circuit television and suspicious behaviour in a hardware shop.⁷⁰⁴ This government material was helpful also in indicating areas that might be best avoided in my writing of *Fairoz*, in that they would open up large areas of police or court activity that would

⁷⁰⁰ ‘What runs under her skin’, *Fairoz*, p. 35.

⁷⁰¹ ‘What runs under her skin’, *Fairoz*, p. 35.

⁷⁰² *Fairoz*, ‘Pilgrims’, p. 26. ‘Hajj Stories’, from the British Museum’s exhibition: ‘Hajj: Journey to the heart of Islam’, 26 January-15 April, 2012

<<https://britishmuseumblog.wordpress.com/2011/10/27/hajj-journey-to-the-heart-of-islam/>> [accessed 11 November, 2021]

⁷⁰³ ‘Witnesses’, *Fairoz*, p. 80.

⁷⁰⁴ ‘The eye’, *Fairoz*, p. 74.

have been difficult for the sequence to encompass without overbalancing the narrative component. I wanted to end the poetry with Fairoz's reflections and with her own questions in the air as to her future.

Fairoz is an attempt to convey aspects of the story of an imagined teenage girl, and I was keen to end the sequence on the note of following her 'further than I can'. Suggested, in part, by Smith's dual concern with cruelty and religion, these poems were certainly facilitated by my reading of her poetry, and while I did not wish to try to imitate her, I was clearly inspired, if to an extent unconsciously, by her swift tonal changes, her variety, her lightness of touch, and performative sense of voice and voices. I am pleased if, in writing this collection, I have managed to keep a dark terrain buoyant. Thus, Smith served as an important source of inspiration for me, an enabler (as she has been for Plath and Duffy, for example), and it is hoped that she may continue to be so for other poets.

III Some concluding thoughts

Clearly there are different ways in which a poet can be one of stature. In Stevie Smith's case, the breadth of the anthologising of a wide variety of her poems attests to her value.

Collectively, her anthologised poems constitute a robust, if to an extent secret, life of her poetry. In her lifetime Smith came to be especially appreciated as a performer of her work. In the early twenty-first century, there has been an increase in the scholarly investigation of her poetry. Her poetry has always had its admirers. It is evident, however, that her overall status as a 'poet's poet' in the poetry world and beyond is not at the level it should be. As a legacy of the sexism of her lifetime, there is still a certain amount of condescension towards her work, a lack of knowledge about it, along with a lack of realisation of the scope and depth of her achievement. This legacy was encapsulated for me, particularly, in the rather tentative review of the landmark *The Collected Poems* (2015) in *The Poetry Review*, Britain's leading poetry journal.⁷⁰⁵ It struck me forcibly as a missed opportunity to celebrate Smith's work and to give it serious attention and exposure in the poetry world.

I have shown what has contributed to this devaluing: the biographical shortfall that has not sufficiently taken into account a difficult emotional hinterland and the impact of this on her poetry; the frequent, sexist, ignoring of her intellectual aspect, as embodied, for instance, in

⁷⁰⁵ Claire Harman, 'Scorpion Wishes To Be Gone', review of *The Collected Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith* (May, ed., 2015), *The Poetry Review*, pp. 108-09 above.

the undervaluing of her work as a book reviewer in favour of her job as a secretary; and the lack of attention to the development of her poetry and to her serious work in advancing the quality of her poems. The current poetry climate, very much more culturally inclusive, diverse and experimental, with poetry performance and multi-media work an integral part of it, is ripe for a full-scale re-introduction of Stevie Smith.

A re-introduction that will raise her standing in the poetry world and give her increased general exposure is now required. A new *Selected Poems* is a necessity, one that incorporates some of the little known but important poems featured in *The Collected Poems* (2015), such as 'To Carry the Child' and 'The Ballet of the Twelve Dancing Princesses'. The need is to emphasise Smith as having a deft and playful touch, a quality not lightweight, but with deep undercurrents, a strategy of liveliness capable of holding the tensions of both the adult and child self, and echoing her own view of poetry as 'like a strong explosion in the sky'. A new *Selected Poems* should highlight, as well as her originality, her relevance; her buoyant approach to troubling terrain; her sharp poems on relationships; and her religious ambivalence. If a fuller range of Smith's poetry were better known, along with her stylistic variety, accomplishment and resourcefulness, contemporary poets, it is hoped, might draw inspiration from her work, as I have done. Additionally, a volume of selected reviews written by Smith would make compelling reading, conveying much about Smith and her poetry writing while also, such was the extent of her reviewing, contributing to the history of a range of book publication of fiction and non-fiction in the mid and later twentieth century.

In presenting her as a poet of her times, but also one of enduring relevance, and in properly assimilating her into the twenty-first century, there is, thus, work to be done. As a central part of a re-introduction, there is a need for a book-length publication on Smith, written by a poet, a study that discusses her in a way that would, as well as being valuable to poets and increasing her status in the poetry world, engage the general poetry reader. I envisage that there would be a strong biographical element to this study so as to address the current shortfall, while it would also emphasise how male-dominated the poetry landscape was at the time Stevie Smith wrote and the impact this has had on her reputation. Not encompassed by my thesis, but also illuminating to a potential publication on Smith as a poet, would be an in-depth analysis of her novels. This would, I envisage, explore the parallel development of her poetry and fiction, while also indicating the comparative higher achievement of her poetry. It is my hope that my work so far will provide a basis for such a publication.

Abbreviations

MA: Moniza Alvi (author)

Smith: Stevie Smith

Books

Collected Poems: The Collected Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith, edited by Will May (London, Faber and Faber, 2015)

Me Again: Me Again: The Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith, edited by Jack Barbera and William McBrien (London: Virago, 1981)

Journals

LRB: London Review of Books

TLS: Times Literary Supplement

Collections of Papers

BBC Written Archives: BBC Written Archives, Caversham, Reading

Bristol, Penguin Archive: University of Bristol Library, Special Collections, The Penguin Archive 1935-1980

Hull Archive: The Hull History Centre, Stevie Smith Papers 1936-2015 and Related Material

KCC, RN Lehmann Archive: Archive Centre, King's College, Cambridge, The Papers of Rosamond Nina Lehmann

St Louis Archive: Washington University Libraries, Department of Special Collections, St Louis, Florence Margaret 'Stevie' Smith Papers, 1943-1970

Tulsa Archive: Department of Special Collections, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa Stevie Smith Papers, 1900-1990

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Creative Work: *Fairoz*

FAIROZ

Moniza Alvi

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*How far can I follow her
my imagined Fairoz..?*

Driving the devil away

He had to be stoned repeatedly.
The problem was the devil wouldn't die.

He had such a battering but he
rose up again, a living thing.

It was cathartic to hurl a stone at a wall
to combat the devil within –

the devil was no respecter of boundaries,
he permeated the skin.

It brought you closer to God,
helped to cast out unworthy desires.

'I want to feel the weight of a heavy stone,
to really be doing something,' said a boy.

'Take a small stone,' said his father.
'A pebble is enough.'

In the present tense

Fairoz wanders the dark pathways of the internet.
The trees form tunnels over her head.

People jump out of the bushes
each with something to say.

They pounce.
It's airless.

It's a way of leaving home.
Slurred voices in the night.

No moon. The planetary light of the screen.
Midnight. She sets off down the paths

without so much as a basket.
'It doesn't take long to meet a man' they say.

A wayfarer.
He emerges from the trees

with an axe which he raises above his head.
She can see that he's smiling.

This kind of relationship
develops quickly.

Fairoz is very young. And not so young.
It's nice to have someone to talk to –

she thinks, she feels.
'I like your name,' he says.

Her name explodes in her head.
His name is Tahir.

She says 'I want to find out
why people do what they do.'

Indoors

It was cold. It was raw.
Their mother was a version
of the Snow Queen.

She could be so loving
to Fairoz and Annat
praising their rivering hair

and their progress at school
and saying how well blessed she was
to have such daughters.

At other times she hissed
and spat at them, their mother
who had herself been a little daughter.

How dried up she looked
when she looked in the mirror!
She smiled her best smile

and the room behind her
filled with snow
which soon became hard-packed.

Snow on the chairs and carpet
snow settling on the prayer mat
snow on the homework.

The hand-held mirror
grew so heavy.
When she dropped it

it flew into a thousand pieces
some of them no bigger
than grains of sand.

‘Annat!’ she called ‘Fairoz!’
And they staggered towards her
across the indoor snow,

little pieces of mirror
shooting into them.
Half-blinded by flakes

the girls fell out into the garden.
No snow there, but greyness
and grit and the traffic

thundering on the ring road.
'We're getting too old to play.
And we're too cold.'

Slowly they went back indoors.
They observed their mother from afar
as if she were a distant relative.

Hair

Uncut
since birth
hidden or
on show
rippling loose
or shorn
falling across
a murderer's brow
hair is always
innocent.

What do you do with a heap of stones?

The stones would be so useful
for building houses.
So many houses are made of straw.
With only a little huffing
and puffing they're blown down.

‘It was a house of female habitation’

Was it a house of mercy?
Three intelligent women lived there.
The two teenagers
looked around their in-between country.

They didn’t know their father’s name,
or they kept forgetting it.
He visited once – and left
at the same instant.

‘Let me out’ he muttered.
He’d gusted in from the East,
had no money to speak of.
The door opened of its own accord.

~~~~~

## Questions in the wood

She logs on. The light of her screen.  
Tahir stands, legs apart in the clearing.

‘How old are you, Tahir?’

He laughs.  
‘I’m much older than you. Guess how old?’

‘I think you’re twenty-five, no thirty.’

He laughs again. ‘Right the first time.’

‘What do you do, Tahir? Do you work?’

‘It’s complicated. I’ll tell you very soon...  
You’re so pretty,’ he says.

She’s there with him, out in the open.  
He puts down his axe.  
His eyes are quite gentle.

‘Tahir, do you pray? Five times a day?  
Does Allah listen?’

‘That’s a big question, Fairouz.  
He does. Usually He does.’

## **The Devil and the gleams**

Tahir's eyes gleam.  
His axe gleams.

And on the screen's dark sky  
a single star gleams.  
Shrinks. And disappears.

A gleam is  
something to work with.

## **The Devil's soup –**

brought to boiling point each day at noon  
and smelling of all things rotten.

‘God, would you like to try some?’

God spits it out.

*What was I doing tasting the Devil's soup?  
Can any good come of it?*

## **The white cat**

‘Amma, Amma, can we have a cat?  
We’ll look after it, we’ll feed it.’

‘We’re too near the ring road,’ Amma said.  
She frowned – and the window frosted up.

A cat walked in, white as the indoor snow.  
It lifted each paw high at the shock

of the cold and wet.  
Within seconds its eyes froze shut.

## Not enchantment

When her screen lights up she steps through it.  
Signposts point in all directions –

some are broken.  
Not this way. She's back where she started.

Internet wanderers step forward then melt  
into the trees. She can't grasp

what they're saying.  
She knows she's a wanderer too.

Where's Tahir?

'See you next time.' That's what he said.

'Tahir! Tahir!' She can't see anyone at all.

Just the angry red stalks of the brambles  
and lots of clingy frilled mushrooms.

She shuts the screen down.  
And for a few moments she's nowhere.

The night is half-blind.  
Schoolclothes on a chair.

Her headscarf like moonlight  
touching the floor.

## In the morning

she says to herself:

‘I don’t like my life.’ And again.  
‘I-don’t-like-my-life.’

Lifecoldlife.

Sun creeping through the curtains.  
Pale sun.

And now on the way to school  
‘I don’t like my life because — ’

The Devil enjoys ‘I don’t like my life.’

He echoes the words:  
‘I don’t like my life! I don’t like my life!’

It’s familiar to him – this chink.  
This fast-widening crack.

## Home

The first time she heard it  
it took her a moment to take it in.

‘Go home!’ She was just by the house,  
walking up the short front path.

She dropped her bag on the doorstep,  
turned and picked up a stone.

But he’d already slid away.  
He left his two poison words.

## Fairoz and Annat

‘Fuck off!’ she said quietly. ‘Fuck off!’

She knows *We don’t swear*.

But now she swears a lot, under her breath.

And sometimes louder. Stonewords.

‘Why do you swear so much, Fairoz?’

‘Because I’m older. Because I want to.

And I need to. That’s why.’

~~~~~

As summer

As summer belongs to the year.
And winter too.

And the house belongs to the road.
Or seems to.

As nakedness belongs to the light
as well as the dark.

As the surface belongs to the depth
whatever the depth is like.

As the tongue belongs to speech –
though not to all speech.

As our heads belong to our bodies.
And have to.

School lunchtimes

Ihdinas-siraatal mustaqeem
'Guide us to the straight path'

In the second floor room
(‘somewhere for us –
Muslim girls’)
after midday prayers
she thinks of Tahir
the things he says:
‘I’ve a day off
next week –
shall we meet?
Fairoz, tell me
how long is
your hair?’

Listening to Fairoz and Tahir

To shut out other sounds,
to be the curved surface

their voices bounce against,
to put the unsaid on one side.

To eavesdrop on them,
to overhear and underhear,

and attend with my faulty ear
to a made up conversation
attempting

with my own words
to hold my own words back.

Tahir: What would you do for Allah?
He needs us, you know. They hate us here.

Fairoz: Yeah, I know that. Most of them do –
they treat us like shit. We pray...

Tahir: Praying is all very well. But we must
be braver than that. We owe it to Allah
as an act of faith. Fairoz, I'd like to meet,
really meet. Just for a short time.
Tomorrow? Today? In the park?

Fairoz: Yeah. Later today? Really meet.

Pilgrims

'a great joy'
 'my whole family is here'
 'it's something I've so much wanted to do'
 'marvellous, if you can afford it'
 'I'd always dreamt of making the pilgrimage to Mecca'
 'over two million annually'
 'almost like a vacation'
 'peaceful – no worries'
 'carrying the flags of our countries'
 'I had the most incredibly good night's sleep'
 'when I was 15 years old my father sent me on the Hajj alone'
 'we all learned to adapt and make the best of it'
 'a bit like a really massive sleepover'
 'posting photographs on Facebook'
 'a combination of nerves and heightened euphoria'
 'simple Ihram clothing – all of us equal under the eyes of God'
 'measures are taken to prevent cholera'
 'the exploitation of pilgrims'
 'there's a risk'
 'stoning the devil is the most dangerous part of Hajj'
 'pilgrims have been asphyxiated, crushed to death'
 'like being caught in a wave'
 '110 degrees – people dying of thirst'
 'some without shoes'
 'pilgrims throwing water bottles into the crowd'
 'I was walking like a dead man'
 'the push and pull of the crush stripped the clothing off people'
 'a terrible day in Hajj history'
 'I became very sick during the time'
 'I injured my leg and needed stitches and still have a scar'
 'Hajj makes all things bearable'

‘even death can be welcomed’

‘once in my life, to be here’

‘It was... sort of my duty to Allah’

‘I’m very happy today’

Does the Devil know what he is?

Does he even have knowledge?

Does the Devil have instincts?

Ah, the Devil has only the diabolical.

He grips it tight.

The notice

**THE MOSQUE IS
OPENING ITS DOORS
TO THE HOMELESS
ANY RACE OR CREED.**

‘Fairoz, shall we help? Will you?’

‘I’ll think about it, Annat.’

What would you do for Allah?

What would you do?

What wouldn’t you do?

For Allah.

For Allah?

When they meet

Tahir fishes in a pocket.
Retrieves a small parcel
loosely wrapped.

‘For you, Fairouz!’

She slides out a bangle, elfin, gold –
a gift for a fairy-child.

‘Thank you. But it’s tiny...’

‘Let me try.’

He steadies her wrist, grasps
the shining circle, pressing it
until her hand is red.

‘Sorry,’ he says.

~~~~~

## **A story of God and the Devil**

Someone or something  
gave birth to them –  
countless years ago.

They looked at each other  
with recognition.  
Occasionally they swapped roles.

God was fully capable of  
ripping an arm open.

Sometimes the Devil  
normally so active  
floated downriver on a log.

Let me be God for the day.  
Let me be the Devil.

## Ripe

‘Ha!’ said Amma. ‘Ha!  
Choose your own?  
And where will you find him –  
under a stone?’

The time ran ripe  
as a juicy peach  
a nectarine or pear.  
It was a beautiful alarming thing.

A shadow bent papery  
by the door.  
Who’s that? Boy or girl?  
Shall we ask the shadow in?

They wanted to choose.  
It was summer in the house.  
The time was ripe. More than ripe.  
‘They’re our lives, Amma, not yours.’

## **Wolves-of-the-woods**

Wolf-crouching-by-fragile-trees

wolf-bored-bored

wolf-where-the-streams-never-stop

wolf-with-grievances-going-back-generations

wolf-with-enquiring-eyes

wolf-drifting-like-smoke

wolf-and-a-small-patch-of-blue-sky

wolf-I'll-never-forget-what-they-did-never

wolf-where-the-dark-streams-converge

wolf-in-a-tiny-minority

wolf-a-more-attractive-husband-than-a-suitor-

in-a-lost-to-the-world-village

wolf-where-the-streams-run-shallow

wolf-as-cruel-as-a-savagely-beaten-thing

wolf-long-thin-blade

wolf-howling-on-a-high-note

wolf-with-an-unread-Guide-to-the-Koran

wolf-with-a-grey-coat-and-military-buttons

wolf-reciting-half-a-prayer

wolf-where-the-wood-is-suddenly-a-forest

## **What runs under her skin**

Can anyone know  
what's inside her?

Can I?  
Hardly.

Do her thinking  
and her doing collide?

Or are her outside  
and inside aligned?

Who is she? Who can say?  
Can she say?

I can only  
let her unfold.

**Tahir:** I can show you Jannah. Can you picture Heaven, Fairoz?

**Fairoz:** Dunno.

## **She pictures Jannah**

*Gardens higher than the sky not where weeds grow rivers  
valleys of pearls and rubies no cars no buses all the gates  
a bit like the park gates taller with names try to see it angels  
questioning seeing angels no sadness joy for you forever  
if you've led a good life only if Allah deciding when people die  
Judgement Day Jannah who will go there? definitely go?  
everlasting life a glow smiling not talking forgiveness  
Jannah Paradise not on this earth*

## **Absent and present**

He has to go away now.

Go away for a while.

To where?

Not there... nor there...

but still very far away.

Though nowhere is far away.

He assures her they'll

never be far away.

They can still spend hours

talking in the woods

tomorrow – and today.

**Tahir:** Forgot to say. Something crucial about Jannah. Fairoz you know about those who die defending Islam, they go through the Baab Al-Jihad. That's their gate into Heaven. Know about that gate?

**Fairoz:** Sure. Yeah. I know about that one.

**Tahir:** Defend Islam. That's what we've got to do.

A small, stylized wavy line graphic, resembling a horizontal squiggle or a series of connected 'v' shapes, centered on the page.

## Her absences

The noughts  
in the teacher's register.

O

Unauthorised.

O

Disappearing into a zero.  
Gravely at risk.

O

Where is she? Where are they?  
What is she learning?

O

Falling through the

O

Under the railway bridge  
in the dankness

O

with a boy-man,  
a man-boy. Or is she

O

alone in her bedroom  
with the curtains drawn

O

and still meeting a man?

O

Fairoz! Fairoz!

O

Lost in the fog of the

O

the blank that aches  
and enlarges.

O

**‘where the swarm is thickest’**

Indoor snow again.  
The house was full of it,  
flake after flake  
all the white bees swarming.

‘Amma, it’s freezing! Where are you?’

‘I’m upstairs WORKING, Fairoz.  
And don’t be stupid, it’s not at all cold.’

**Fairoz:** The more you try to forget, the more you can't forget... Yeah, that's what I think.

**Tahir:** Yeah. When I was a kid our town was mostly white and our window was smashed so many times there was no point mending it. When they banged on the door we hid upstairs. Like we couldn't exist. I can't forget that.

## **The dark patch**

Once there was a young person who bought some cream for lightening the skin. It wasn't for what you think.

It was just that she had a small darker patch on her chest and she wanted to lighten it. She thought it was terrible when those like her with brown skin, girl or boy, wanted to lighten their whole skin, their face. This was only a dark patch. She didn't want that. That was all.

But then she thought she might get a too-light patch and it would stand out. Was a too-light patch as bad as a too-dark patch? Was the cream worth risking?

The dark patch preyed on her mind. It wasn't on her face, but still it was on her mind. Darker than it should be.

The small browner patch that she couldn't get away from.

Then the thought of a light patch nagged at her.

The skin-lightener in its white pot.

## The plants

The Devil was scattering seeds.  
God's curiosity was roused.  
'What are you growing?'

'Plants, tough plants, God.  
They take root in the unlikeliest places,  
force their way up  
through those tiny cracks.  
I call them shrivel-the-soul.  
One glimpse can be enough.'

God had at least to equal this.  
'My perfect flowers...' he began.

## **It was long ago**

And not so long ago

that Amma forced a piece of ice  
into her hand, not a word spoken.

It stuck there like a burr. Ice with hooks.

‘Amma! Amma!’

In the palm of her hand  
a cold flame was burning.

## **A conversation**

The child and the adult  
she'll soon become  
are walking hand in hand  
through the bushes.  
Sometimes the adult leads.  
Sometimes the child.

'I'm ready now,' says the child.  
'Ready for what?' asks the adult.  
The child ignores the adult's question.

**Annat:** Salma's sister, you know, she takes her salwar kameez off and wears jeans just to put the bins out!

**Fairoz:** What they make us do! The little things – I reckon they're big things.

**Annat:** Wish we could just get on with our lives...

## A punch

*Sorry sorry she said sorry did she mean it? Tahir said  
 sorry too did he mean it? sorry it's just a word felt  
 guilty she'd asked for it he said that punch quick  
 like a boxer nobody there to see it she made him do it  
 sorry maybe probably she had thinking thinking  
 did he think that? hurts arm throbs she must have  
 he was usually kind but now this wear it not for me  
 he said wear it for Allah cover your face now he's  
 saying sorry again soft word sorry it depends  
 how it's said swelling ow! No! like 'I love you'  
 depends how it's ways to say things words said*

~~~~~

Ice age

It had been there forever.
and yet at the back of their bones

they knew there was something different
and that was the strange thing.

Cold spoke in its own tongue,
its words were a glacial stream.

Who could ever really escape an ice-age,
protect themselves

from the indoor or outdoor cold?
Who could avoid all the stone

the ice-rivers carried
and the sediment left behind?

The cold bore ice and more ice –
thick sheets of it

to the hemispheres of the house.
It scratched and scoured

the human core.

He's 'v v sorry'

*From Tahir buds opening slowly colours of flames
tulips! tulips swaying dancing in a circle faster
fasterfaster sprawling out out dying colour
of blood and beginning again closing opening
closing in her phone shut in it tulips not real
private luckily only she'll see them secret*

The short long story

More than now and then
since tenuous time began

in what was contortedly
called the world of men

under the thwarted sun
under the guarded moon —

‘So, what kept happening?’

All that is tortuous
between East and West.

The loping wolf

I'm a wolf of strong faith
in a land of disbelief.

I know my strengths
and knew what to do –

I applied for the night-work.
I'm always on time.

With my razor-teeth
I'm a biter –

limbs, balls, breasts,
I fasten on hard, dig in.

If they're released
from my chamber

they leave with a solemn
hooded look.

I'll lope to the war
of everywhere, East-West

West-East. Only God
can lope this far.

A tale reduced to a sliver

Once, in the middle of the last century, a student crossed to this country by boat. He wore his smartest clothes. He had to look for somewhere to live. The signs didn't say NO BLACKS then, but nevertheless it was difficult. He was an outsider and he was poor. He found an old hut at the edge of the town by the airfield. Padlocked. Long. It looked spacious. He made enquiries.

'That hut by the airfield. Can I live there?' he asked.
'There's nowhere else.'

'Nobody can live there,' they said. 'It's not fit for human habitation! It's a disused Nissen hut. There'll be rats and mice.'

'Compared to where most people live where I come from, it's a palace!'

'All right,' they said, in the end. 'But it might only be for a while. We'll have to see.'

He moved in straight away, with another student from home. The hut was certainly long – and large. There was a stove with a pipe going up to the roof. The rain pounded on the corrugated metal. Every day they killed rats and mice.

Fairoz: Some fights are good fights. Yeah.

Tahir: Yeah. Against the West. WESTERN extremists. They won't say they are. The hypocrites! The shits! Someone I know, their uncle was imprisoned, tortured by westerners for nothing. They thought he was someone else. They never apologised.

Fairoz: They just say it's us! And

Tahir: Listen – we were great once, way back. And we'll be great again. We're global already you know.

God's eyelids

For an hour or two God lay down
in the shade of a wide-canopied tree.

'Wake up!' laughed the Devil who
always had to keep track of him.
'You don't have time to sleep!'

'I'm not asleep,' said God. And sighed.
Each eyelid was as heavy as a war.

This woman will speak to you, he says

A woman
steps forward into the clearing.

She carries an axe.

Her voice smiles.
Her words rush and tumble:

‘Fairoz listen we need intelligent girlslikeyou clever and brave
there’s hardly anywhere safe notyet but we’ll look after you
don’t be afraid you’ll be verywellrewarded there’re lots of us
but specially picked we’re like sistersmothersbestfriends’

She hasn’t finished yet.

‘Look I’ll message you,’ she says.

And disappears into the trees.



The bride

‘Let’s marry – online. I can arrange it.’

She knows about it now.
This marriage in the woods
must be valid
all in one sitting
with a wali and witnesses
gathered around.
And with no interruptions
not a nightbird’s hoot.
The couple sufficiently lit.

‘I love you, Fairoz. Well, what do you think?’

In the semi dark,
off the twisting paths
she sees
a man is marrying
a girl.
How young is this bride?
Hard to tell.
Why is she looking down?

‘For now and for the afterlife.’

The girl’s dress is so heavy
and the wood is tangled.

Gone

Like a strip of land,
a swathe of forest, has she gone?
She hasn't gone abroad,
or travelled very far at all.
She quarrels with her sister,
eats dal and rice and sleeps, at home.
She says her prayers.
She takes the normal route to school
where she goes drifting – out.
The teachers say 'Is something wrong?
We're here if you want to talk to us.'
Her friends? She's let them slip away.
She's on her phone upstairs,
her schoolbag unopened on the floor.
She's edging out of one story,
looking both ways. Not looking.
She hasn't left – but she has gone.

A task

Can you sew?
asked the woman in the wood.
I believe you can.

Not a button, not a shirt,
a jacket or a dress –
can you sew a vest?

I know you're skilled enough
with Allah on your side
to do a good neat

lasting job.
It's not just women's work –
it's for our cause, you know.

I'll give you strong thread
to feed through the empty eye
of a silver needle.

Can you stitch life to death
and pull the thread tight?
A few sharp tugs, and that's it.
An honourable thing, this sewing.

Fairoz: You can get to Heaven, then, if you've killed someone, yeah?

Tahir: I've told you, there's killing – and there's killing. It depends... If you kill defending Islam, Allah will welcome you. Yeah. He'll open that special gate. Remember the Baab Al-Jihad. It's the main thing to remember that gate. It's the most crucial thing of all. It's not murder. It's faith. And it's honour. And... and Allah will witness it.

He always knows why you did it. You're clever, Fairoz – I know I can trust you not to forget.

The viewing

She clicks 'Play'.

Two – lit up.

An axe-man.

A prisoner.

Shadowy others.

Tall trees spaced.

Axe swings to

neck.

She clicks 'Pause'.

A loneliness.

She clicks 'Play'.

Sees it.

Seen it.

Sees it.

Dark now.

He was

He was

a traitor.

You hear me, Fairoz?

OK?

The contest

God held one end of the argument
and the Devil, the other. They heaved
and strained but nothing ever

moved much. The two of them
locked in a tug-of-war.
The rope they couldn't drop.

A change

It was different now. Tahir was different.

He'd been different before

but now the difference was – different.

'You're different now, Tahir.'

'No, I'm not – I love you more

than I did before. That's all

that's different.

Every day is different!

Let's have no more talk

of different.'



Classroom scorpions

*Out of the big smeary window the city
and more and more of it a grey sea
so quiet from up here like empty*

‘Note what Macbeth says to Lady Macbeth.
Page 93. Act III, Scene 2... Line 36...
Found it, Fairouz?’

‘O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!’

Tahir: Fairoz – let's get married. Like I say. Be strong together. I keep picturing Paradise – and praying. You're my reward. Ha! So what do you reckon? About being my wife. A proper wife.

Fairoz: A wife? A proper wife? Leaving home? And doing what married people do?

Tahir: Of course. What else? Living together. Our home. I can picture it. Easily. Yeah, I'd really like that.

Cherry stones

Tinker

Tailor

Martyr

Sailor

Rich

Or poor

Or very poor

West

Or East

Or in between

Woman beater

Freedom fighter

Bomb maker

This life

Next life

Sometime

Never

Who's there?

*That time in the playground blood-red voices
 couldn't not hear them 'Murderer! Murderer!'
 older ones younger ones joining in and one clear
 piping voice 'You're all murderers!' words thrown
 ducked threw back 'Murderers yourselves!'
 couldn't deal with it not really not at all words
 gouging we're all humans they're not should she
 tell? Amma? the teacher? maybe no
 no point what would they do? could make things
 worse yeah an unfairness bigger than*

*And now long after and not so long after
 looking at her hands her shoes and into
 the chasm behind her eyes to see to see
 who's there him her us 'Murderers!'
 Murderers? no yes no who's there
 in the seething?*

DANGER

The explosives in their containers:

hydrogen peroxide, sulphuric acid,
ammonium nitrate, potassium perchlorate...
They carry triangular warning signs.

The emotions are also dangerous.

Even sadness

transmuted into something else.

Tahir: Your sister – would she help us? Help the cause?
She's religious, isn't she? Is she... reliable?

Fairoz: No... No. Don't think she'd help. She'd say
'You can give to charity if you want to help Allah.'
Or something like that. She's good...

Tahir: So I'm not good? You're not good?

Fairoz: We are... But not in the same way.

The eye

O hardware shop.
O faithful eye –

has it seen anything unusual?
The hardware shop is dark

and so densely forested.
How can the recording eye see?

But it does. It's well-trained.
The forester is quick and deliberate.

The hammers are ranged like
strong-beaked birds

on the bristling wall-rack.
A claw hammer, that's it.

And a club hammer.
Drops them into the open cage

of his basket. Adds long nails.
Hurries to the wooden counter.

Something not right? He's too
intent, no glancing around.

Someone wants to hammer a nail
through the universe.

Does the eye weep?
The eye is dispassionate.

She's heard nothing from Tahir

'Speak Soon'. That's what he said.
'Speak soon love you Fairouz.'

And now she

cuts herself on the ice of waiting
cuts herself on the ice of not knowing
cuts herself on the ice

Call him three times

Tahir? said the woman in the wood.
Who's Tahir? Oh you mean Abdul.
He's really Abdul. Sometimes
Anwar. Names are a risk.

I don't think you'll see him,
not for a while. Maybe
not in this life.
He was always careful,

so very skilled at
covering his tracks.
But it's hard
to hide in these woods.

Don't despair. Inshallah,
no one need be lonely here.
Friendship, marriage –
just footsteps away.

But try calling him now.
Three times, once for each name.
Abdul – Anwar – Tahir.
He'll answer, if he hasn't moved on.

What's real?

*Did she know him? Abdul? Anwar? alive? or dead?
heard nothing from him like death maybe he can't
contact her? doesn't want to? where is he? where?
nobody knows or nobody will tell her he could be
anywhere the wide-open anywhere hunted down
running running hiding forgotten her by now
yeah talking to someone else like being kicked —
keep trying to find him? pull away? all the hours
talking but then he lied like kept big secrets from her
Jannah what he said that he'd be there and she'd
be there somehow they'd be together not real
a million miles from real pull away can't*

The Devil's news

'What's the point of having good news
if I can't relay it directly to God?
My devastating, appalling good news.
I'll run through fire with this news.
Running to you, God. Running.
Swifter than the speed of your light.
Listen. Oh God. Such news.'

~~~~~

## Witnesses

‘he was keeping out of view’

‘it seemed strange he was just standing there’

‘a feeling of being hurled to the side’

‘then there was another bit of hell’

‘I saw things I’m never going to be able to unsee’

‘I wanted to help’

‘we tried to outnumber him’

‘I was aware of people moaning and calling out’

‘there was screaming, blood and chaos’

‘I saw his arm move quickly’

‘I kept talking to her, trying to keep her conscious’

‘someone shouted Mind your backs!’

‘I had to make sure someone wasn’t being beaten to a pulp’

‘I rushed to the other side of the stairwell to get away’

‘people were yelling Keep moving!’

‘armed police surrounded him’

‘the officer shouted Don’t move!’

‘we were trying desperately to apply first aid’

‘a man was wrestling with a person lying on the ground’

‘the guy on the floor opened his jacket and we backed away fast’

‘he charges towards the guy’

‘he was clearly wearing something protective’

‘someone tried to stop me going to help’

‘my leg was damaged, I kind of dragged it along’

‘I tried to comfort him’

‘I took a moment to Tweet’

‘I used my belt to apply a tourniquet’

‘I was completely overwhelmed’

‘I didn’t think of leaving’

‘it’s got nothing to do with religion, nothing at all’

‘if it happened today, it could happen tomorrow’

~~~~~

In the snow

She lay down in the indoor snow –
it numbed her slowly, very slowly.

‘You not going to school, Fairoz?’

‘What’s wrong with you then? Tell me.’

‘Annat, do you know what’s wrong with Fairoz?’

Her whole life

*She hasn't she didn't luckily she hadn't she did
just a bit not really more than a bit no a little
and she watched will the police? they'd want to
track her doesn't want to lie doesn't was drawn in
interested drawn in drew out drew in (don't say that)
doesn't want to lie listening listening did a lot of
listening to him to her to all of them was so tired
of all the listening what did she really think? it was
wrong not completely no yes violence like murder?
she has her life she's young not so young no
will they think she's young? responsible like guilty?*

*Could someone help her? she has this one life hers
she's an intelligent girl yeah more than quite intelligent
her whole life sometimes it's nothing though not nothing*

Urgent question

‘Mirror mirror,
heart of silver, not of gold,
am I young – or am I old?’

‘Come closer now...
The answer is
young-old. Old-young.’

Like a mark on her kameez

Spreading like a mark, a stain

very fast

out of her control.

Stigma.

More strongly there
even than herself.

What she'd like to say

She always, almost
always (especially later)
had her doubts –

They crept in like waves

sometimes smaller
sometimes larger –

that he was good
that what he said
was good *was* good –

She never let him
put words into her mouth.

Is there anything she'd like to say?
'I had my doubts. Yeah, doubts.
I'm telling you the truth.'

The room in her mind's eye

One of the chairs
is for her.
Pulled out for her. No –
screwed to the floor.
A window? No window.
A metal grille.
Walls made of blocks.
An inside lock? Maybe not.
She can't sit down
on a chair wedged
into the corner
of her mind's eye.
It's a big enough room
for the corner of an eye.
Bolts? No clock?

The woods

The woods are the woods –
nothing more. The trees

darkening the pathways.
People still jump out of the bushes

but with nothing new to say,
their mouths opening and closing.

The woods – there's no beginning
and no end. The woodcutters

are at work. Strewn branches.
Tree-stumps are everywhere now,

as many stumps as trees.
And crowds of mushrooms.

Those that look so enticing are deadly –
the pristine white ones, white as

white feathers, cap and gills,
and the storybook red ones

with white spots – warty really.
They attract the flies – and kill them.

This place. Where is she?
Past tense. Where was she?

Cold song

Her teeth are chattering

chatter chatter

but she hasn't told

told no one

chatter chatter no one

reflects her words

back to her

can anyone bear to hear it

hear her wake up

Her future

‘Another one for me,’ said the Devil.
‘I seize my chance, get a hold

and in the end
what can you do about it?’

God thought for a moment.
He didn’t need to say anything.

But he did.
‘We’ll see who wins,’ he said.

‘Over every soul there is a watcher’

A star to watch over you
not just to watch you
a piercing star
if this could be true
if the beautiful ideas
could really be beautiful
and stay beautiful

a protecting star
a vigilance
a kindly watcher star
not just record-keeping
and the nights not starless
if this night-star could be true
in some sense true.



My imagined Fairoz

How far can I follow her
my imagined Fairoz – she has
no map and nor have I –
follow her

into her house of three women
one older, one younger
a breathing house

a house of stopped breath
where she lives and doesn't live,
follow her into her room –

follow her inside and out,
as far – further than I can?
How far can I follow her

and then – choosing the time
while not exactly choosing it –
let her go?

Notes

p.5 ‘The stoning of the devil’, *Rami al-Jamarat*, is one of the main rituals of the annual Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. Small stones are thrown at three walls, symbolically driving the devil away. The ending of this poem drew inspiration from an article by Naser Al Wasmi, ‘Hajj 2018: As it happened from Makkah’, *The National*, 22 August 2018.

p.11 ‘It was a house of female habitation’: The title and first line are derived from Stevie Smith’s poem ‘A House of Mercy’, *The Collected Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith*, edited by Will May (Faber and Faber, 2015).

p.23 *Ihdinas-siraatal mustaqeem* ‘Guide us to the straight path’ is from the Muslim prayer: ‘Surah Al-Fatihah’. ‘Guide us to the straight path: the path of those You have blessed, those who incur no anger and who have not gone astray.’ From ‘1. The Opening’, *The Qur’an: A new translation by M. A. S. Abdel Haleem* (Oxford World’s Classics, Oxford University Press, 2004).

p.26 ‘Pilgrims’: Includes variants on comments in *Records of the Hajj: The Pilgrimage to Mecca* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), ed. D. L. Rush and ‘Hajj Stories’ from the British Museum’s exhibition: ‘Hajj: Journey to the heart of Islam’ 26 January-15 April, 2012.

p.42 ‘where the swarm is thickest’: The title and the image of the ‘white bees’ are taken from Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Snow Queen*, translated by H. B. Paull, (Hytholoday Press, USA, 2013).

p.43 ‘The more you try to forget’ was partly inspired by an account of racist violence in Mark Townsend’s *No Return* (see acknowledgements below).

p.54 ‘The Loping Wolf’ was partly inspired by an account of torture in Azadeh Moaveni’s book *Guest House for Young Widows* (see acknowledgements below).

p.60 ‘wali’ – ‘authority figure’ at a Muslim wedding, often the bride’s father.

p.70 ‘Cherry stones’ is derived from a traditional fortune-telling counting game. The most common English version is ‘Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Sailor, Rich Man, Poor Man, Beggar Man, Thief.’

p.75 ‘She’s heard nothing from Tahir’ was inspired by a line in the poem ‘Difference’ by Anna Kamieńska in *Astonishments: Selected Poems of Anna Kamieńska* translated from the Polish by Grażyna Drabik and David Curzon (Paraclete Press, Massachusetts, 2018).

p.80 ‘Witnesses’: Includes variants on eye-witness responses in newspaper reports of incidents of extremist violence.

p.92 ‘Over every soul there is a watcher’ was initially inspired by lines from *The Koran* as in Arthur J. Arberry’s translation from the Arabic (Oxford World’s Classics, Oxford University Press, 2008), LXXXVI ‘The Night Star’: ‘And what shall teach thee what is the night-star? / The piercing star! / Over every soul there is a watcher.’

I would like to pay particular tribute to the following books:

Non-fiction:

Azadeh Moaveni: *Guest House for Young Widows: Among the Women of Isis* (Scribe Publications, London, 2019).

Mark Townsend: *No Return: The True Story Of How Martyrs Are Made* (Guardian / Faber, London, 2020).

Novels:

Karan Mahajan: *The Association of Small Bombs* (Vintage, London, 2017).

Kamila Shamsie: *Home Fire* (Bloomsbury, London 2017).

Meike Ziervogel: *Kauthar*, Salt Publications (Cromer, 2015).

Drama:

Nyla Levy: *Does My Bomb Look Big In This?* (Methuen Drama, London 2019; on UK tour in 2019).

Gillian Slovo: *Another World: Losing Our Children To Islamic State* (Oberon Books, London, 2016).