

Aphorism in Stevie Smith



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I have started the preceding paragraph with the word 'nevertheless' ... I believe myself to be fairly indoctrinated by the habit of thought which calls for this word. In fact I approve of the ceremonious accumulation of weather forecasts and barometer-readings that pronounce for a fine day, before letting rip on the statement: 'Nevertheless, it's raining.' I find that much of my literary composition is based on the nevertheless idea. I act upon it. It was on the nevertheless principle that I turned Catholic.

-- Muriel Spark, 'What Images Return'

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Abstract

My thesis draws up a new theory of the aphorism, a form which has received limited critical treatment in literary and philosophical studies. It uses this model of aphorism to frame an original approach to the enigmatic poetry and novels of Stevie Smith (1902-1971).

Surveying the aphoristic tradition through German, French and English lines of development, analysing a range of short-form writing including La Rochefoucauld's maxims, Erasmus's proverbs and Karl Kraus's aphorisms, I suggest that aphorism represents a tool for the social management of emotion. Rhetorically corralled into a slick, collectable shape, the aphorism promises arresting and instantaneous epiphany. However, the accomplished elegance which positioned the aphorism's message as self-evidently true in fact works to repel further enquiry, and ultimately ensures that it will be forgotten or bypassed in favour of another aphorism. Aphorism, therefore, is a form in which dangerous ideas and emotions can be safely displayed and, simultaneously, effaced. Because aphorism's style defuses the imperative to act on what is clearly known, writers like Stevie Smith can use the form as a means of withdrawing from the burden of making an impact on the world.

I therefore find that Smith's use of aphorism and its related forms (proverb, epitaph, caption and fragment) offers a route into her texts. With her disconcerting pen-and-ink drawings, dark comedy, and social ventriloquism which stops short of satire, the rhetorical force of Smith's poetry fascinates and arrests its readers, but nevertheless leaves them unable to react coherently, identify the use-value which her writing appears to promise, or delve successfully beneath its compelling surface. Drawing on hitherto unpublished archival material, I argue that Smith's texts resist analysis because like the aphorisms embedded throughout them, they offer and exemplify a mode of clearly-declared revelation which, at the same time, makes itself unusable.

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I offer this thesis to my two most critical and passionate readers. Aliyah and Richard, with all my love.

Introduction

In an undated letter, David Wright, co-editor of the magazine *X: A Quarterly Review*, wrote to the poet and novelist Stevie Smith. He had a request:

...the idea has come to me to ask a few poets whose work is of importance to contribute...collections of aphorisms to fill one page each (say 500 words) these aphorisms being to do with the nature of poetry & the business of writing it. Or if not aphorisms, pensees [sic]. A collection of these would I think be much more interesting and exciting than the usual full-dress Lit. Crit articles all magazines have. A few words from practising poets would do much to dispel the mystic-boredom woven about the whole subject of Poetry by the New Critics and all the other hardworking little dons.¹

Stevie Smith would have been pleased to hear that her work was 'of importance'. After publishing the bestselling *Novel on Yellow Paper* in 1936, two other novels in 1938 and 1949, and three poetry collections in the 30s and 40s, the 1950s saw a slump in her popularity. Though she published two poetry collections, including the collection titled after her most famous poem, *Not Waving But Drowning* (1957), she earned most of her income during this decade from writing reviews. So this poet, who saw herself as *sui generis* (a line which critics have often also taken) and denied affiliation in any poetic school, decided, on this occasion, to take part.² The result was published in 1960, later anthologised under the title 'My Muse'.³

¹ Letter from David Wright to Stevie Smith, Series 1, Box 11, Folder 7, Stevie Smith papers, 1924-1970. Coll. No. 1976.012. McFarlin Library. Department of Special Collections and University Archives. The University of Tulsa.

² See for instance Calvin Bedient, 'Horace and Modernism,' in *In Search of Stevie Smith*, ed. Sanford Sternlicht (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 168, and Sanford Sternlicht, *Stevie Smith* (Boston: Twayne, 1990), 7. In a questionnaire, when asked whether she felt affiliated to any poetic school, Smith wrote an emphatic 'NO'. Series 1, Box 1, Folder 5, Stevie Smith papers, University of Tulsa.

³ Stevie Smith, 'My Muse,' in *Me Again: The Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith*, ed. Jack Barbera and William McBrien (London: Virago, 1982), 125-6.

Vernon Watkins, Hugh MacDiarmid and Patrick Kavanagh also contributed aphorisms – or ‘if not aphorisms, pensees’ – to *X*. All four writers took advantage of the lack of specificity in David Wright’s request. Vernon Watkins’ piece presents most immediately as ‘aphoristic’. He spaces his short one- or two-line units pithily across the page:

Natural speech may be excellent, but who will remember it unless it is allied to something artificial, to a particular order of music?

Criticism projects its high tone, its flattering responses, but of what man-made echo does the mind not weary, as it turns endlessly round the Earth?⁴

Patrick Kavanagh’s ‘aphorisms’ are longer than Watkins’, but still divided by white space and paragraph breaks. Hugh MacDiarmid alternates between longer paragraphs and aphorisms as short as ‘Deeper than opinions lies the sentiment that predetermines opinion’.⁵

Stevie Smith’s aphorisms (or *pensées*) are the shortest and punchiest of all. However, she presents them in continuous prose.

Poetry is like a strong explosion in the sky. 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 his carapace. Poetry is a strong way out...
...Poetry is very strong and never has any kindness at all. She is Thetis and Hermes, the Angel, the white horse and the landscape. All Poetry has to do is make a strong communication. All the poet has to do is listen. The poet is not an important fellow. There will always be another poet.⁶

⁴ Vernon Watkins, Patrick Kavanagh, Hugh MacDiarmid, Stevie Smith, ‘Poets on Poetry,’ in *An Anthology from X: A Quarterly Review of Literature and the Arts, 1959-1962*, ed. David Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 64.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 68-9.

We recognise the declarative tone of absolute finality which often identifies an aphorism; the use of superlatives ('All', 'at all'); the characteristic brevity; the repetition of that imperious 'is' which permits no argument. Smith signals authority as, in Wright's words, a poet 'whose work is of importance'. Yet, in this piece, Smith eliminates the white space which usually frames and privileges an aphorism;⁷ one aphorism immediately supplants another. Like a practical matriarch, allowing no airy-fairy nonsense or 'mystic-boredom' from pretentiously over-admiring critics, she hurries us along, forces us to go on to the next aphorism before we have a chance to pause and digest the first. Smith dulls the impact of her own aphorisms. Like the poets she describes, her aphorisms do not seem to be important fellows. There will always be another aphorism.

Aphorism, Poets, and the 'Important Fellow'

ORR: So you don't think that the poet should occupy a unique or favoured place in society?

SMITH: No, I don't think he should at all. I think he should be just made to get on with his writing...and then if his poems are no good, then he must just be thrown out, I think.⁸

In this 1961 interview with Peter Orr, Smith reiterates her aphoristic view that '[t]he poet is not an important fellow'. Poets deserve no special treatment, she argues. They should be 'put in a room' and 'made to get on' with their work.⁹ Such solitude and

⁷ On the significance of the white space surrounding an aphorism, see, for instance, Clare Kennedy, *Paradox, Aphorism and Desire in Novalis and Derrida* (London: MHRA, 2008), 80; Gary Saul Morson, 'The Aphorism: Fragments from the Breakdown of Reason,' *New Literary History* 34, no. 3 (2003): 423; Ben Grant, *The Aphorism and Other Short Forms* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 55; Barbara Spackman, 'Machiavelli and Maxims,' *Yale French Studies* 77 (1990): 152.

⁸ Peter Orr, 'Stevie Smith,' in *In Search of Stevie Smith*, 37.

⁹ *Ibid.*

peace seem like a form of very special treatment, which a poet might be grateful to receive.

But being out of the run of common life, detached and kept in isolation, represents for Smith a way of being ordinary. Her father abandoned the family and her mother died when Smith was a child. Smith lived, therefore, with her aunt in her suburban house in Palmers Green, and made the eccentric decision to remain in this archetypally 'normal' English environment all her life. The fact that she never married, that she was known to her aunt and to her neighbours not as the winner of the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 1969, but as simply 'Peggy', was and continues to be a source of fascination for readers and critics. Isolation and separation from the mainstream of life stand ironically, for Smith, for a kind of ultra-normal invisibility.

Such an interplay between being special and eccentric, and being ordinary, average, invisible – and in fact deriving that eccentricity from a particular kind of performative normality, an inconsequentiality which refuses to sustain its own grandeur – runs through Smith's poetry. Eccentricity, as for Edith Sitwell in her *English Eccentrics* (1933) (published three years before Smith's first novel), comes to seem simply 'Ordinariness, carried to...a high degree of perfection'.¹⁰ This derivation of eccentricity from ordinariness is key to reading Stevie Smith. She manages her relationships with other poets to make herself seem ordinary, just 'another poet' visibly influenced by a stream of other writers, past and present. Alice Ferrebe argues, accordingly, that much of Smith's work engages directly with her contemporaries, especially Movement

¹⁰ Edith Sitwell, *English Eccentrics* (London: The Folio Society, 1954), 4.

poetry;¹¹ Jane Dowson and Alice Entwhistle find that Smith's writing is highly representative of women's postwar writing, 'distill[ing] most of [its] chief characteristics and concerns'.¹² Paul Muldoon identifies, if not nods to her contemporaries, then at least echoes of Keats, Thomas Hood, Hardy and Edward Thomas in Smith's writing.¹³

Yet, even as her work positions her in a poetic tradition, Smith establishes her writing as different and eccentric. Will May outlines how Smith establishes her connection with the illustrated nonsense poetry of Edward Lear only in order to minimise it. She positions herself cosily in that tradition, he argues, while effacing her relationship with Lear, in a bid to highlight her own uniqueness.¹⁴ So, on other occasions, Smith employs conventional verse forms and imagery, inhabiting Victorian and Modern styles, but mingles these with the casually grisly, out-of-place or colloquial. In 'The Bereaved Swan', Smith interrupts Tennysonian melancholy by comparing the titular swan to 'a cake / Of soap' (CP, 35); 'Spanish School', on grief and suffering in Spanish art, turns by the end of the fourth line into a clerihew – and then even more startlingly, goes on to abandon that inherently comic form (CP, 17). 'A Father for a Fool' claims, in its subtitle, to be singable to the tune 'Boys and Girls Come Out To Play'; by the end of the third line, however, the poem has wandered wholly away from the metre of that song (CP,

¹¹ Alice Ferrebe, *Literature of the 1950s: Good, Brave Causes* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 110.

¹² Jane Dowson and Alice Entwhistle, *A History of Twentieth-Century British Women's Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 107.

¹³ Paul Muldoon, *The End of the Poem: Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London: Faber & Faber, 2006), 141-153.

¹⁴ Will May, 'Drawing Away from Lear: Stevie Smith's Deceitful Echo,' in *Edward Lear and the Play of Poetry*, ed. James Williams and Matthew Bevis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 316-338.

119). The outlandish occupies the same space as the nondescript, the two absorbed so thoroughly into each other that our capacity to notice the disjunction is disrupted.¹⁵

Geographically, the suburb, where Smith lived since she was three, stands as a symbol of this paradox: a space out of the main sway of life, which simultaneously represents a ground-zero of the normal. Smith was proud of her suburban identity. She writes about Palmers Green (disguised as ‘Syler’s Green’ and ‘Bottle Green’) in her poems, novels and essays.¹⁶ Following John Carey’s emphasis on Smith’s unironic enjoyment of the suburbs’ human reliability,¹⁷ Alison Light argues that the suburbs offer Smith material on a particular kind of gendered Englishness, based around the ‘virtues of private life’.¹⁸ This emphasis on self-positioning outside the prominent and public in turn informs Kristin Bluemel’s view that the suburbs mirror Smith’s ‘out-of-place’ persona and writing.¹⁹ While Simon Dentith has highlighted Smith’s sometimes critical stance towards suburban inauthenticity, emphasising the ‘tonal illegibility’ in her treatment of the suburbs,²⁰ Ged Pope suggests that the very ambivalence, performativity and liminality of the suburbs allowed Smith to enact a variety of roles.²¹ To these analyses, I add that the suburb-dweller does not seem really to be “living”, or seems not to live

¹⁵ See Noreen Masud, ‘“Ach ja”: Stevie Smith’s Escheresque Metamorphoses,’ *Cambridge Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (2016): 251.

¹⁶ Stevie Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper* (London: Virago, 2014), 110; Stevie Smith, ‘Syler’s Green,’ in *Me Again*, 83-99.

¹⁷ John Carey, *The intellectuals and the masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1830-1939* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), 67-9.

¹⁸ Alison Light, ‘Outside History? Stevie Smith, Women Poets and the National Voice,’ *English: The Journal of the English Association* 43, no. 177 (1994): 241.

¹⁹ Kristin Bluemel, ‘“Suburbs are not so bad I think”: Stevie Smith’s Problem of Place in 1930s and ‘40s London’, *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 3 (2003): 104.

²⁰ Simon Dentith, ‘Thirties Poetry and the Language of Suburbia,’ in *Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism and After*, ed. Keith Williams and Steven Matthews (London and New York: Longman, 1997), 120.

²¹ Ged Pope, *Reading London’s Suburbs: From Charles Dickens to Zadie Smith* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 112.

enthusiastically enough, even as they live the most “normal” life imaginable. Living in a suburb, you are ‘on the edge’ – but so, somehow, is everyone else.

Spending her life with her aunt, unmarried, commuting into London to work as a secretary, writing in her dead office hours, Smith lived not exactly a double life, but one which disrupts the opposition between the invisibly normal and the visibly, strikingly unusual. It was both an unexceptional and humdrum private life, and an eccentric one: literally off-centre, outside central London, and additionally outside the norms of the heterosexual romance narratives which Smith’s publishing company churned out in magazines like *Peg’s Paper*. While the women in these magazine stories found husbands and generated lovely ‘kiddies’,²² Smith broke off her engagement to Eric Armitage and began a lifelong public and private performance as a kind of precocious and naughty little girl.

Dressing up in a pinafore to recite her poems, in her fifties and sixties, enabled Smith, Laura Severin argues, to dodge her social obligations.²³ Performance offered her, as it offered her twentieth-century contemporaries Edith Sitwell and Mina Loy, a way of existing at a slant to the life she had to live. Jan Montefiore, Deryn Rees-Jones and Ian Gregson identify echoes of Sitwell’s phrasing, surreal imagery and disruptive use of sound in Smith’s writing.²⁴ The similarity extends to the poets’ use of performance. Sitwell performed her work *Façade* behind a curtain, through a megaphone of

²² Smith, *Novel*, 115.

²³ Laura Severin, ‘Becoming and unbecoming: Stevie Smith as performer,’ *Text and Performance Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (1998): 23.

²⁴ Janet Montefiore, *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The dangerous flood of history* (London: Routledge, 1996), 131; Deryn Rees-Jones, *Consorting with Angels: Essays on Modern Women Poets* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2005), 87; Ian Gregson, ‘Post/Modernist rhythms and voices: Edith Sitwell and Stevie Smith to Jo Shapcott and Selima Hill,’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century British and Irish Women’s Poetry*, ed. Jane Dowson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 9.

compressed grass,²⁵ and staged, according to Alexandra Harris, a fantasia through her wardrobe of ‘brocades and taffetas and huge embroidered coats’.²⁶ Melissa Bradshaw draws out the campness of Sitwell’s performance of Lady Macbeth in the US in 1950: ‘the elaborate costumes, the hammy overacting, the disconnect between Sitwell’s age and the role she’s playing (Sitwell was sixty-three).’²⁷ Smith’s performance, however, derives not from exaggeratedly feminised trappings, but from the costume of a well-brought-up little girl: pinafore, patent-leather shoes. When she gets up on stage and sings her poems in the sixties, in what John Gross called ‘a queer, flat voice’,²⁸ off-key and unsettling, she becomes, contradictorily, the dutiful little girl doing her school performance piece.

Both Smith’s life and Smith’s work, then, manage to participate at once in the eccentric and in the average. She casts herself and her writing both as striking, and as nothing particularly special. Her self-portrayal as eccentric, as *sui generis*, derives from the normalcy at the heart of eccentricity itself. Eccentricity involves giving oneself wholeheartedly to the normal, embracing one’s role as ‘not an important fellow’ so strongly that one stands out starkly.

And Smith arranges her aphorisms in *X* to mirror this dynamic. Each aphorism in her piece says something explosive which is also, at the same time, unimportant and replaceable, as the next one appears immediately afterwards without pause or separation

²⁵ Richard Greene, *Edith Sitwell: Avant-Garde Poet, English Genius* (London: Virago, 2011), 155.

²⁶ Alexandra Harris, *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2010), 64.

²⁷ Melissa Bradshaw, ‘Lady Macbeth Goes to Hollywood,’ *Modernism/modernity* 23, no. 1 (2016): 24.

²⁸ John Gross, ‘Ruthless rhymes,’ *Observer*, December 11, 1966.

by white space. They hover between weighty value and disposability: their brevity balances between signifying pithy accuracy, and a lack of substance.

From the beginning, Smith's poetry tends towards the brief and the summative. Calvin Bedient notes Smith's 'epigrammatic incisiveness',²⁹ and reviewers remarked on the prevalence of the two- to four-line 'epigram' in Smith's first collection *A Good Time Was Had By All* (1937), with *Granta* quoting examples to demonstrate Smith's 'freshness and incisiveness'.³⁰ Writing in the *New Statesman*, G. W. Stonier contrasted *A Good Time Was Had By All* with the longer, free-flowing prose of *Novel on Yellow Paper*: this, he suggested, was 'her briefer, more caustic, aphoristic vein', in which Smith 'can begin and leave off so often in a few lines.'³¹ The sharp edge of 'On the Death of a German Philosopher' falls on a particular satirical target, in line with the demands of epigram:

He wrote *The I and the It*
He wrote *The It and the Me*
He died at Marienbad
And now we are all at sea.³²

An epigram is a dignified form, classical and stony: not, perhaps, in the word of the *Granta* reviewer, 'fresh'. A fresh epigram responds to immediate events: one doubts whether, or how, it can last. So Smith's reviewers acknowledged that brevity might become disposability. Looking back at her career in the sixties, a review of *Selected*

²⁹ Calvin Bedient, *Eight Contemporary Poets* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 140.

³⁰ P. G. B. K., *Granta* 46, May 5, 1937; the *TLS* also called her poem 'Alfred the Great' an 'epigram' ('Humour,' *Times Literary Supplement*, May 8, 1937).

³¹ G. W. Stonier, 'The Music Goes Round and Round,' *New Statesman* 13, April 17, 1937.

³² Stevie Smith, *The Collected Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith*, ed. Will May (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), 4. All further references are to this edition, and indicated in the text as CP.

Poems in the *San Francisco News* spoke of her ‘casual throwaway lines’.³³ The tiny poem ‘Pearl’, for instance, appeared in 1966:

Then cried the American poet where she lay supine:
‘My name is Purrel; I was caast before swine.’ (CP, 530)

Like the joke, the poem is ‘throwaway’: it elicits only a moment of attention and a (very) weak laugh before being ‘caast’ aside. Reviewing *The Frog Prince*, in which ‘Pearl’ appeared, Bernard Bergonzi thought the book had ‘strong hints of the cracker-motto’,³⁴ and a review in the *Spectator* noted the ‘lines suitable for a Christmas cracker’.³⁵ Stevie Smith’s poetry becomes something to be read with interest, laughed (or groaned) at, and then thrown away without further thought.

The disposability of Smith’s poems does not prevent them, for her reviewers, from being interesting. John Gross acknowledges this in his review of Smith’s *The Frog Prince*, describing Smith’s writing as ‘poems, squibs, jottings, thumbnail elegies, call them what you will’. For Gross, her poems are equally small explosive ‘squibs’, all bright light and noise and no lasting substance, and ‘thumbnail elegies’, exquisitely condensed monuments to something lost. The explosive can be both earth-shaking and transient.

Gross does not settle the case. Instead he remarks: ‘[t]here is no one quite like Stevie Smith’.³⁶ The very evasiveness and undecidability of her small, unstable texts give

³³ ‘Wastrels, Pirates, Poets in Paperbacks,’ *San Francisco News-Call Bulletin*, June 6, 1964.

³⁴ Bernard Bergonzi, ‘Tones of voice,’ *The Guardian*, December 16, 1966.

³⁵ C. B. Cox, ‘Scots and English,’ *Spectator*, February 17, 1967.

³⁶ Gross, ‘Ruthless rhymes.’

Smith, in Gross's view, her valuable uniqueness. A 1963 review of Smith's *Selected Poems* in *The Tablet* considers the selection with pokerfaced approval: the book includes 'sufficient of the really dotty epigrams to satisfy the most exigent.'³⁷ If you are a Stevie Smith fan, in other words – a really dedicated fan – then you will want what is most characteristic and opinion-dividing of her work: namely, 'the really dotty epigrams', the texts which mark themselves most clearly as eccentric.

Reinforcing this sense of Stevie Smith as an essentially, or most characteristically, epigrammatic or aphoristic writer are Elizabeth Bowen's remarks on Smith's novel *The Holiday* (1949). Though *The Holiday* is a full-length novel, Bowen remarks that several of the protagonist Celia's reflections 'might well be cut out and pasted up on walls.'³⁸ A note of flusteredness in the face of wayward genre, or slight irony, emerges when she observes, "'The Holiday'" being a novel, not a book of *pensées*, it behoves the reviewer to give some idea of set-out and plot'.³⁹ Bowen hints that *The Holiday* resists this treatment; that it tends always towards the status of compendium of short-texts. Smith's reviewers, then, connect her 'dottiness' to her short texts, and their contested status: a microcosm of the critical dilemmas which her poetry poses more broadly.

This 'dottiness' can be prized as collectable and worth preserving. John Gross includes two of Smith's short poems in *The Oxford Book of Aphorisms*:

Ceux qui luttent ce sont ceux qui vivent,
And down here they luttent a very great deal indeed.
But if life be the desideratum, why grieve, ils vivent.

³⁷ 'Angle Shot,' *The Tablet* 217, June 15, 1963.

³⁸ Elizabeth Bowen, 'Bright-Plumaged Brood,' *The Tatler and Bystander*, October 5, 1949.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

STEVIE SMITH, 'Ceux qui luttent...', *The Frog Prince*, 1966⁴⁰

Sin recognized – but that – may keep us humble,
But oh, it keeps us nasty.

STEVIE SMITH, 'Recognition not Enough', *Selected Poems*, 1964⁴¹

And Geoffrey Grigson includes five of Smith's poems in *The Faber Book of Epigrams and Epitaphs* (1977), including 'This Englishwoman':

This Englishwoman is so refined
She has no bosom and no behind.⁴²

Gross and Grigson sense a tendency in Smith's writing on which Louis MacNeice also picks up in *Modern Poetry* (1938); he brackets Stevie Smith's work with Dorothy Parker's 'hard-boiled' quips.⁴³ Smith had read Parker's stories,⁴⁴ and their chatty colloquial style had an influence, Smith herself conceded, on the tone of *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936).⁴⁵ But Parker herself was influenced by the French maxim writer La Rochefoucauld, whom she had read at school; she subsequently began her writing career by composing witty captions.⁴⁶ Parker's poetry bears the marks of this aphoristic training. Its quick brevity casts the heavy into flippancy and lightness, as in her sarcastically-named 'Two-Volume Novel':

The sun's gone dim, and

⁴⁰ John Gross, ed. *The Oxford Book of Aphorisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 30.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁴² Geoffrey Grigson, ed. *The Faber Book of Epigrams and Epitaphs* (London: Faber & Faber, 1977), 232-3.

⁴³ Louis MacNeice, *Modern Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938), 148; Calvin Bedient, *Eight Contemporary Poets* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 140.

⁴⁴ Jack Barbera and William McBrien, *Stevie: A Biography of Stevie Smith* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 75; Frances Spalding, *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 111.

⁴⁵ Kay Dick, *Ivy and Stevie* (London: Allison & Busby, 1983), 73.

⁴⁶ Arthur F. Kinney, *Dorothy Parker* (Boston: Twayne, 1978), 27-8.

The moon's turned black;
For I loved him, and
He didn't love back.⁴⁷

D. H. Lawrence's pithy style also had an impact on Smith. She copied snippets of his writing into her reading notebooks, and thereafter adapted them for inclusion, unacknowledged, in *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936).⁴⁸ An early reviewer called Smith's first collection, *A Good Time Was Had By All* (1937), the 'feminine counterpart' of Lawrence's *Pansies* (1929).⁴⁹ Smith does not mention *Pansies* in her reading journals, but it was highly publicised in the newspapers for indecency, and she is unlikely to have missed it.⁵⁰ Lawrence's poems in this collection are as brief, cutting and flippant as many of Smith's:

When I wish I was rich, then I know I am ill.
Because, to tell the truth, I have enough as I am.
So when I catch myself thinking: Ah, if I was rich—!
I say to myself: Hello! I'm not well. My vitality is low.— ('Riches')⁵¹

In his 'Introduction', Lawrence described these short poems as a reimagining (and improvement) of Pascal's *Pensées*.

It suits the modern temper better to have its state of mind made up of apparently irrelevant thoughts that scurry in different directions, yet belong to the same nest...we prefer it to those slightly didactic opinions and slices of wisdom which are laid horizontally across the pages of Pascal's *Pensées* or La Bruyère's *Caractères*, separated only by *pattes des mouches*, like faint sprigs of parsley. Let every *pensée* trot on its own little paws, not be laid like a cutlet trimmed with a *patte de mouche*.⁵²

⁴⁷ Dorothy Parker, *The Collected Dorothy Parker* (London: Duckworth, 1973), 238.

⁴⁸ Smith, *Novel*, 172.

⁴⁹ G. W. Stonier, 'The Music Goes Round and Round,' *New Statesman* 13, April 17, 1937.

⁵⁰ See Christopher Pollnitz, 'The Censorship and Transmission of D. H. Lawrence's *Pansies*: The Home Office and the "Foul-Mouthed Fellow",' *Journal of Modern Literature* 28, no. 3 (2005): 46.

⁵¹ D. H. Lawrence, *The Poems: Volume I*, ed. Christopher Pollnitz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 432.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 663.

Situating his writing against the short-form work of Pascal and La Bruyère, Lawrence imagines his poems as mobile and lively, shapeshifting between flowers and tiny scurrying animals which take their own chaotic paths. Pascal's fragments, in contrast, are passive and heavy: the tiny animals have been butchered, 'laid horizontally', waiting to be consumed. In his 'Foreword' to *Pansies*, Lawrence finds them too weighty: 'repellant, slightly bullying...If it were put into poetry it wouldn't nag at us so practically. We don't want to be nagged at.'⁵³ For Lawrence, poetry deflates the assertiveness of a strong thought. While short units of prose might be tight and bullet-like, Lawrence's wandering lines may wander from their mark. They steer clear of being powerful; they dissolve tactfully.

Framing his poems against Pascal's nagging "thoughts" allows Lawrence to claim he is deflating his own forcefulness. His "pansies", in fact, border on didactic:

Kill money, put money out of existence.
It is a perverted instinct, a hidden thought
which rots the brain, the blood, the bones, the stones, the soul.

Make up your mind about it:
that society must establish itself upon a different principle
from the one we've got now.

We must have the courage of mutual trust.
We must have the modesty of simple living.
And the individual must have his house, food and fire all free
like a bird. ('Kill money—')⁵⁴

Anaphora hammers Lawrence's point home; the lines, breaking free from formal constraints and running on, might mimic the scurrings of an untethered animal, but

⁵³ Ibid., 671.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 422.

they also weigh down the poem. Lawrence's writing is more ponderous than Smith's, and more unambiguously didactic, but a weighty poetry collection for which one nevertheless claims the status of 'light' bears some similarity, as I will suggest, to Smith's own self-presentation.

W. H. Auden, Smith's contemporary, defended light verse. For Auden, a poet produces light verse when they experience a sense of community with society; they will then use the straightforward language which Auden considers key to the genre.⁵⁵ It is specifically in Auden's sense of the term that Jan Montefiore positions Smith's writing as 'light verse', citing the communal feeling which Smith establishes with her audience.⁵⁶ Both Auden and Smith performed their poetry, often choosing to present funny or whimsical selections. They were recorded singing together in the pub in 1965, and read one after another at a performance in Edinburgh which was broadcast on the BBC Third Programme.⁵⁷

Auden introduced his *Oxford Book of Light Verse* with the claim 'Light verse can be serious.'⁵⁸ Edward Mendelson takes Auden's cue, suggesting that Auden chose to write in accessible, 'light' styles because they 'allowed him to write about emotion and experience that more difficult and obscure styles would falsify or distort.'⁵⁹ Though Auden is often satirical, Mendelson's claim does not quite accommodate the variety of

⁵⁵ W. H. Auden, 'Light Verse,' in *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), 363.

⁵⁶ Jan Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women's Writing* (London: Pandora, 2004), 42-3.

⁵⁷ BBC Third Programme, 'Poets in Public: W. H. Auden and Stevie Smith introducing and reading their own poems,' British Library, NP884.

⁵⁸ Auden, 'Light Verse,' 364.

⁵⁹ Edward Mendelson, 'Preface,' in W. H. Auden, *As I Walked Out One Evening: Songs, ballads, lullabies, limericks and other light verse*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), ix.

short, often funny pieces which Auden wrote. Like Smith, he wrote clerihews, publishing an entire collection in *Academic Graffiti* (1971), as well as humorously aphoristic short pieces:

Man would be happy, loving and sage
If he didn't keep lying about his age.⁶⁰

I am beginning to lose patience
With my personal relations.
They are not deep
And they are not cheap.⁶¹

Michael Horovitz identifies an earlier precedent for Smith's 'emphatic aphoristic edges' by comparing her 'To School!' with Blake's 'Thank God, I was never sent to school / To be flogged into following the style of a fool'.⁶² Indeed, Smith described Blake's poetry as 'easy echoes to catch',⁶³ and both Blake and Smith linger on the Bible's 'numerical proverbs' (of which more in Chapter Four). While Smith includes some in the *Batsford Book of Children's Poetry* (1970), which she edited, Blake recasts them in his 'Proverbs of Hell' in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*:

The roaring of lions, the howling of wolves, the raging of the stormy sea, and the destructive sword, are portions of eternity too great for the eye of man.⁶⁴

Romana Huk feels that Smith is 'tempt[ed]' by Blake's aphoristic style of 'oracular prophecy and denouncement', but implies that she resists it: 'a romantic rhetoric of

⁶⁰ W. H. Auden, *As I Walked Out One Evening*, 12.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶² Michael Horovitz, 'Of Absent Friends,' in Sternlicht, *In Search of Stevie Smith*, 150; William Blake, *Blake: The Complete Poems*, ed. W. H. Stevenson (London: Pearson Education, 2007), 630.

⁶³ Jonathan Williams, 'Much Further Out Than You Thought,' in Sternlicht, *In Search of Stevie Smith*, 43.

⁶⁴ Blake, *Complete Poems*, 114.

hieratic authority that she abhorred and undermined when aware of this takeover of her lines'.⁶⁵ I argue, in contrast, that Smith deliberately employs an aphoristic aesthetic, like many of her forebears and contemporaries, but to unique effect. Her aphoristic writing gives form to the doubleness of eccentricity, presenting itself as at once striking, memorable and revelatory, and entirely normal or assimilable. It offers Smith a way of being both dotty and worth preserving, both unique and of her time – and, I will suggest, provides her with a way of making bold statements which remain safely cut off from being used or responded to emotionally. Aphorism allows its speaker to express something fully while cauterising the reader's emotional or intellectual response to what she says: it unburdens the speaker of the need to be useful, or even audible.

A Brief History of Aphorism

The word 'aphorism' itself derives from the Greek; the phrase 'to aphorize' comes from ἀφορίζειν, 'to define,' parsable as ἀπό ('off') and ὀρίζειν ('to set bounds').⁶⁶ The term dates back to Hippocrates, whose *Aphorisms* sum up established rules for medical practice.⁶⁷ Proverbs and epigrams, forms related to the aphorism, also circulated in ancient Greece: philosophers and statesmen used proverbs to support their arguments, while monuments bore engraved epigrams in memory of particular events.⁶⁸

Gradually, this relatively clear distinction of function and origin became more complex.

'Proverb' expanded to span several genres: the contents of the Book of Proverbs in the

⁶⁵ Romana Huk, *Stevie Smith: Between the Lines* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2005), 64.

⁶⁶ 'aphorize, v,' OED Online, June 2017, Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/9152> (accessed September 19, 2017).

⁶⁷ See Joel E. Mann, *Hippocrates, On the Art of Medicine* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), 57-64.

⁶⁸ Niall Livingstone and Gideon Nisbet, *Epigram* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 5.

Bible, clichéd lines associated with ‘folk’ wisdom, as well as the model of the proverb offered by Erasmus in his *Adagia*. Contemporary critics tend to distinguish between proverb and aphorism: for instance, on the grounds that aphorism can extend beyond proverb’s quotable brevity;⁶⁹ that aphorism displays more urbanity than proverb’s folk-wisdom;⁷⁰ and that aphorism offers an individual voice, proverb a collective voice.⁷¹ In practice, Erasmus includes a very wide range of phrases in his collection: from full sentences such as ‘Seven make a feast, nine make a fray’ to brief metaphorical phrases like ‘swan-song’.⁷² He suggests in his introduction: ‘a complete definition...may be reached by saying: ‘A proverb is a saying in popular use, remarkable for some shrewd and novel turn.’’⁷³ Far from being well-worn and clichéd, Erasmus sees the proverb as possessing originality and difficulty of the sort we might now associate with, for instance, Nietzschean aphorisms. ‘The difficulty of proverbs,’ he remarks, ‘calls for respect’.⁷⁴

Following Erasmus’s wide and inclusive model of the proverb, in the notebook culture of the Renaissance, aphorisms gained a wider, scientific scope as a brief and easily notable precept.⁷⁵ Francis Bacon used the form as a means of resisting a scientific model centred on a claim of full, perfect understanding. Aphorisms, in opposition to this model of complete knowledge, were ‘short, unconnected sentences, not methodically

⁶⁹ See Gross, *Oxford Book of Aphorisms*, viii.

⁷⁰ See John Fagg, *On the Cusp: Stephen Crane, George Bellows, and Modernism* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009), 129.

⁷¹ See John Dominic Crossan, *In Fragments: The Aphorisms of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 20.

⁷² Erasmus, *Collected Works of Erasmus, Adages [i] to Iv100*, trans. Margaret Mann Philips (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 315, 195.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁷⁵ Grant, 13-14.

arranged'.⁷⁶ Using aphorisms in scientific writing ensures, according to Bacon, that only 'the pith and heart of sciences' can be included, with 'some good quantity of observation'.⁷⁷ Aphorisms, 'representing a knowledge broken, do invite men to inquire farther', whereas a more integrated, full-length presentation, Bacon argues, makes readers feel deceptively secure in a realm in which all knowledge seems to have been discovered.⁷⁸ Though Bacon's emphasis on brokenness foregrounds incompleteness rather than the summative tone of later aphorisms, we find David Wright riffing on this tradition in his letter to Stevie Smith when he dismisses the 'mystic-boredom' of 'the usual full-dress Lit. Crit articles' in favour of a few aphorisms.⁷⁹ Essays put their reader to sleep; the sharpness of aphorism awakens and invigorates.

This invigorating quality meant epigram also returned to prominence in the Renaissance, with John Donne, Ben Jonson and Thomas More among the numerous writers working within this genre. James Doelman suggests that epigrams at this time offered an insider perspective, satirising the vices of the context (church, court, society) in which the speaker finds themselves.⁸⁰ Accordingly, John Donne's address in 'The Lier' offers anonymous but intimately specific detail about the liar in question, such that those in the relevant social circle could not fail to recognise the subject of its sharp mockery:

Thou in the fields walkst out thy supping howers,
And yet thou swearst thou hast supp'd like a king;
Like Nabuchadnezar perchance with grass and flowers,

⁷⁶ Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, ed. Lisa Jardine and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 71.

⁷⁷ Francis Bacon, 'The Advancement of Learning,' in *Francis Bacon: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 234.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 235.

⁷⁹ Letter from David Wright to Stevie Smith, Series 1, Box 11, Folder 7, Stevie Smith papers, University of Tulsa.

⁸⁰ James Doelman, 'Epigrams and Political Satire in Early Stuart England,' *Huntingdon Library Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (2006): 36.

A Sallet worse then Spanish dyeting.⁸¹

Although the form was no longer primarily associated with an engraving, the premise of Alexander Pope's famous 'Epigram. Engraved on the Collar of a Dog which I gave to his Royal Highness' of course retains this connection:

I am his Highness' Dog at Kew;
Pray tell me Sir, whose Dog are you?⁸²

While, in the twentieth century, Crossan refuses to distinguish between aphorism and epigram,⁸³ W. H. Auden and Louis Kronenberger do differentiate the forms in their 'Introduction' to *The Faber Book of Aphorisms* (1965). While Bacon celebrated the productively partial knowledge of aphorism, Auden and Kronenberger define the aphorism as stating a universal truth (in contrast to their view that epigrams need only be true of a single occasion). Epigrams, they add, must be brief and funny; aphorisms need not amuse, and can extend over several sentences.⁸⁴ Despite this apparent strictness of definition, Auden and Kronenberger include a range of short texts (quotations from Woolf's diaries, for instance) which stretch their own terms, being extremely specific to a particular situation.⁸⁵ The rules of aphorism, here as always, seem laid down only in order to be broken.

⁸¹ John Donne, *John Donne: The Satires, Epigrams and Verse Letters*, ed. W. Milgate (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 53.

⁸² Alexander Pope, *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (London and New York: Routledge, 1963), 826.

⁸³ Crossan, 22.

⁸⁴ W. H. Auden and Louis Kronenberger, 'Foreword' in *The Faber Book of Aphorisms* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), vii.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 372.

The continental aphorism has an equally complex history. In seventeenth-century France, Blaise Pascal produced the *Pensées* which David Wright would name to Stevie Smith as a possible model for her thoughts on poetry, and on which D. H. Lawrence would riff in *Pansies*. Pascal's short, religious fragments are notes for a book, whose ordering can only be tentatively guessed at. The *Pensées* focus on religious faith, self-knowledge and doubt, sometimes in the form of unanswered questions or half-sentences:

58 *Man's condition*. Inconstancy, boredom, anxiety.⁸⁶

Other *pensées*, however, are less fragmentary; they issue specific moral demands in final tones and complete, imperative sentences:

We must know ourselves. Even if that did not help in discovering truth, it would at least help in putting order into our life. Nothing is more proper.⁸⁷

In its form, and its focus on propriety, this *pensée* evokes the salon maxims of Pascal's contemporaries: brief, witty lines which, Richard T. Gray argues, aim to integrate the speaker successfully into his social milieu.⁸⁸ François de La Rochefoucauld's maxims bear comparison with Pascal's texts:

When we read too quickly or too slowly we understand nothing.⁸⁹ [Pascal]

⁸⁶ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, ed. Anthony Levi, trans. Honor Levi (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1999), 14.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁸⁸ Richard T. Gray, *Constructive Destruction: Kafka's Aphorisms: Literary Tradition and Literary Transformation* (Munich: Walter de Gruyter, 2012), 41-42.

⁸⁹ Pascal, 16.

Passion often turns the cleverest man into a fool, and often makes the worst fools clever.⁹⁰ [La Rochefoucauld]

Both Pascal and La Rochefoucauld enjoy finding the innate or potential similarities between extremes of behaviour, often in phrasing built around smooth reversals and rhetorical neatness. ‘We are often strong out of weakness, and bold out of timidity’ represents a characteristic La Rochefoucauld maxim.⁹¹ Although maxims are often critically defined by their tendency to lay down rules of conduct,⁹² La Rochefoucauld’s writings, as Philip E. Lewis notes, do not in fact offer direct moral guidance.⁹³ Instead, they most frequently lament the difficulty of judging the right moral path: ‘It is hard to judge whether a straightforward, sincere, honourable deed has resulted from integrity or cleverness.’⁹⁴ La Rochefoucauld’s maxims ruthlessly unmask the despicable motives behind apparently good behaviour: ‘What we call generosity is most often merely the vanity of giving.’⁹⁵ The theme of ‘merely’ (*n'est le plus souvent que*) recurs over and over again: clemency of rulers is merely strategy,⁹⁶ constancy merely confined agitation,⁹⁷ friendship merely social contract.⁹⁸ These maxims reveal themselves as unexpectedly dark, hopeless and ultimately uninformative. They remain ‘thoughts’, like *pensées*, rather than easily-usable guides.

⁹⁰ François de la Rochefoucauld, *Collected Maxims and Other Reflections*, trans. E. H. and A. M. Blackmore and Francine Giguère (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5.

⁹¹ La Rochefoucauld, 7.

⁹² See, for instance, Spackman, 140.

⁹³ Philip E. Lewis, *La Rochefoucauld: The Art of Abstraction* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1977), 17.

⁹⁴ La Rochefoucauld, 49.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

La Rochefoucauld's capacity to withdraw from instruction into dark, solitary contemplation prefigures the line of influence that links his salon-friendly French maxims to a separate German tradition emerging from the eighteenth century onwards, represented by writers such as Georg Lichtenberg, Friedrich Nietzsche, Franz Kafka and, later, Karl Kraus.⁹⁹ Gray differentiates this tradition by suggesting that while the French maxim aims to win its author social acceptance and approval in the salon, the German aphorism is an isolationist form: written independently of any social context, and aiming to draw its reader out of the mainstream current of society.¹⁰⁰ For Gray, German aphorism is an eccentric form: on the margins, refusing to participate in its social context.

Credited with introducing the literary aphorism into German literature,¹⁰¹ the scientist and essayist Georg Christoph Lichtenberg filled fifteen 'waste books' with short texts. Although they vary in length and style, many are brief but tonally insistent:

That what you are searching for is usually in the last pocket you search is a putative empirical proposition, which I believe is assumed true in every land and every family; and yet no one seriously believes it.¹⁰²

Nietzsche admired Lichtenberg's aphorisms, reading and rereading them through his life and recommending them to his students.¹⁰³ Nevertheless, the French moralists were an equally strong influence on the aphoristic style of Nietzsche's *Human, All Too*

⁹⁹ Richard T. Gray, *Constructive Destruction: Kafka's Aphorisms: Literary Tradition and Literary Transformation* (Munich: Walter de Gruyter, 2012), 38.

¹⁰⁰ Gray, 44.

¹⁰¹ Steven Tester, 'Introduction,' in Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, *Georg Christoph Lichtenberg: Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Steven Tester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 1.

¹⁰² Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, *Georg Christoph Lichtenberg: Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Steven Tester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 81.

¹⁰³ Joel Westerdale, *Nietzsche's Aphoristic Challenge* (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyten, 2013), 31.

Human (1878), *The Dawn* (1881), *The Gay Science* (1882), *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883) and *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886). La Rochefoucauld's tendency to compare one's inner self and one's social self, and his diagnostic treatment of human qualities (displaying their unrecognised motivations clearly to view), emerges in several of Nietzsche's aphorisms:¹⁰⁴

Man is more sensitive to contempt from others than to contempt from himself.¹⁰⁵

Inconsiderate thinking is often the sign of a discordant inner state which craves numbness.¹⁰⁶

Several years later, Kafka maintains the connection between the German and French traditions. His *Züräu* "aphorisms" bear comparison to Pascal's *Pensées*, Kafka having, as Reiner Stach notes, looked through the French writer's notes just before he became ill.¹⁰⁷

Whoever in this world loves his neighbour does just as much and just as little wrong as who in this world loves himself. Remains the question whether the former is possible.¹⁰⁸

In its feeling-out of opposites at two extremes (just as much, just as little) and its half-sentences, Kafka's aphorism sits comfortably alongside those of both Pascal and La

¹⁰⁴ See, for instance, Alexander Nehemas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1985), 14.

¹⁰⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. Marion Faber and Stephen Lehmann (London: Penguin, 1984), 242.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 246.

¹⁰⁷ Reiner Stach, *Kafka: The Years of Insight*, trans. Shelley Frisch (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015), 229.

¹⁰⁸ Franz Kafka, *The Züräu Aphorisms*, trans. Michael Hoffman and Geoffrey Brock (London: Harvill Secker, 2006), 62.

Roche foucauld.¹⁰⁹ The tradition of German aphorisms which seem, in Richard T. Gray's view, to detach themselves from the social milieu of the maxim,¹¹⁰ continually displays the influence of maxim's salon context: the eccentric, isolationist form of aphorism turns out to be more 'centric' than it appears. The echo of Oscar Wilde's French-salon-style witticisms in Karl Kraus's aphorisms, evoking conventional sentiments before reversing the reader's expectations with slick assurance, is clearly audible:¹¹¹

I can say with pride that I have spent days and nights not reading anything, and that with unflagging energy I use every free moment to acquire gradually an encyclopaedic lack of education.¹¹² [Karl Kraus]

There is something tragic about the enormous number of young men there are in England at the present moment who start life with perfect profiles, and end by adopting some useful profession.¹¹³ [Oscar Wilde]

Maxim and aphorism have, in fact, resisted easy separation ever since Samuel Johnson defined the aphorism *as* 'a maxim; an unconnected position'.¹¹⁴ In customary usage and in critical discourse to this day, maxim and aphorism do not tend to be distinguished.¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁹ See Gray, 208, on Kafka's ownership of Chamfort's aphorisms.

¹¹⁰ Gray, 38-40. For further complication of this neat German-French separation, highlighting the differences between German aphorists, see Jill Marsden, 'Nietzsche and the Art of the Aphorism,' in *A Companion to Nietzsche*, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 25.

¹¹¹ See Edward Timms, *Karl Kraus: Apocalyptic Satirist: Culture and Catastrophe in Habsburg Vienna* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 189.

¹¹² Karl Kraus, *Half Truths and One-and-a-Half Truths: Karl Kraus: Selected Aphorisms*, ed. and trans. Harry Zohn (Manchester: Carcanet, 1986), 75.

¹¹³ Oscar Wilde, 'Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young,' in *Oscar Wilde: The Major Works*, ed. Isobel Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 573.

¹¹⁴ Samuel Johnson, *A dictionary of the English language; in which the words are deduced from their originals, explained in their different meanings, And Authorized by the Names of the Writers in whose Works they are Found* (London, 1799), 1: n. pag.

¹¹⁵ Critics who conflate maxim and aphorism include Grant, 17; Mary J. Muratore, 'Deceived by Truth: The Maxim as a Discourse of Deception in *La Princesse de Clèves*,' *Zeitschrift für Französische Sprache und Literatur* 104 (1994): 30-31; Marion Faber, 'The Metamorphosis of the French Aphorism: La Roche foucauld and Nietzsche,' *Comparative Literature Studies* 23, no. 3 (1986): 209; Harold E. Pagliaro, 'Paradox in the Aphorisms of La Roche foucauld and Some Representative English Followers,' *PMLA* 79, no. 1 (1964): 42-50; Simon Reader, 'Social Notes: Oscar Wilde, Francis Bacon, and the Medium of Aphorism,' *Journal of Victorian Culture* 18, no. 4 (2013): 454.

Through its history, then, aphorism exists in two states at once. From one point of view, the word ‘aphorism’ refers to a series of particular traditions: the Hippocratic medical, the Baconian scientific, the German isolationist. These coexist with, and are at various times critically differentiated from, the Renaissance epigram, the French salon maxim, the folk-proverb and the *pensée*, as well as a host of forms occasionally discussed in opposition to aphorism: axioms,¹¹⁶ dicta,¹¹⁷ riddles,¹¹⁸ parables,¹¹⁹ and slogans.¹²⁰ Yet these traditions have influenced each other indelibly, which has given rise to the second point of view: that aphorism is a broad term encompassing all of these short forms. Gary Saul Morson argues that aphorism and its variant forms have no single definition, and are in theory and practice used in overlapping ways.¹²¹ While this thesis unpacks Stevie Smith’s particular relationship to individual variants – proverb, caption and Romantic fragment, among others – its general stance follows Morson in using the term broadly.

If a definition of aphoristic genre proves impossible, so does a substantive definition of aphoristic form. No sooner can an identifying quality of aphorism be located, than a counter-example rebuts it. Aphorisms are often associated with brevity,¹²² but they frequently expand beyond a single sentence.¹²³ In fact, Morson suggests that an aphorism’s length has no real limit, arguing that longer forms display an ‘aphoristic

¹¹⁶ Grant, 57.

¹¹⁷ Morson, 416.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 413.

¹¹⁹ See Jacobus Liebenberg, *The Language of the Kingdom and Jesus* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2001), 512.

¹²⁰ See Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 14.

¹²¹ Morson, 409.

¹²² See, to give just two examples, Gross, *Oxford Book of Aphorisms*, viii; Fagg, 129; James Geary, *The World in a Phrase: A Brief History of the Aphorism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2005), 9-16.

¹²³ Gross, viii. Geary makes similar points in *The World in a Phrase*, 9-16.

consciousness'. He claims (with tongue only slightly in cheek) that '*War and Peace* is the longest aphorism in the world.'¹²⁴ Murray S. Davis argues that aphorism, as a form, is inherently unstable because it is intersectional, part of a spectrum:

...an "aphorism" is located at the intersection of five distinctive dimensions, from which its partial synonyms [i.e., for instance, maxim, axiom, epigram, proverb, cliché] move away: (a) intellectuality (from insight to conduct), (b) plausibility (from the possible to the undeniable, demonstrable, or provable), (c) generality (from universal to individual), (d) novelty (from new perspective to customary perspective), and (e) vitality (from stimulating to soporific).¹²⁵

But if aphorisms are not always brief, they tend as a (by no means definitive) rule to be self-contained.¹²⁶ John Fagg associates the form with a 'portability and detachability' which allows the text to be lifted and recycled into different contexts.¹²⁷ Aphorism, then, is a self-sufficient unit: Jacques Derrida notes, in 'Fifty-two Aphorisms for a Foreword', a series written as a foreword for a collection on architecture which teeters between serious and tongue-in-cheek, that aphorisms should be entirely self-enclosed and never refer to one another (even as the aphorisms in his own series clearly do).¹²⁸ Importantly, this gesture of enclosure comes as a corollary to another aspect of aphoristic form: its impression of summing everything up,¹²⁹ making a general declaration,¹³⁰ and, importantly, making a claim to be expressing some universal truth.¹³¹

¹²⁴ Morson, 412.

¹²⁵ Murray S. Davis, 'Aphorisms and Cliches: The Generation and Dissipation of Conceptual Charisma,' *Annual Review of Sociology* 25 (1999): 247.

¹²⁶ Alvin Snider, 'Francis Bacon and the authority of aphorism,' *Prose Studies* 11, no. 2 (1988): 60.

¹²⁷ Fagg, 136.

¹²⁸ Jacques Derrida, 'Fifty-two Aphorisms for a Foreword,' in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg, trans. Andrew Benjamin (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 2:121.

¹²⁹ See Derrida, 'Fifty-two Aphorisms,' 124.

¹³⁰ See Gross, *Oxford Book of Aphorisms*, viii.

¹³¹ See Fagg, 129.

Intriguingly, while the aphorism's form signals that it is conveying a highly significant, universal truth in a pithily-useful shape, many critical works on the aphorism are tongue-in-cheek or playful: not only Derrida's essay, but also, for instance, James Geary's chatty and colloquial study,¹³² and James Williams' humorous keynote speech at the 2015 conference 'Aphoristic Modernity' in York.¹³³ Aphorism's assertiveness seems funny, particularly to a modern reader: a declaration of certainty which seems either suspect or pompous, in need of deflation, or camp in its casual privileging of form over content. Thus Morson and Derrida write their essays on aphorism in aphorisms, capitalising for humour on the form's capacity for self-contradiction and urbane slickness. The relationship can reverse: if aphorism tends towards the camp, the camp equally tends towards the verbal artistry, memorable speech and resistance to direct knowing associated, as John Gross suggests,¹³⁴ with the aphoristic. So Susan Sontag writes her 'Notes on "Camp"' in aphorisms, and other writers on camp (Allan Pero, for instance) have followed suit.¹³⁵ Aphorism as a form accommodates absurdity.

Part of this capacity for humour derives from aphorism's emphasis on exaggerated or foregrounded style. In his study of Lichtenberg's aphorisms, J. Stern identifies the form broadly in terms of a 'resistance to fluent reading': he emphasises the importance of antithesis as an aphoristic formal device.¹³⁶ Gray notes the 'uncommon stylistic density' of Kafka's use of the form, arguing that it can perhaps be seen as a concentrated model

¹³² Geary, 3.

¹³³ James Williams, 'Dorothy Parker, A. E. Housman, and What Oscar Said,' keynote speech, *Aphoristic Modernity, 1890-1950*, York, July 4, 2015.

¹³⁴ Gross, viii.

¹³⁵ Susan Sontag, 'Notes on "Camp",' in *Against Interpretation* (London: Vintage, 2001), 275-292; Allan Pero, 'A Fugue on Camp,' *Modernism/modernity* 23, no. 1 (2016): 28-36.

¹³⁶ J. Stern, *Lichtenberg: A Doctrine of Scattered Occasions* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1959), 191.

of literary language in general.¹³⁷ Similarly, Alexander Nehemas argues for the importance of hyperbole to the aphoristic style, arguing that its usage by Nietzsche ‘helps the aphorism attract attention and, in its startlingness, reveals quite unexpected connections.’¹³⁸ Beverly Coyle surveys style most comprehensively: she identifies the aphorism’s regular deployment of formal devices which bolster its characteristic sense of ‘closure...finality and stability’,¹³⁹ including rhyme, meter, scansion, repetition, predicative sentence structure, unqualified assertion and a lack of adjectives.¹⁴⁰

For the purposes of this research, I understand aphorism in Morson’s inclusive sense, as including variant forms such as proverb, caption and fragment: writings which are either brief or give the impression of being brief, and which convey what we might call a dismissive sense of finality, whether through formal devices, arrangement on the page, social and literary context, or description by the author. Through this approach, I identify an aspect of aphorism which holds true across this range of forms: that it gives the impression of whisking itself away before it has been fully apprehended or unpacked. The aphoristic resides in a withholding of full revelation – as something unnecessary, or redundant, or even socially embarrassing – even as it signals, as a point taken for granted, that such revelation is entirely possible, and the reader should earnestly seek it. Although Nietzsche sees exegesis as fundamental to a reading of the aphorism in *The Genealogy of Morals*,¹⁴¹ his aphorisms in *Beyond Good and Evil* (making the most of the aphorism’s capacity to accommodate different perspectives)

¹³⁷ Gray, 4.

¹³⁸ Alexander Nehemas, *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1985), 23.

¹³⁹ Beverly Coyle, *A Thought to Be Rehearsed: Aphorism in Wallace Stevens’s Poetry* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983), 2.

¹⁴⁰ Coyle, 4-8.

¹⁴¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: World’s Classics, 1996), 10.

express a weariness at the core of deep understanding, an indifference to exegetical effort:

Once a matter has been clarified it no longer concerns us.¹⁴²

We no longer love our knowledge enough, once we have communicated it.¹⁴³

Developing his thoughts on reading Nietzsche in *Minima Moralia* (1951), Theodor Adorno recasts this aphoristic withholding of full discursion as a moral imperative. *Minima Moralia* consists of a series of short texts which Adorno himself calls aphorisms in his dedication, although most are several sentences long.¹⁴⁴ Many were written during Adorno's exile from Germany, before and during the Second World War: they originate from, reflect on and embody, in the phrase of the subtitle, a 'damaged life'. Adorno uses aphorisms as many Modernist writers used fragments: to represent a shattered world which resists cohesion. Their 'disconnected and non-binding character' allows Adorno to reject 'explicit theoretical cohesion' in favour of privileging subjective experience as a lens on philosophy.¹⁴⁵ Yet this does not entail an aimless laying out of scraps of writing which may or may not possess value. Adorno's reflections on Anatole France's *Jardin d'Épicure* dwell on the social responsibilities of short-form writing:

¹⁴² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. and ed. Marion Faber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 60.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁴⁴ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London and New York: Verso, 2005), 16.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

...one cannot help feeling [when reading France], despite gratitude for enlightenment dispensed, an uneasiness...It stems from the contemplative leisureliness, the sermonizing, however sporadic, the indulgently raised forefinger. The critical content of the thought is belied by that air of having all the time in the world...

His mode of delivery contains, beneath the poised humanity, a hidden violence: he can afford to talk in this way because no-one interrupts the master.

...the impossibility of uttering thoughts without arrogance, without trespassing on the time of others. The most urgent need of exposition, if it is to be in the least serviceable, is to keep such experiences always in view, and by its tempo, compactness, density, yet also its tentativeness, to give them expression.¹⁴⁶

What is significant about Adorno's criticism of France's diction as leisurely and self-indulgent is that, in form at least, France tends to keep his meditations at least as brief as Adorno's. The difference, Adorno thinks, is that France makes no effort to manage what he says: he brings forth platitudes 'as if no one may dare to notice their triteness'.¹⁴⁷ Adorno emphasises that the act of expressing a thought at all signals the privilege of presuming a right to speak and a right to take up the time of one's listener. The theorist, he suggests, must express a thought; it must be rich and solid. Yet it must also waver, must shyly seek a hearing without expectation or entitlement; it must take up no more space than it merits. If Nietzsche espouses frugality of expression because revelation can never be heeded with interest and understanding, Adorno adds an uncertainty about whether one's revelation in fact deserves to be listened to at all. Aphorism's proper work is to keep its truth-claim contained: to state itself flatly, but to manage its own boundaries so that it makes no demands.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 99-100.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 99.

Smith's Aphoristics

Collapsing vast, Whitmanesque generations into eight words with scrupulous frugality, Smith's poem 'All Things Pass' signals that it is taking up no more space than absolutely necessary:

All things pass
Love and mankind is grass. (CP, 53)

'All Things Pass' demonstrates the 'boundary-effects' which Beverly Coyle sees as fundamental to the aphorism. Here, alliteration, repetition, rhyme and meter 'create...a sense of closure...finality and stability'.¹⁴⁸ The stressed, monosyllabic rhymes bind the poem into a sealed, conclusive-sounding couplet; the predicative structure sweeps away the possibility of disagreement. Smith's superlative 'all', the poem's highlighted first word, underlines the text's claim to aphoristic irrefutability. These 'boundary-effects', in Coyle's terms, cordon off the truth which, the form implies, lies within. The reader is kept out; simultaneously, the author is kept reined in, restrained from an emotional reaction to what she describes which would overspill these strict boundaries.

In form and content, 'All Things Pass' presents easily as an aphorism. But what about a poem like 'Pearl'?

Then cried the American poet where she lay supine:
'My name is Purrel; I was caast before swine.' (CP, 530)

¹⁴⁸ Coyle, 2.
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The throwaway joke raises the question of whether Smith might perhaps be writing a far less dignified form than maxims or epigrams: clerihews, perhaps, or simply nonsensical doggerel? Smith spoke, in an interview, of her suspicion of perfect rhymes: an absolutely perfect rhyme may become a ‘jingle’.¹⁴⁹ In *Novel on Yellow Paper*, seeing the word ‘Lincs’ prompts the protagonist Pompey to make up the meaningless-but-catchy ‘Leafless Lincs for lovely drinks’.¹⁵⁰ If ‘All Things Pass’ occupies one end of Smith’s short-form spectrum, ‘Leafless Lincs’ floats about, disreputably, on the other.

An inscription by Stevie Smith, in Hamish Miles’s copy of her first collection, *A Good Time Was Had By All* (1937), seems to represent both ends of Smith’s aphoristic impulse. The first two lines later formed part of ‘Advice to Young Children’:

Children who paddle where the ocean bed shelves steeply
Must take great care they do not paddle too deeply¹⁵¹

Smith closes off her commanding, authoritative couplet, aphoristically, with a decisive and precise rhyme. The lines possess the ambiguity which Morson associates with the aphorism: pointing suggestively, mysteriously, beyond themselves to depth which – like the steeply shelving ocean floor – we are restrained from investigating or defining.¹⁵² It invites a metaphorical reading which simultaneously warns us against reading too thoroughly: like the children, we should perhaps not ‘paddle too deeply’.

¹⁴⁹ Orr, 36.

¹⁵⁰ Smith, *Novel*, 156.

¹⁵¹ Photocopy of frontispiece, Series 1, Box 6, Folder 2, Stevie Smith papers, University of Tulsa.

¹⁵² Morson, 421.

incurable aphorist, who decided that ‘To be premature is to be perfect’.¹⁵³ Adorno’s association of the aphorism with acts of withdrawal, withholding and self-management – in which the writer does not take for granted his or her right to be attended to, retreating from the scene in good time – maps fruitfully on to these poems. Smith’s lightness qualifies itself: a knowing and stagy production of lightness, keeping itself contained, which troubles our efforts to see it, really, as light.

So Smith muddles up our binary. Her jingle has the aphorism’s capacity to stop just short of what is necessary: to withdraw itself from a situation, like the aphorisms streaming by just too fast in *X*, before it can be productively dwelt on. Smith’s texts participate in this sense of the ‘aphoristic’, not simply due to their brevity and their quotation in collections, but because they have an imperious, declarative force which manifests in two ways. Firstly, form: many of Smith’s short poems do partake of Coyle’s ‘boundary-effects’. The second is in fact their unexpectedness and illegibility: the fact that we do not know how to interpret or receive her short texts. Taken aback, thrown off guard – flattened, in the case of the Hamish Miles inscription above, by its breeziness and speed – we receive the poems passively. In doing so, we inscribe them with the inscrutable authority associated with the aphoristic.

I take my cue from Wright, then, and from the generous vagueness which allows aphorisms to become muddled with *pensées*, when I argue that, in *X*, Stevie Smith lays noticeable claim to an aphoristic identity. This thesis explores the interpretative consequences of viewing Stevie Smith as an ‘aphoristic’ writer, focusing on one hand

¹⁵³ Oscar Wilde, ‘Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young,’ in *Oscar Wilde: The Major Works*, 572.

on short texts, and on the other on longer texts which display some of the same features on show in an aphoristic series. Acknowledging the range of possibilities in the aphoristic aesthetic, and paying particular attention to certain associated genres which Smith deploys in her writing, the thesis argues that the capacity of aphorism to withhold even as it holds forth offers an instructive lens for Smith's simple yet critically-resistant writing.

The first chapter begins with a literature review of Smith critics, then lays the groundwork for viewing Smith's aesthetic as aphoristic. Examining both very brief (clearly aphoristic) poems and longer poems, with reference to her novels, it demonstrates Smith's employment of aphoristic language to convey powerful truth-claims. The massive scale of these claims means that they, ironically, exceed assimilation and audibility. The chapter argues that Smith engineers her texts so that, following Wallace Stevens' conception of the 'epigrammatic', they can only be 'passed by' or gone away from, encountered but not used or engaged with.

Chapter Two considers how the aphorism enables specific effects of poetic 'flatness' in Smith's poetry. It reads Smith against theorisations of flatness, including Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best's 'surface reading', J. Hillis Miller, Jacques Derrida, and Steven Connor. With reference to Smith's poems, it argues that tonal, narrative and physical flatness provides a language for Smith's texts: daring us to interpret them, they nevertheless withhold the narrative distribution of significance which would aid interpretation.

The third chapter filters Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936) through her reading of Greek tragedy, and its implications for her presentation of narrative time. Developing Jacques Derrida's theorisation of aphorisms as at once 'monumental' and 'dissociated', it suggests that Smith uses myth (the aphorism being what "survives" from a (mythic) narrative) to create a model of time which keeps the climax inaccessible, recoverable only through a second-hand 'message' which arrives too late to learn from. The chapter also explores the epitaph, a sub-category of the aphorism which exemplifies this sense of belated recovery of residue from a past moment.

Chapter Four investigates *The Holiday's* (1949) treatment of proverb in light of the fairytale narratives which fascinated Smith, situating it alongside her 'proverbial' poems such as 'The Fool'. Drawing on theorisations of the fairytale, and unpublished material from the Smith archive, it argues that fairytale provides an instructive lens for understanding the proverb in Smith's writing. As an anonymous, thoroughly-known alternative to the aphorism, proverb survives in Smith's writing in the form of vivid images rather than moral messages, in a dynamic which marginalises any practical use-value.

Positioning a captioned drawing as the aphorism 'in practice', witnessed within a social situation, the fifth chapter examines Smith's two books of captioned images, *Some Are More Human Than Others* (1958) and *Cats in Colour* (1959), to uncover what it means for the aphorism to be or behave 'appropriately' in a given situation. It sets Smith's captioned drawings alongside contemporary and historical captioned cartoons, to explore her captions' relationships to their illustrations. The chapter argues that Stevie

Smith's caption-drawing dyads are particularly compelling where they are alternately inappropriate to one another, and inappropriately appropriate: so seamlessly fitting that they stymie our critical senses.

Chapter Six explores the ambiguous relationship, in Smith's writing, between aphorism and fragment. It finds that Smith often stages the transformation of one form into another, where she lengthens an apparently-complete text further (aphorism turns into fragment, the self-contained into the sequential), or prematurely terminates one which seemed to have more to convey (fragment turns out to be aphorism). The chapter interrogates the kinds of 'going on' which this aphorism-fragment oscillation enables. It argues that Smith's poetry demands to be gathered in an ever-growing collection of short, satisfying-but-unsatisfying texts, and locates that relationship between satisfaction and dissatisfaction in certain of Smith's longer poems which signal their extension far beyond what was poetically or rhetorically necessary.

The conclusion considers the threefold implications of the thesis. Firstly, it identifies and defines the aphorism's interplay between revelation and reticence. This then allows the thesis to take an original approach to Smith studies, proposing that the aphoristic model reconciles Smith's light and weighty moments, rather than seeing them as either alternating or deceptive. Thirdly, it indicates potential lines of connection, via the aphorism, between Smith and other early-twentieth-century writing, particularly by women. It indicates how these aphoristic rhythms which promise revelation, but sabotage the reader's capacity to use them, may suggest alternative readings of other writers in this period who incorporate short forms into their work.

Chapter One: Unnecessary Aphorisms

In their biography of Stevie Smith, Jack Barbera and William McBrien describe the perplexed reaction of one of Curtis Brown's readers, 'E.B', to a submission of Smith's poetry in 1934. E.B describes a page of 'several short verses', including texts not extant elsewhere: 'Casual copulation / Cheats the heart and the imagination.'¹⁵⁴ Calling Smith's writing 'bitty', 'ultra-1934', and (in pleasingly faint praise) 'so many', E.B ends her review in telling terms:

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.¹⁵⁵

Here, brusquely outlined, is the Smith-dilemma. The poet's brevity might easily be cast simply and approvingly as light-heartedness, humour, pleasing disposability – but even a reviewer as unsympathetic as E.B remains uneasy, suspecting a weight to the poems which she cannot find or access. The 'bitty' little poems which seem to claim little or no 'literary quality', or even content, manage nevertheless to signal a palpable but unlocatable 'power': to move, to transform, to reveal.

E.B.'s choice of the word 'power' matters here. This is not simply a question of 'quality' or 'value': words which do fall within the jurisdiction of a publisher's reader, whose job is to discern whether or not Smith's poems are any good. The bigger issue that E.B has sensed is that these are poems which seem poised to act, to do something. Smith's texts signal, covertly, that they are on the verge of communicating, revealing, clarifying.

¹⁵⁴ 'E.B', reader's report, Series 2, Box 4, Folder 17, Stevie Smith papers, 1924-1970. Coll. No. 1976.012. McFarlin Library. Department of Special Collections and University Archives. The University of Tulsa.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

But only nearly. As soon as the reader gains a foothold on Smith's writing, the text shifts underneath them. Smith's short poems constantly disrupt her reader's expectations: laying claim to aphoristic devices, they nevertheless fluctuate between making recognisably aphoristic truth-claims, and evacuating themselves of all interpretative potential. On one hand, poems like 'Reversionary' from *Tender Only to One* (1938) are clearly content-dense, exploring an idea which is at least partially graspable (that noble beings understand their own dishonour, and this shamed understanding hampers them from making their mark on the world), and which might, one imagines, be used: to inform a reader's actions. It shores up its power to convince by combining rhyme, repetition and assertion with recognisable fabular types and metaphorical implications:

The Lion dishonoured bids death come,
The worm in like hap lingers on,
The Lion dead, his pride no less,
The world inherits wormliness.¹⁵⁶

These formal techniques come under the heading of Beverly Coyle's aphoristic 'boundary-effects': a cluster of devices which contribute to the pithy convincingness of aphorism or epigram.¹⁵⁷ In contrast, 'Croft' from *Mother, What is Man?* (1942) conveys its initial impression of significance through a form which claims profundity far beyond its content:

¹⁵⁶ Stevie Smith, *The Collected Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith*, ed. Will May (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), 132. Further references to this edition are indicated in the text as CP.

¹⁵⁷ Beverly Coyle, *A Thought to Be Rehearsed: Aphorism in Wallace Stevens's Poetry* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983), 2.

Aloft
In the loft,
Sits Croft;
He is soft. (CP, 218)

Each statement in this poem is predicatively unassailable: truth-claims whose very brevity permits no space for argument. Tantalisingly drawn-out, buttressing its imperiousness with predicative structure and rhyme, 'Croft' builds, line by short, assertive line, to a position of 'aloft' authority. As Croft sits on high, we feel he is preparing to declaim a revelation. This never materialises. 'He is soft' deflates the poem's gravitas, albeit with convincing firmness. Caught between laughter and awe, we give in to receiving the text as authoritative, even as 'Croft' dismantles the truth-claim which it promises.

Smith's work places apparently "serious" poems like 'Reversionary', whose aphoristic construction embeds an enigmatic but at least partially apprehensible meaning, alongside texts such as 'Croft', whose tight and sombre form convinces us, as readers and critics, to seek a message which was, we eventually suspect, never there at all. 'Croft' signals significance without meaning: a solid assertion, bolstered by formal boundaries, whose claim to truth is overemphasised into impenetrability. Yet Smith insisted in a letter to Kay Dick on Croft's role as a symbol for herself.¹⁵⁸ She does not elaborate. Is she isolated (in the loft)? 'Aloft' with an angel's detached, haughty wisdom? Or simply 'soft', with all that word's ambiguity? Smith's claim positions us on the brink of accessing authoritative revelation from the poem, but restrains us from quite reaching it. It inscribes the poem with an opaque suggestiveness which, if nothing else, prevents

¹⁵⁸ Stevie Smith, *Me Again: The Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith*, ed. Jack Barbera and William McBrien (London: Virago, 1982), 288.

us from wholly relegating it to the category of nonsense. We are kept on our toes, scanning for a significance or absolute communicable truth which seems promised by the poem's form, but which resists its own revelation.

For Gary Saul Morson, such withholding of complete revelation is fundamental to the aphorism. Each aphorism, he argues, 'points beyond itself, step by possibly endless step. It is a mystery'.¹⁵⁹ The form itself, then, itself demands this cautious touch: the right to be dissipative, uncommunicative, discardable, spared from thorough interrogation and mining, in the same moment that it establishes its own weighty significance. In this interplay between the suggestive epigrammatic text, and the short text which promises significance which eludes the reader, Smith foregrounds the aphorism's own inherent impenetrability: its claim to be intellectually weighty, to have something important to say, even as it refuses to express that content in legible or useful terms. This chapter seeks a path through Smith's performance and her engagement with light verse to establish Smith's writing as aphoristic. Her poems promise fundamental revelation, but eventually force their reader to pass them by, empty-handed.

Light Presentations: Performance and Nonsense

... Yet not light always is the pain
That roots in levity. Or without fruit wholly
As from this levity's
Flowering pang of melancholy
May grow what is weighty,
May come beauty. ('The Poet Hin', CP, 634-5)

¹⁵⁹ Gary Saul Morson, 'The Aphorism: Fragments from the Breakdown of Reason,' *New Literary History* 34, no. 3 (2003): 413.

Smith's mutually contradictory poems flaunt their own lightness. They make reference to fairytales, play with words and trade on humorous triple-rhymes. Smith illustrates her texts, and often offers instructions about musical accompaniments. By the end of the 1950s, thinking that her work 'had better not be looked upon as pure poems but rather as intimate revue stuff' for performance to a less-highbrow public,¹⁶⁰ she had begun singing her poems to appreciative audiences.¹⁶¹

The effect of her performances was startling. Smith's childlike costume, uneven voice and deadpan manner, refusing to adjudicate on how the recitations should be received, fascinated audiences.¹⁶² Colin Amery, the president of the literary society at the University of Sussex in 1965, remembered her 'clothes that were thirty years too young – a red tunic, white stockings and red shoes', and marvelled at the spectacle of 'a middle-aged woman...not being able to sing, but singing.'¹⁶³ Seamus Heaney, who performed alongside her in 1970, compared her singing to 'an embarrassed party-piece by a child half-way between tears and giggles'.¹⁶⁴ Comedy and tragedy, singing and not-singing, tears and giggles: contradictions layer on top of each other in these performances.

Smith plays on Heaney's idea of the 'party-piece', carried out with varying degrees of accomplishment for the benefit of family and friends, in her second novel *Over the*

¹⁶⁰ Letter to Jack MacDougall, February 11, 1949, Series 1, Box 2, Folder 4, Stevie Smith papers, University of Tulsa.

¹⁶¹ See Laura Severin, *Stevie Smith's Resistant Antics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 121.

¹⁶² Frances Spalding, *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 265.

¹⁶³ Jack Barbera and William McBrien, *Stevie: A Biography of Stevie Smith* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 251.

¹⁶⁴ Seamus Heaney, 'A Memorable Voice: Stevie Smith,' in *In Search of Stevie Smith*, ed. Sanford Sternlicht (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 211.

Frontier (1938). The protagonist Pompey sings an affecting ‘party-piece’ of her formidable and lionish aunt’s:

In the gloaming,
Oh my darling,
Think not bitterly of me.

My noble aunt used as a girl I believe to sing this grand old song. Very affecting it must have been. I like to think of my noble Lion-Aunt, in a sentimental mood of an evening thus commemorating the suitors, already no doubt devoured in wrath and digested at leisure.

In the gloaming,
Oh my darling,
Best for you and best for me.¹⁶⁵

Pompey sings along but she also pokes fun at her aunt’s sentimental choice. Such performances of sentimental songs were already dated in the late 1930s, and Smith compounds the incongruity by strewing the setting with gore. Her ‘noble Lion-Aunt’ sings the inappropriately-loving words among the devoured remains of her unfortunate suitors. The passage fuses several Victorian-Edwardian traditions of entertainment. As well as parlour-performance, it evokes the routines of music-hall, whose presence Jan Montefiore and Laura Severin have ably traced in Smith’s work,¹⁶⁶ as well as a rich tradition of comic writing which derived its humour from incongruous juxtapositions of respectability and anarchy.¹⁶⁷ Comic journals flourished in the Victorian period. Although *Punch* (begun 1841) was the most successful, John Bowen notes that it was preceded by *Figaro in London* (1831-9), *Hood’s Comic Annual* (1830-9) and George

¹⁶⁵ Stevie Smith, *Over the Frontier* (London: Virago, 1980), 36.

¹⁶⁶ Janet Montefiore, *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The dangerous flood of history* (London: Routledge, 1996), 130; Severin, *Resistant Antics*, 124.

¹⁶⁷ See Paul Turner, *Victorian Poetry, Drama and Miscellaneous Prose 1832–1890* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 432.

Cruikshank's *Comic Almanac* (1835-53), and was accompanied by journals such as *Fun* (1861-1901).¹⁶⁸

Fun offered W. S. Gilbert an opportunity to publish light-hearted columns and poems, some of which later became the 'Bab' Ballads. These, together with Harry Graham's *Ruthless Rhymes for Heartless Homes* (1899), Edward Lear's limericks and Hilaire Belloc's cautionary tales – all illustrated in black-and-white, with figures alternately grotesque and melancholy – offer rich touchpoints for Stevie Smith. She followed these Victorian and Edwardian comic writers in appending line drawings to her poems, and buttresses her evident stylistic and pictorial affiliations to Edward Lear in particular through specific reference. Her drawings, as Will May points out, often resemble 'remaindered Lear illustrations',¹⁶⁹ and in her last novel *The Holiday* (1949), for instance, she invokes Lear's old man of Thermopylae who never did anything properly.¹⁷⁰

Smith's engagement with the illustrated comic tradition, however, runs beyond Lear. She refers to Belloc's 'Henry King, Who chewed bits of String, and was early cut off in Dreadful Agonies' in a letter to Rachel Marshall in 1964: 'I fear it will be a case of 'They murmured as they took their fees, there is no cure for this disease'.¹⁷¹ So poems like 'Henry Wilberforce' place Stevie Smith within this tradition of "light" poetry, sharing a common form and content:

¹⁶⁸ John Bowen, 'Comic and satirical,' in *The Cambridge History of Victorian Literature*, ed. Kate Flint (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 276.

¹⁶⁹ Will May, 'Drawing Away from Lear: Stevie Smith's Deceitful Echo,' in *Edward Lear and the Play of Poetry*, ed. James Williams and Matthew Bevis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 329.

¹⁷⁰ Stevie Smith, *The Holiday* (London: Virago, 1979), 127.

¹⁷¹ Smith, *Me Again*, 312. Belloc's lines are: 'They answered, as they took their Fees, / "There is no Cure for this Disease...' H. Belloc, *Cautionary Tales for Children* (London: Eveleigh Nash, 1907), 18-19.

Henry Wilberforce as a child
Was much addicted to the pleasures of the wild;
He observed Nature, saw, remembered,
And was by a natural lion dismembered. (CP, 661)

Citing Eugene Ionesco's description of comedy as tragedy speeded up, Matthew Bevis reminds us of the importance of brevity and acceleration to comedy, noting, for instance, the brisk pace of early slapstick cinema.¹⁷² And the brevity of Smith's 'Henry Wilberforce', the whole story begun and ended in double-quick time, offers it the humour of Edward Lear's limericks:

There was an Old Man of Leghorn,
The smallest as ever was born;
But quickly snapt up he, was once by a Puppy,
Who devoured that Old Man of Leghorn.¹⁷³

Lear's formally strict limericks depend for effect on their light-footed quickness, but also their rigid rhyme scheme (Ruth Baumert describes how much more meticulous Lear's prosody is than Smith's) and predictable structure.¹⁷⁴ His limerick characters trace the same small and harmless journey: striking out into eccentric actions, then being crushed back into their place by what Auden famously called the 'legions of cruel inquisitive They'.¹⁷⁵ In his often quellingly self-disciplinary narratives, Lear's characters end up where they started. His decision to end his limericks on their initial A-

¹⁷² Matthew Bevis, *Comedy: a very short introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 28.

¹⁷³ Edward Lear, *The Complete Verse and Other Nonsense*, ed. Vivien Noakes (London: Penguin, 2001), 73.

¹⁷⁴ Ruth Baumert, 'Fear, Melancholy, and Loss in the Poetry of Stevie Smith,' in *The Abject of Desire: The Aestheticization of the Unaesthetic in Contemporary Literature and Culture*, ed. Monica Mueller and Konstanze Kutzbach (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 207-8.

¹⁷⁵ W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), 183.

The Victorian-Edwardian comic situation seems, often, to boil down to precisely this kind of aphoristic residue. The tradition tends to privilege witty brevity: a quickly-told story, whose events happen with bewildering speed, before being efficiently closed off like Lear's tidy limericks. So pithy one-liners provide the sharp humour of Ambrose Bierce's *The Devil's Dictionary* (1909), which defined 'Hatred', for instance, as 'A sentiment appropriate to the occasion of another's superiority'.¹⁸¹ Comedy is quick, and its leftovers – if anything remains left over – are small and contained. So in Belloc's poem, an anxiety looms afterwards about what is left over: left to the boy's parents and to posterity. Jim's parents seem unable to react quite thoroughly enough. They were, Belloc remarks, 'more Concerned than I can say'.¹⁸² Humour resides in this failure to rise to the occasion: to draw from the situation the reaction, result or residue which its enormity seems to demand. In the 1930s, Marriott Edgar's 'The Lion and Albert' (performed by Stanley Holloway) built on this pervasive comic theme, and had Wallace the lion gobble up Albert for poking him in the ear.¹⁸³ The parents in Edgar's text respond as inadequately as in Belloc's poem: Albert's mother grumbles, moderately, 'Well, I am vexed!'¹⁸⁴ These twentieth-century parents subside after receiving 'nine pounds four and two' from Prudential.¹⁸⁵ In contrast, Jim's father and mother receive no financial compensation for Jim's death. They must content themselves with the residue of a moral lesson ('always keep ahold of Nurse'), pithily if euphemistically stated.

And aphoristic speech haunts the parlour-performance in Smith's *Over the Frontier*. Pompey's singing Lion Aunt has 'already no doubt', Pompey notes dryly, 'devoured in

¹⁸¹ Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 74.

¹⁸² Belloc, 15.

¹⁸³ Marriott Edgar, *Albert, Arold and Others* (London: Francis, Day & Hunter, 1937), 2.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

wrath and digested at leisure' the suitors who have come to woo her. Smith's Aunt will not marry at haste and repent at leisure (she remains an inveterate spinster), but the ghost of that proverb gives the bloody moment, with its warped version of the marital 'one flesh', a secure and decisive edge. It casts the Aunt's imagined actions as rhetorically-if-not-socially-validated; it manages, but also showcases, the shocking chaos.

The witty brevity of aphorism or proverb may provide the 'turn', the *sprezzatura* or managerial flourish, at the end of the comic poem. Promising to wrap the situation up neatly, the closing proverb nevertheless elicits laughter because it is so entirely inadequate to what has just transpired. Harry Graham's *Ruthless Rhymes for Heartless Homes* (1899), mainly four-line verses, derive their humour from their use of aphorism. His characters issue gnomic observations which – too understated to do the situation justice – become superfluous, offering no help to the sufferers:

Aunt Jane observed, the second time
She tumbled off a bus,
"The step is short from the Sublime
To the Ridiculous."¹⁸⁶

In the 1899 edition of *Ruthless Rhymes*, the accompanying illustration to this poem ('Equanimity') shows Aunt Jane in mid-air. It is as though her equable aphorism has slowed her fall, created the time in which Jane can finish her observation properly, but in doing so has compounded the ridiculousness of the moment. Aphorism promises helpful, enlightening reflection, but ultimately proves itself of no use in the situation. In

¹⁸⁶ Henry Graham, *Ruthless Rhymes for Heartless Homes* (London: Edward Arnold, 1899), 14.

‘GH’'s 1899 illustration to Graham's ‘Unselfishness’,¹⁸⁷ about a father whose selfish children refuse to be crushed along with him when the roof falls in, we see two samplers bearing mottoes on the walls of the room: ‘Evil is Wrought / By want of Thought’ and ‘DISCRETION is the better part of VALOUR’. The first aphorism tsks at the evil, thoughtless children; the second admits that perhaps they were being prudent after all. Aphorism keeps showing up – the only moral and psychological tools to hand in these moments of crisis – but is so absurdly inadequate, so excessive to the situation, that it does no good at all.

The echoes between Harry Graham's ‘The Stern Parent’ and Stevie Smith's ‘She said...’ make it clear that Smith is working with an eye on Graham. Not only do the poems follow similar narratives, but both revolve around a key moment where proverb is invoked:

Father heard his Children scream,
So he threw them in the stream,
Saying, as he drowned the third,
“Children should be seen, *not* heard!” (‘The Stern Parent’)¹⁸⁸

She said as she tumbled the baby in:
There, little baby, go sink or swim,
I brought you into the world, what more should I do?
Do you expect me always to be responsible for you? (‘She said...’, CP, 203)

In both poems, parents throw their children into the water, justifying themselves with proverbial phrases: ‘Children should be seen, not heard’, ‘sink or swim’. Harry Graham's ‘The Stern Parent’ draws its humour from the excessiveness of Father's

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 19.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 6.

response to his children's screaming, as well as the spurious justification which his closing proverb offers. Father signals that the proverb is the final word on the matter, containing and managing everything which has just occurred. Readers laugh precisely because the nursery proverb is so inadequate to the grisly situation. Graham demonstrates that the meticulous metrical and social restraint on show in Belloc and Lear may, in fact, stage an anxiety about ensuring appropriate restraint. Brevity and neatness might not really come as easily as they seem to, or might be under threat from the anarchic events which the poems describe (large animals devouring the unwary). Jingling rhythms bind in troubling and troublesome sentiments: tying them up neatly, leaving little space for an emotional response. Aphoristic neatness, in other words, betrays precisely the emotional and narrative excess which it sets out to contain.

Smith's originality in 'She said...' comes from teasing out this interplay between tidiness and excess which operates in the tight epigrammatic structure of Graham's poem. Telling the child to 'sink or swim' in the water, the mother literalises the proverb which in 'The Stern Parent' remains excessive to the situation because it is so inadequate to it. In Smith's poem, the proverb becomes exactly appropriate to the situation: the baby will literally either swim or (more likely) sink. Fitting the proverb so exactly, Smith then hurtles in the direction of the unexpected, the unfitting. The mother's indignation erupts messily through Graham's careful metre, the lines overextending past their rhythmic confines. If, as Williams suggests, 'the resistance of metre to feeling' can make verse comic,¹⁸⁹ here we witness a reversal of power: the

¹⁸⁹ Williams, 'The Jokes in the Machine,' 823.

sudden manhandling of metre by a feeling which seemed, until the third line, meekly subservient to it.

Exact adherence to the terms of the proverb provides an occasion for Smith to showcase its excessiveness in the tradition of nonsense narratives on which she is building. The aphoristic phrase does nothing to justify, explain, or console either the reader or the children now bobbing along the river. It is inadequate to the situation, an attempt at re-establishing social norms which is as deficient as Albert's mother declaring herself 'vexed' at her son's demise. The proverb's deficiency makes it superfluous: excessive and unneeded by this crisis, a sage remark which becomes comedy by failing to line up properly with the contours of the tragic moment. The justifying, containing aphorism is at once not enough, and too much.

Weight and Lightness: Smith's Critical Reception

This "light" tradition of brevity, of quick exits, and of an engagement with aphorism which showcases its inadequacy and superfluity to catastrophic situations – instead of being 'enough', aphorism becomes excessive – casts Smith's poems as themselves excessive: more than is needed by the world of serious poetry. In this context, their brevity comes to be seen as disposability, fritters which can be discarded. Philip Larkin described her mode as 'fausse-naïve, the "feminine" doodler or jotter who puts everything down as it strikes her'.¹⁹⁰ Whether she should therefore be read as a writer of 'light verse' remains a matter of critical debate. Eleanor Risteen Gordon argues for a

¹⁹⁰ Philip Larkin, 'Frivolous and Vulnerable,' in *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982* (London: Faber & Faber, 1983), 153.

manipulative ‘child-guise’ in Smith’s poetry, which conceals a kind of tyrannical mockery.¹⁹¹ Even Frances Spalding, Smith’s most sensitive biographer, associates her work with ‘childlike’ free play.¹⁹² In more recent years, however, much critical work on Smith defends her against this charge of lightness. Mark Halliday argues that she seldom allows her moments of lightness to develop fully into comedy.¹⁹³ James Najarian presents Smith’s appearance of lightness as deceptive; her appearance of ‘light verse’, he argues, allows her to grapple unchallenged with canonical male voices.¹⁹⁴

Smith both resisted and encouraged this image as a light or childlike writer. While she performed her poems dressed as a child, she also complained that the poetic value of her writing remained unappreciated.¹⁹⁵ Will May describes Smith’s complex relationship with Lear as one in which Smith causes her reader to misrecognise her poetry as nonsense. It was in her interests to elide her connection to Lear, he suggests, in order to be taken seriously.¹⁹⁶ Spalding notes how Smith requested that a write-up remove descriptions of her work as ‘whimsical’ and ‘primitive’.¹⁹⁷ A letter to Anna Kallin encapsulates the poet’s (not uncomplicated) counter-argument:

It is not at all whimsical, as some asses seem to think I am, but serious, yet not aggressive, & fairly cheerful though with melancholy patches.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹¹ Eleanor Risteen, ‘Daddy, Mummy and Stevie: The Child-Guise in Stevie Smith’s Poetry,’ *Modern Poetry Studies* 11 (1983): 243.

¹⁹² Spalding, 88.

¹⁹³ Mark Halliday, ‘Stevie Smith’s serious comedy,’ *Humor* 22, no. 3 (2009): 306.

¹⁹⁴ James Najarian, ‘Contributions to Almighty Truth: Stevie Smith’s Seditious Romanticism’, *Twentieth Century Literature* 49, no. 4 (2003): 472.

¹⁹⁵ Spalding, 265.

¹⁹⁶ May, ‘Drawing Away from Lear’, 317.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 259.

¹⁹⁸ Smith, *Me Again*, 304.

The thorough and discursive simplicity of this self-judgement in fact drains away any stable critical standpoint. It offers Smith's sympathetic commentators two (not necessarily incompatible) approaches to her work.

One option has been to take the first part of her statement at face value. She is not whimsical, she is serious. Her work contains a serious message which can be revealed if read properly, and which exists under (and often separate from) its lighter elements. Julia Sims Steward, for instance, reads Smith as a rebellious feminist. She sees her as resisting the 'confines of domesticity' through her 'defiant' and 'vigorous' illustrations;¹⁹⁹ as 'interrogat[ing] what it means to talk about women as a category' via her depiction of female bodies;²⁰⁰ as underlining the performativity of gender.²⁰¹ Similarly, Jane Dowson and Alice Entwhistle focus on the way Smith 'exposes and invigorates outworn and self-fulfilling stereotypes'.²⁰² Catherine Civello designs her critique, explicitly, 'to attract feminist attention', reading the author as 'ambivalent about her female status'.²⁰³ Laura Severin reads Smith primarily as one of 'domesticity's sharpest critics' who subverts the rhetoric of patriarchy.²⁰⁴

Smith's drawings and performances have been fertile ground for locating narratives of feminist subversion. Severin focuses on Smith's poetry performances in the 1960s,

¹⁹⁹ Julie Sims Steward, 'Pandora's Playbox: Stevie Smith's Drawings and the Construction of Gender,' *Journal of Modern Literature* 22, no. 1 (1998): 76, 82.

²⁰⁰ Julie Sims Steward, 'The Problem of the Body in Stevie Smith's Body of Work,' *South Atlantic Review* 70, no. 2 (2005): 80.

²⁰¹ Julie Sims Steward, 'Ceci n'est pas un Hat: Stevie Smith and the Refashioning of Gender,' *South Central Review* 15, no. 2 (1998): 19.

²⁰² Jane Dowson and Alice Entwhistle, *A History of Twentieth-Century Women's Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 109.

²⁰³ Catherine A. Civello, *Patterns of Ambivalence: The Fiction and Poetry of Stevie Smith* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1997), 2.

²⁰⁴ Severin, *Resistant Antics*, 4, 14.

dressed in ‘little-girl’ clothes, to suggest that Smith channels girlhood because of the permission granted culturally to the Victorian girl-child to escape from feminine norms.²⁰⁵ A sense of this performative energy enters Linda Anderson’s chapter, which sees Smith’s doodling as a means of establishing continuity between the oral and the written, the playful and the literary, providing a route for female presence and unregulated energy to re-enter the text while escaping its disciplinary norm.²⁰⁶

Occasionally, critics locate Smith’s ‘serious message’ beyond a feminist approach. Bryony Randall’s close reading of Smith’s 1946 short story ‘The Story of a Story’, an account of an author’s conflict with a male friend whom she has written into one of her texts, identifies a ‘central struggle...between literary and legal interpretative regimes’.²⁰⁷ She does conclude in part, however, by simmering this deadlock down to a reading in which the ‘literary girl’ vengefully silences a site of male power.²⁰⁸ Even Lauryl Tucker’s psychoanalytic account of Smith’s poetry suggests that Smith, via her child characters, subverts repetitive cultural narratives of narcissism.²⁰⁹

As early as 1993, however, Romana Huk complicated this account of Smith’s subversive feminist poetics, pointing out that as a female subject Smith is constituted

²⁰⁵ Laura Severin, ‘Becoming and unbecoming: Stevie Smith as performer,’ *Text and Performance Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (1998): 29.

²⁰⁶ Linda Anderson, ‘Gender, feminism, poetry: Stevie Smith, Sylvia Plath, Jo Shapcott,’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry*, ed. Neil Corcoran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 174-9.

²⁰⁷ Bryony Randall, ‘“Give him your word”: Legal and Literary Interpretation in Stevie Smith’s “The Story of a Story”,’ *Law and Literature* 21, no. 2 (2009): 238.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 240.

²⁰⁹ Lauryl Tucker, ‘Progeny and Parody: Narcissus and Echo in Stevie Smith’s Poems.’ *Twentieth-Century Literature* 60, no. 3 (2014): 337.

within the very (patriarchal) discourses which she subverts.²¹⁰ Four years later, Huk argues that Smith's reworking of familiar modes 'disrupt[s] without redefining',²¹¹ and does not, in contrast to critics who see Smith as offering an alternative way for women to live, prescribe a new way of living and writing.²¹² Attending to this embeddedness of Smith within her cultural discourses, several critics have focused on Smith's unsubversive relationship to tropes which are troubling to the present-day reader. Most disconcertingly, this emerges in a number of anti-Semitic episodes in her writing. Pompey carols 'Hurrah to be a goy!' in *Novel on Yellow Paper*, and Smith's depiction of Aaronsen in *Over the Frontier* trades heavily on Jewish stereotypes.²¹³ Phyllis Lassner proposes that Smith's Jews test the other characters' contradictory attitudes towards war, bringing out the best and worst in them;²¹⁴ she later suggests that Smith 'challenges her readers to react against her and thus discover their own politics'.²¹⁵ Following Lassner's argument that Smith's female characters view themselves as alienated and anxious in relation to an Other, whether male or Jewish,²¹⁶ Kristin Bluemel relates Smith's anti-Semitism to her radical eccentricity: Pompey, already feeling an outsider, relies on ideas of Jewish difference in order to position herself as

²¹⁰ Romana Huk, 'Eccentric Concentrism: Traditional Poetic Forms and Refracted Discourse in Stevie Smith's Poetry,' *Contemporary Literature* 34, no. 2 (1993): 245.

²¹¹ Romana Huk, 'Poetic Subject and Voice as Sites of Struggle: Toward a "Postrevisionist" Reading of Stevie Smith's Fairy-Tale Poems' in *Dwelling in Possibility: Women Poets and Critics on Poetry*, ed. Yopie Prins and Maera Shreiber (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 154.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 165.

²¹³ Stevie Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper* (London: Virago, 2014), 2; Smith, *Over the Frontier*, 196.

²¹⁴ Phyllis Lassner, 'A Cry for Life: Storm Jameson, Stevie Smith, and the Fate of Europe's Jews' in *Visions of War: World War II in Popular Literature and Culture*, ed. M. Paul Holsinger and Mary Anne Schofield (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1992), 182.

²¹⁵ Phyllis Lassner, "'The Milk of Our Mother's Kindness Has Ceased to Flow': Virginia Woolf, Stevie Smith, and the Representation of the Jew' in *Between "Race" and Culture: Representations of "the Jew" in English and American Literature*, ed. Bryan Cheyette (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 139.

²¹⁶ Phyllis Lassner, *British Women Writers of World War II: Battlegrounds of their Own* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), 198.

English.²¹⁷ Gill Plain, focusing on how Smith's stream-of-consciousness writing mirrors the manipulative language of fascism, argues that Smith divides form and content to numb the reader into 'a false sense of poetry' which disguises the implications of its own narrative.²¹⁸

Critics often see Smith as a writer grappling with prejudiced beliefs, attempting to escape them. Although Pompey wants to escape the world's vicious politics in *Over the Frontier*, Adam Piette suggests, she only succeeds into entering into a fascistic fascination with speed and destructive movement.²¹⁹ In *Stevie Smith: Between the Lines* (2005), Huk positions Smith's novels as exploring how self-delusion leads to entrapment within oppressive political discourses, most prominently fascism and anti-Semitism.²²⁰ She reads Smith's texts as building gradually to climactic revelations of how her protagonists are 'conditioned by, and indeed entrapped within the parameters of' the political currents of the Thirties (anti-Semitism, fascism), even as they attempt to distance themselves.²²¹

Huk's work acknowledges, and absorbs, Smith's unstable viewpoints and tones. In her reading, the perspectives and stated views of Smith's characters fluctuate as they try (and, ultimately, fail) to evade the realisation of their own implication within coercive

²¹⁷ Kristin Bluemel, *George Orwell and the Radical Eccentrics: Intermodernism in Literary London* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 27.

²¹⁸ Gill Plain, *Women's Fiction of the Second World War: Gender, Power and Resistance* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 73.

²¹⁹ Adam Piette, 'Travel Writing and the Imperial Subject in 1930s Prose: Waugh, Bowen, Smith, and Orwell' in *Issues in Travel Writing: Empire, Spectacle and Displacement*, ed. Kristi Siegel (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 60.

²²⁰ Romana Huk, *Stevie Smith: Between the Lines* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2005), 168.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 119.

ideologies.²²² What Huk illuminates so well is that Smith's tendency to expound sharply differentiated positions within and between her texts complicates attempts to interpret her work as a legibly singular assertion of feminist views. And this instability of perspective and ideology in Smith's work forms the basis for the second critical alternative: to read Smith's work in terms of shifting personae. Spalding noted Smith's 'variety of personae...[which] remain multivocal and contradictory',²²³ and Sheryl Stevenson found that 'multiple speakers enable Smith...to explore conflicting points of view'.²²⁴ J. Edward Mallot positions Smith's characters in a 'sea of words' (competing voices, perhaps) which endanger successful communication.²²⁵ Will May develops these suggestions into a full monograph. He argues that Smith herself shrewdly curates the failure of cohesive readings of her texts, framing the reader in continuous acts of misreading through the 'mixed messages' she deliberately supplies.²²⁶ May emphasises how rapidly Smith's tone can switch from one mode to another;²²⁷ keeping her poetry in flux between possible interpretations, she repeatedly unseats her readers, forcing the conscientious among them 'to return again and again to her work, always conscious of their fallible attempts to decode her writing.'²²⁸

Critics therefore seem to have two options. Either one reads Smith's work as not light but secretly weighty, or one can read her as alternately light and weighty at varying

²²² Ibid., 4.

²²³ Spalding, xvii.

²²⁴ Sheryl Stevenson, 'Stevie Smith's Voices,' *Contemporary Literature*, 33, no.1 (1992): 27.

²²⁵ J. Edward Mallot, 'Not Drowning But Waving: Stevie Smith and the Language of the Lake,' *Journal of Modern Literature*, 27, no. 1/2 (2003): 186.

²²⁶ William May, *Stevie Smith and Authorship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 54. See also Will May, 'An Eye for an I: Constructing the Visual in the Work of Stevie Smith,' in *From Self to Shelf: The Artist Under Construction*, ed. Sally Bayley and William May (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 76-86.

²²⁷ May, *Stevie Smith and Authorship*, 26.

²²⁸ Ibid., 136.

moments: as resisting, in May's terms, 'the threat of interpretative fixity'.²²⁹ Building on May's observation that Smith's ideal reader returns again and again, this project finds a critical position beyond this binary: to ask whether Smith can be fruitfully read as a poet who may in the same moment be simultaneously, concomitantly light and weighty. Smith's weight, I argue, derives from its very lightness, from the interpretative dilemmas it poses for the reader. Crucially, I will suggest, we can pin down this dualism by examining it within the critical mode of the aphorism. Weighty with the promise of enlightenment, the aphorism nevertheless tends towards lightness as its readers find themselves forced, inevitably, to pass it by.

Aphoristic Form

An aesthetic of substance which signals its arresting solidity, but which cannot be delved into for meaning or function, runs through Smith's poetry. It forms the subject of 'The River Humber' in her *Tender Only to One*:

...the river where it hinges
Upon the perfect sleep of perfected images.

Quiet in the thought of its felicity,
A graven monument of sufficiency
Beautiful in every line the river sleeps complacently. (CP, 145)

The river which 'hinges' on sleep calls to mind William Carlos Williams' red wheelbarrow, on which 'so much depends',²³⁰ and Smith's 'perfected images' often, in fact, institute us into the discourse of Imagism. When Ezra Pound argued, in 'A

²²⁹ Ibid., 108.

²³⁰ William Carlos Williams, *The Collected Poems Volume I 1909-1939*, ed. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan (Manchester: Carcanet, 2000), 224.

Retrospect’, that it is ‘better to present one Image in a lifetime than to produce voluminous works’, he suggests a slow, painstaking precision, perfecting a single object ‘as much like granite as it can be’.²³¹ Amy Lowell’s emphasis, in her ‘Preface’ to *Some Imagist Poets* (1916), that Imagist writing should be ‘hard and clear’, captures the same sense of impenetrable, but somehow lucid, opacity.²³²

In ‘The River Humber’, Smith brings to the surface the contradiction audible in Lowell’s ‘hard and clear’, the phrase promising both inscrutability and revelation. Both the river, and the encounter with the river, are staged as aesthetically ‘perfect’: a ‘graven monument’. Smith’s language around stability, hardness and monumentality echoes in Jacques Derrida’s remarks on aphorism in ‘Fifty-two Aphorisms for a Foreword’:

...the aphorism...proffers what is or will be, arrests it in advance in a form that is monumental, to be sure, but also anarchitectural: dissociated and a-systemic.²³³

Aphorism’s brief, detached form is at once disconnected and dissipated, and ‘monumental’. ‘Arrest[ing]’ knowledge before it can fully occur or be realised, aphorism preserves the nascent or emerging ‘in advance’, in a fixed, weighty form. In its premature weightiness, and in its refusal to cooperate with other aphorisms, it remains ‘dissociated’; in itself, however, the aphorism is monumental.

²³¹ Ezra Pound, ‘A Retrospect,’ in *Early Writings: Poems and Prose*, ed. Ira B. Nadel (London: Penguin, 2005), 262.

²³² Amy Lowell, *Some Imagist Poets: An Anthology* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1915), vii.

²³³ Jacques Derrida, ‘Fifty-two Aphorisms for a Foreword,’ in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg, trans. Andrew Benjamin (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 2:117.

Smith weights the Humber into just such a staid, overspecified ‘monumental’ significance. So much ‘hinges’, she suggests, on this river (a word implying an architecturally-constructed relationship of critical significance), though its monadic ‘sufficiency’ restrains it from succumbing to interpretation. Her triple-assonance line-endings (‘felicity’, ‘sufficiency’, ‘complacency’) overweight the poem into heavy ‘monumental[ity]’. In her last stanza:

The river Humber
Turns again to deeper slumber,
Deeper than deeps in joys without number. (CP, 146)

the final trochees (Humber, slumber, number) slow the rhythm, until (to supply the missing rhyme) the too-heavy poem can only “lumber” along. The poem is as weighty as the river.

Overburdened in rhythm and significance, the river Humber sinks beyond reach of interpretation. ‘Without number’ suggests, also, without significance – or, to rephrase, significance which exceeds the possibility of its own communication. The river is a ‘graven monument’, whose engraving we crucially cannot read. Juxtaposed with ‘Beautiful in every line’, the phrase suggests associatively that the engraving comprises lines from an exquisite poetic text. We can appreciate the idea of its beauty, but the text itself remains just out of focus.

This is one of Smith's many unreadable messages: the 'missing text[s]' upon which May builds his reading of her work as resisting determinacy.²³⁴ The monk in 'The Weak Monk' (*Harold's Leap* (1950)) wrote 'till he was ninety years old' – but buried the book immediately, making his ideas inaccessible:

...he shut the book with a clasp of gold
And buried it under the sheep fold.

...he thought he'd a right to expect that God
Would rescue his book alive from the sod.

Of course it rotted in the snow and rain;
No one will ever know now what he wrote of God and men.
For this the monk is to blame. (CP, 286)

The monk's book embodies an authoritative statement about 'God and men'. He shores up his text's physical boundaries with a gold clasp, before ritually burying it. In other words, an assertive truth-claim is made and then cancelled or discarded.

More subtly, however, Smith envisages the burial as at once preservation and disposal. The monk's gesture prevents others from accessing his truth-claim, even as it creates the necessary preconditions for a miraculous revelation of that claim: God would, he thought, 'rescue his book alive'. The monk's treatment of his text both ensures (he hopes) and withholds enlightenment. Stern locates precisely this mode of blocked illumination in the way an aphorism 'preserves and thus also arrests the flow of life.'²³⁵ We experience the text, but only partially; we cannot get beyond its 'clasp of gold' to discover 'what he wrote'. Smith's account presents the text's workings as aphoristic.

²³⁴ May, *Stevie Smith and Authorship*, 2.

²³⁵ J. Stern, *Lichtenberg: A Doctrine of Scattered Occasions* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1959), 218.

The poem provides a hermetic, ultimately inadequate reading experience, identified by only partial interpretative access.

Just as we can never wholly read or understand this text, the river in 'The River Humber' is 'sufficien[t]' unto itself, 'complacently' refusing to engage with the onlooker. We inevitably fail to locate the significance or semantic content of this encounter. It is a 'monument' to nothing but itself, 'graven' with unreadable words. The text promises revelation, but, through the same act, keeps it permanently in reserve.

And this cognitive sensation characterises our encounter with an aphorism: a sense that absolute truth lies within its boundaries, although we inevitably fail to marshal a set of terms which helps us comprehend it. An aphorism is, in John Fagg's phrase, a 'truth-claim...based on form rather than content'.²³⁶ Faced with aphorisms, the reader experiences, as Harold E. Pagliaro argues, an 'immediacy and intensity of response...[which makes] them seem incontrovertible.'²³⁷ Aphorism's first effect is asemantic, a wordless impression made on the reader before the content catches up. It promises a particular kind of utility: some universal and paradigm-shifting truth, potted into a small compass and delivered with a sharpness and sleekness which penetrates through to a reader's assent before they have grasped it intellectually.

Smith understands, and exploits, the way that aphorism's regal power cannot be separated from its impenetrable exterior: from the formal effects which create

²³⁶ John Fagg, *On the Cusp: Stephen Crane, George Bellows, and Modernism* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2009), 142.

²³⁷ Harold E. Pagliaro, 'Paradox in the Aphorisms of La Rochefoucault and Some Representative English Followers,' *PMLA* 79, no. 1 (1964): 45.

boundaries on the superficial level of poetic device. She outlines such a capacity for belated meaning in her essay 'At School'. Describing how, as a child, she liked poems for their 'grand words' and for the pleasure involved in 'declaim[ing]' them, she suggests that children should learn poetry even when it initially exceeds their understanding:

...then later, thinking about the poems and saying them over, one finds they stretch out and take fresh meanings...²³⁸

In this sense of meaning as chronologically secondary to form, Smith has impressive pedigree. James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939) repeatedly offers its reader the shape of aphorism without powerful content, or with only minimal content: 'a nod to the nabir is better than wink to the wabsanti' echoes the proverb 'A nod is as good as a wink to a blind horse', but to little discernible end.²³⁹ As Pagliaro acknowledges, aphorism may make the reader feel 'that he has been shown a more extensive truth than in fact he has.'²⁴⁰

Smith's short poem 'Croft', discussed in the opening to this chapter, is just one instance where Smith charges mundane experience with aphoristic weight. She repeatedly preserves the language she encounters in an aphoristic form which inscribes it with authority, inflecting it with a significance which its content cannot sustain. In her essay 'A London Suburb', she rearranges an overheard snippet, embellishing it with 'boundary-effects' (line breaks, highlighting its repetitions) to shore up dignified

²³⁸ Stevie Smith, 'At School,' in *Me Again*, 119-120.

²³⁹ James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, ed. Robbert-Jan Henkes, Erik Bindervoet, and Finn Fordham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5.

²⁴⁰ Pagliaro, 50.

aphoristic outlines, a sequence of unarguable statements and truth-claims. Smith reveals casual prattle as ‘the unconscious poem that happens sometimes when people are talking’: calmly paced, each line doling out another helping of insight before a full stop that confers axiomatic finality:²⁴¹

Seven years old ‘e is.
Ever so sweet ‘e is.
Ever such a neat coat ‘e’s got.
Ever so fond of kiddies.
But a dog likes to know oo’s going to ‘it ‘im and oo isn’t.’²⁴²

Incorporating the working-class idiom that she claims to overhear into a series of repetitively assertive declarations, Smith builds the snippet up into a serious, emphatically stated poem.²⁴³ Key in this award of authority, however, is that Smith is not simply “reclaiming” or “celebrating” neglected language. Instead, she uses it to create a play of movement where, in the clash between languages of sentiment and violence, the reader cannot help reading the text as insistently meaningful, even dark, even as Smith flaunts the harmlessness in words like ‘kiddies’. ‘But a dog likes to know oo’s going to ‘it ‘im and oo isn’t’ is aphoristically suggestive, asserting absolute truth.

Smith’s text, then, flags itself up as at once authoritative and frivolous, with equal and irresolvable fervour. Weight becomes concomitant with weightlessness: we cannot read this text securely. Smith builds in lightness, so thoroughly but lightly identical with the text’s own imperiousness that it unsettles almost imperceptibly.

²⁴¹ Stevie Smith, ‘A London Suburb,’ in *Me Again*, 104.

²⁴² *Ibid.*

²⁴³ On the music-hall Cockney stereotype, see David Chinitz, *T. S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 94.

It is this very aesthetic, in which a text presents itself as at once highly significant and completely dismissable, which I term aphoristic, and which runs throughout Smith's work, including her longer poems and novels. The same drive led Karl Kraus to title his aphorisms in *Die Fackel* 'Waste', and brought Lichtenberg's books of aphorisms to be called *Sudelbücher* (Waste Books).²⁴⁴ Aphorisms always teeter on the verge of waste, of discardability, despite their apparent declaration of unassailable authority.

Stevie Smith structures her oeuvre through the modes of speech and storytelling by this aphoristic acrobatic. Even through texts which present themselves as loose, chaotic and discursive, we perceive a model of authority which repeatedly stops, withdraws and cancels itself – in a way characteristic of the aphoristic form. While James Najarian finds that Smith's poetry 'pretends not to aspire to authority even as it quietly seizes it', I locate Smith's poetic effects in a *staged* seizure, and abrupt abandonment, of authority through the aphoristic mode.²⁴⁵ Heavy with authority but resistant to interpretation, the aphorism makes itself weightless by destroying the mechanisms which would render its revelation accessible.

Aphorism's incomplete enlightenment runs deeper than its punning multiplicity, coexisting alongside its claims to summary.²⁴⁶ Nor is it simply a consequence of boundary-effects which weight down or conceal an intact truth. Unsuccessful or incomplete epiphany is, in fact, built into the aphorism's truth-value. The form promises

²⁴⁴ Steven Tester, 'Introduction,' in Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, *Georg Christoph Lichtenberg: Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Steven Tester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 4; Karl Kraus, 'Abfälle,' *Die Fackel* 198, March 12, 1906.

²⁴⁵ James Najarian, 'Contributions to Almighty Truth: Stevie Smith's Seditious Romanticism', *Twentieth Century Literature* 49, no. 4 (2003): 472.

²⁴⁶ On the aphorism's multiplicity, see for instance Morson, 412; Snider, 65.

a communicable insight, but simultaneously it does not deliver it as promised. Aphorism derives monadic 'sufficiency' from its refusal to reveal the process of its own genesis: its insistence, perhaps, on its own eccentric self-performance, which means that it therefore remains aesthetically and referentially accountable only to itself. It employs the terms of its own originary universe, which it builds from scratch, letting the reader guess how to understand it. Smith's 'How Slowly Time Lengthens' functions in this way. Its four lines withhold all contextual details, presenting its mini-narrative as self-evidently comprehensible even as it remains obscure:

How slowly time lengthens from a hated event.
In my youth I was humiliated in a guilty association –
Insinuator, flatterer, Board of Trade Surveyor, hypocrite,
Aha, Hildreth Parker, how have the years dealt with you? (CP, 142)

'How Slowly Time Lengthens' invokes a named individual, epigram-like, whose context has been lost. The 'hated event' remains unspecified, the 'guilty association' unexplored. The text has severed its own genealogy, 'dissociated' itself, even as it insists on the existence of that 'monumental' originary context. It demands our questions, but forestalls them, with a rhetorical question which shuts down the possibility of answer.

Smith's poems seem, aphoristically, to promise communicable potted truths. In the same gesture, they withhold those truths, holding themselves just above or below the status of informational usefulness. Karl Kraus summed up this contested capacity for revelation in his aphorism: 'An aphorism never coincides with the truth: it is either a

half-truth or one-and-a-half truths.²⁴⁷ The aphorism either possesses not enough truth (to reposition this in the terms of one of Smith's poems, perhaps Hildreth Parker never existed; the narrative is a baffling fabrication and we are unsure why we are hearing it) or it contains too much truth: too many interpretations, more than one can cause mentally to cohere. At both sides of the binary, the result is a text which cannot live up to the extent of the revelation which its form promised.²⁴⁸

This sense of both an aphorism's ambiguous import, and its partially deflated revelation, carries as an aesthetic into Smith's 'Never Again' from *A Good Time Was Had By All*:

Never again will I weep
And wring my hands
And beat my head against the wall
Because
Me nolentem fata trahunt
But
When I have had enough
I will arise
And go unto my Father
And I will say to Him:
Father, I have had enough. (CP, 59)

The pacing and line lengths in the second half suggest that the text is building to a definite and significant climax. The repetition, the Biblical language and the penultimate colon all inscribe that final line with dramatic weight. But what we get is anticlimax: the weightless 'Father, I have had enough'. If in 'O Happy Dogs of England', Smith took the text too far, here she withdraws before the poem is ready.

²⁴⁷ Karl Kraus, *Half Truths and One-and-a-Half Truths: Karl Kraus: Selected Aphorisms*, trans. and ed. Harry Zohn (Manchester: Carcanet, 1986), 67.

²⁴⁸ On the uselessness of proverb, as a mode which can be deployed to support any possible decision, see Ben Grant, *The Aphorism and Other Short Forms* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 63, who suggests nevertheless that 'the comfort proverbs provide' means that they offer their own kind of use-value (64).

Both approaches take the text out of action. Going away and going on equally sabotage the poem's capacity to have an impact.

'Having enough', in its first appearance in the poem, seems to be the stimulus which will lead causally to action and conclusion: reaction, suicide, escape. What really happens, however, is startlingly undramatic: subtle and hard to define. Action is replaced by repetition, a restatement of the status quo ('I have had enough') which seems, in its content, to confirm it as inescapable.

To have enough, moreover, is a scarcely palpable act, implying modesty of desire both past and present. It suggests both that much has been silently endured, and hints in its phrasing at an asceticism latent in the refusal of more (anything). The speaker makes a declaration to God which contains no demand and involves no threat: it is a quiet statement, barely in itself 'enough' even to constitute a complaint. The announcement seems to have little to do with her Father. We never witness his reply. It is unclear what, if anything, she could expect him to say.

And yet it is hard to see this ending as unsatisfactory. It is 'enough'. It is enough for the speaker – making the announcement seem itself sufficiently satisfying – and for us as readers. It is enough to end the poem – and, it is at least partly implied, the speaker's existence. In Smith's hands, the phrase hardens into a piece of language charged with an omnipotent imperiousness. Both over- and underdetermined, in form and content respectively, the statement is aphoristic in its self-sufficiency. We sense that it has power, and the fact that we never find out how or why seems of secondary importance

even as we are entirely aware of Smith's sleight of hand.²⁴⁹ We are content to view it as revelatory in the full knowledge that it reveals nothing.

The dilemma of 'Never Again', then, has multiple parts. Firstly, we are surprised that the closing statement has been made at all: its anticlimax dismantles our narrative expectations. But more, our difficulty as readers lies in grasping that a statement of unhappiness which should have had no effect has somehow managed to claim a (contestable) degree of victory. A woman going to her God and saying with great and quiet dignity that she has had enough, would in any other situation be interpreted as an event which has no effect and serves no purpose. Here, though, it is (ambiguously) enough. Something utterly light has simultaneously laid claim to real weight.

And this leads to the poem's third revelatory discharge: this demand is meaningful precisely in the sense that it is prepared to have no real effect. Though an 'I' speaks in this poem, imagining addressing God directly, this is not a lyric 'I'. The polyvocality of these poems, channelling various and unpredictable voices, means that they resist a lyric voice which might intimately address an other; in which, to adopt Jonathan Culler's phrase, 'poets call on a universe they hope will prove responsive, and their demands often prove seductive.'²⁵⁰ If lyric makes requests of the world in the faith that they will be heard and fulfilled, as Culler suggests, 'Never Again' showcases how Smith's

²⁴⁹ I am indebted to Anne-Lise François' study of the 'reticent assertion' (*Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 19). Her argument delineates a mode of speech which presents itself as utterly light. But while François focuses on texts which do not mark themselves, Smith's texts flag themselves up, rhetorically emphasise themselves, even while they force the reader to consider them entirely lightweight. Such self-presentation is inherent in the aphorism; as I suggest, the form of the aphorism makes it dismissable even as it presents itself as unignorably significant and eternal. Its formal effects therefore sharpen the vexation of its 'reticent assertion': when something presents as reassuringly solid, we are frustrated to find it weightless.

²⁵⁰ Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2015), vii.

writing repudiates both lyric's voice and its secure orientation towards a responsive other.

In its refusal to have an effect, in its derivation of value precisely from its withdrawal from eliciting change and response from the world, 'Never Again' participates in the aphoristic. Aphorism is anti-lyric. It is a voice that not only has no subject but needs none: both starkly original, and in that way carrying the trace of its originator, yet in its formal self-sufficiency shaking its skirts clear of dependence on the mind which produced it. In his journal, the (aphoristic) poet Wallace Stevens explored how part of the aphoristic encounter derives from the fact that it is impossible really to use the aphorism:

There are no end of gnomes that might influence people – but do not. When you first feel the truth of, say, an epigram, you feel like making it a rule of conduct. But this one is displaced by that, and thus things go on in their accustomed way.²⁵¹

The aphorism claims a truth which we nevertheless inevitably fail to implement. One aphorism is displaced by another, as in Smith's stream of aphorisms in 'My Muse', so that each cannot be heard and heeded fully. Things go on in their accustomed way. The aphorism is sealed: for Derrida, a 'totality that claims self-sufficiency', 'dissociated' both from the reader and from real-world utility.²⁵² It is independent of us, and therefore indifferent to us. Derrida's language, in the same essay, unpacks how the very absoluteness of the aphorism's authority allows it to withdraw from readers:

²⁵¹ Quoted in Coyle, 15.

²⁵² Derrida, 'Fifty-two Aphorisms,' 124.

...authoritative, peremptory, dogmatic eloquence, self-legitimizing to the point of complacency, when it does everything to save itself a demonstration.²⁵³

Like Smith's Humber, Derrida's aphorism is 'complacent': self-satisfied, needing or expecting nothing beyond itself. It is willing to share no more than its brusque, delimited substance with the reader. Refusing dialogue, it denies access both to the context which created it, and to any further explanation which might aid understanding and enable it to have an impact (on the reader, on the world). Saving itself 'a demonstration', the aphorism refuses to commit to revelation, trading instead on the implicit assertion that its epiphanic potential, conveyed formally through Coyle's 'boundary-effects', is self-evident. This is the verbal frugality of a knowledge whose magnitude, ironically, allows it to hold itself 'in reserve'.²⁵⁴ Self-cancellation or self-minimisation is built into the aphorism's truth-claim – which is, crucially, no less insistent for that. And because it is so detached from and indifferent to us, it renounces lasting power over its audience. The aphorism's impact in the moment of encounter does not cross over into real-world results. As Stevens implies, the knowledge it provides cannot lead to action.

Pompey's key epiphany in *Novel on Yellow Paper* – the moment, perhaps, on which this fugitive text turns – hinges on such an idea of revelatory but unusable knowledge. Pompey recounts how, at eight, she was sent to a convalescent home. Wildly unhappy, the child cries and refuses to eat, hoping she will die. When this plan fails, she has a revelation: she does not need to court Death passively, weeping and hoping he will come. She can simply commit suicide whenever she likes:

²⁵³ Ibid., 124.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 125.

...when I sat up and said: Death has got to come if I call him, I never called him and never have.²⁵⁵

Smith repositions this epiphany into aphoristic respectability, by adding it, in almost the same imperious terms, to the end of her version of Dido's final speech in the *Aeneid*:

Come Death, you know you must come when you're called
Although you're a god. And this way, and this way, I call you.
(*'Dido's Farewell to Aeneas'*, CP, 330)

When eight-year-old Pompey accesses that revelation, it is presented as a turning point in her life, though it leads to no action and no palpable change. In fact, it is precisely because she has had this revelation that she does not need to use it. Her knowledge that Death is her slave frees her from the burden of trying to die. As a result of her epiphany, '[she] never called him' and was, obliquely, reconciled to her own existence.

Such an epistemology of unusable revelation is difficult to access critically. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests that, as readers, our current 'paranoid' Ricoeurian schema places:

...an extraordinary stress on the efficacy of knowledge per se – knowledge in the form of exposure...as though to make something visible were, if not a mere hop, skip, and jump from getting it solved, at least self-evidently a step in that direction...²⁵⁶

²⁵⁵ Smith, *Novel*, 123.

²⁵⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,' in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (London: Duke University Press, 2003), 138-9.

This is a model in which real-world impact is assumed to be built into knowledge, and in which revelation that fails to provide impact is seen as excessive. From this perspective, it is tempting to sum up her poems with the striking word chosen by her aunt to describe one of Smith's early efforts. 'Spanky Wanky', Aunt said, was 'unnecessary'.²⁵⁷

Spanky Wanky had a sister
He said, I'm sure a black man kissed her
For she's got a spot just here
Twas a beauty spot my dear
And it looks most awfully quaint
Like a blob of jet black paint...²⁵⁸

'Unnecessary' seems an extraordinarily tangential descriptor. One could imagine many alternative criticisms, but 'unnecessary' underlines Aunt's inclination to gauge 'Spanky Wanky's' textual value in terms, of all things, of utility and of excess. There is too much of the poem (we are reminded of the 'so many' of 'E.B') and none of it is any use.

The absurdity of Aunt's remark obviously derives from the fact that 'Spanky Wanky' stages a rejection of utility. Not only do the poem's rhythms assimilate it into the tradition of playground skipping chants, designed to mark time rather than convey semantic content, but Spanky Wanky's observations are ultimately pointless:

But when he told his sister that
She threw at him her gorgeous hat
And with airs that made her swanky
Said, I hate you Spanky Wanky.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁷ Stevie Smith, 'Syler's Green,' in *Me Again*, 94.

²⁵⁸ Spalding, 40.

²⁵⁹ Smith, 'Syler's Green', 94.

The poem ends irresolutely: in anti-climax, with a simper and an ineffectual hat-toss. Much of Smith's writing undermines attempts to use it within a wider interpretative frame, or to locate use-value within it. This judgement is distinct from labelling her work 'play'. Martin Pumphrey's influential article suggests that 'Smith's poetry...exploits the interrogative play signal to challenge conventional literary and cultural frames', identifying her work with the subversive Bakhtinian carnivalesque.²⁶⁰ But calling Smith's poetry 'play' continues to work within the strategies of paranoid reading which Sedgwick identifies (it still assumes that Smith is writing in order to subvert authority) and is doubly overwriting as a result. Not only does this designation minimise the truth-claim of her work, and its (complex) weightiness: it also, ironically, involves an attempt to reclaim play as important, with purposes beyond itself.

Smith's aphoristic aesthetic allows her, then, to sabotage conventional utility. She renders her writing unusable, either to the reader, or to the critic who would integrate her into a broader analysis. 'Spanky Wanky' is disturbing but ultimately ignorable. Its pacy weight and urgent rhythm are belied by its 'unnecessary' excess – too tasteless, too violent, too formally overdetermined – which encourages us to treat the text as discardable.²⁶¹ Smith's work is aphoristically excessive, like Karl Kraus's 'Waste' aphorisms.²⁶² The sense is of aphorisms as the residue of an oversized idea, too big to handle, which had to be discarded. Both weighty and weightless, the aphorism, like Smith's poems, can only be read and then abandoned.

²⁶⁰ Martin Pumphrey, 'Play, Fantasy and Strange Laughter: Stevie Smith's Uncomfortable Poetry,' in Sternlicht, *In Search of Stevie Smith*, 100, 112.

²⁶¹ Discardability also derives from lightness: too casual or glibly dashed-off to be worth keeping. See Stern, 111: 'the aphorism is written as it were casually'.

²⁶² Kraus, 'Abfälle.'

This rhythm – an encounter with the aphorism which involves its ultimate displacement from the reader’s mind, due to its resistance to implementation – emerges as key to the aphoristic aesthetic. The tonal flatness of ‘Never Again’ encourages us to hover on this borderline between mental assimilation of the text, and its dismissal. ‘Father, I have had enough’ refuses melodramatic inflection. Its very reticence allows it to stand highly emphasised. We simultaneously feel that we must stay and try to understand further, and that there is no more to be said: the only possible response is to pass on by.²⁶³ Smith has highlighted, here, the crucial gap in the aphorism’s claim to monumental authority, which Wallace Stevens hinted at in his journal. When he writes, ‘this one is displaced by that, and things go on in their accustomed way’, Stevens builds dismissability and neutralised use-value into the heart of the aphoristic project.

Oscar Wilde’s writing makes visible this rhythm of temporary authority, in which aphorism promises potential which is then dismissed. His aphoristic dialogism, both in his plays and in the early parts of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), presents aphorisms as swappable currency, in the tradition of the French salon maxim.²⁶⁴ Nevertheless, they possess the same discardability, the same resistance to declaring absolute truth, as Smith’s writing.

²⁶³ Compare with Marion Faber’s description of how one reads La Rochefoucauld: ‘savouring provocations and putdowns, mulling them over, and going on.’ Faber, ‘The Metamorphosis of the French Aphorism: La Rochefoucauld and Nietzsche,’ *Comparative Literature* 23, no. 3 (1986): 207.

²⁶⁴ On Wilde’s aphorisms, see Grant, 104, and Sandra Siegel, ‘Wilde’s Use and Abuse of Aphorisms,’ *Newsletter of the Victorian Studies Association of Western Canada* 12, no. 1 (1986): 22) who consider whether Wilde’s aphorisms are true; and Simon Reader’s discussion of how Wilde’s aphorisms act ‘like individuals, actors, appearing in different works and voiced by different characters.’ (Simon Reader, ‘Social Notes: Oscar Wilde, Francis Bacon, and the Medium of Aphorism,’ *Journal of Victorian Culture* 18, no. 4 (2013): 461.)

Wilde's aphorisms often conceal their strangeness, reworking clichés to reverse their meanings in a way which takes time to process.²⁶⁵ But in his writing, one aphorism is immediately followed by another, or by a change of subject. The reader's attention is constantly elicited, and overstimulation leads to boredom, a withdrawal from a context which demands too much. Despite (in fact, I suggest, because of) their aphorisms, Wilde's characters are always bored. Dorian Gray's Basil Hallward is 'listless',²⁶⁶ and in *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), Lord Illingworth talks constantly about being bored.²⁶⁷ Exchanges are drained of energy on the page:

JACK ...I wish to goodness we had a few fools left.
ALGERNON We have.
JACK I should extremely like to meet them. What do they talk about?
ALGERNON The fools? Oh! about the clever people, of course.
JACK What fools.
ALGERNON By the way, did you tell Gwendolen the truth about your being Ernest in town, and Jack in the country? (*The Importance of Being Earnest*)²⁶⁸

Algernon's 'By the way' is comic in its inadequacy. If it occurred outside Wilde's hyperfast exchanges, and was dwelt on, Algernon would be considered either rude or dense. Algernon bypasses both his own aphorism and Jack's response, and changes the subject with limp indifference to the results of his own words.

Despite their constant exchanges of witticisms, Wilde's characters do not laugh. They ignore each other's aphorisms, or sometimes tell their interlocutors that they talk nonsense. Alternatively, they counter with aphorisms of their own, each neutralised by

²⁶⁵ On Wilde's reworking of clichés, see Umberto Eco, 'Wilde: Paradox and Aphorism,' in *On Literature*, trans. Martin McLaughlin, 62-83 (London: Vintage, 2006).

²⁶⁶ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, intr. Merlin Holland (London: HarperCollins, 2003), 18-23.

²⁶⁷ Oscar Wilde, 'A Woman of No Importance,' in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, 487, 493.

²⁶⁸ Oscar Wilde, 'The Importance of Being Earnest,' in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, 371.

the next. Characters respond to witty wisecracks with the same banal inconsequence which, we suppose, the aphorisms are satirising.

ALGERNON: Relations are simply a tedious pack of people, who haven't got the remotest knowledge of how to live, nor the smallest instinct about when to die.

JACK: Ah! I haven't any relations...²⁶⁹

For all Wilde's satirising of banal social exchanges, the transitions in his plays are secretly, tellingly dull. When aphorism follows aphorism, all are reduced to the same bloodless tonal uniformity. Wilde seems sometimes to be showcasing the failure of humour, in his readers as much as his characters. Aphorisms sink without trace; they have no impact.

'A Strong Way Out': To and From the Aphorism

It would be easy to read the aphoristic aesthetic's lightness and dismissability as catastrophic: to suggest that Smith is emphasising the pointlessness of truth-claims such as the speaker's in 'Never Again'. Instead, her poetry drives towards a model of value which constructs itself in the moments of lapse implicit in the rhythm of aphoristic engagement. The stops and starts of aphoristic dissociation, in which the text demands to be simply, unobtrusively passed by, permit brief, merciful escapes from truth-claims which exceed immediate comprehension. In this system, the weightlessness of the aphorism's function does not negate its value. It becomes, in contrast, the source of that value. For Smith, things 'go[ing] on in their accustomed way' can assume the scale of a triumph. Pompey's revelation in the *Novel on Yellow Paper* nursing home made nothing

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 370.

happen, but it was essential. Although weightless, it assumed a weight in Pompey's life which is difficult either to quantify or to underplay.

The aphoristic assertion, then, continues to stand on some level even though it is inevitably dismissed. Admitting a truth too big to assimilate in one reading, one's capacity to respond to the aphorism is exhausted before the text's potential has been used up. Yet the necessity of then passing it by does not negate its validity. Smith's 'The English Visitor' from *Not Waving But Drowning* (1957) delineates this complex value of the aphoristic encounter. It portrays an experience no less potent for being passed by, half-forgotten. A widow mourns by her husband's grave:

Oh my darling why did you leave me
To lie so cold where I cannot come,
I only wished to have you by me
In the busy town.

How beautiful are the Scottish mountains
Their backs are like ancient mammoths so quiet
And I should like to walk on the mountain
While it is light. (CP, 348)

A moment of grief is followed, seamlessly, by a meditation on beauty. The thoughts are discrete: presented in aphoristically self-contained stanzas, their language is precise and declarative ('Their backs are like ancient mammoths'; 'I only wished to have you by me'). Identical rhymes (me/me, mountains/mountain) stall the verses, sealing them conclusively back into themselves. Indeed, the first stanza reads as an account of aphoristic impenetrability: it nods to a place 'where I cannot come'.

Equally, however, Smith complicates this weightiness, concluding each stanza with a half-line ('In the busy town', 'While it is light'). Like Kraus's aphorism, this half-line termination presents itself as simultaneously half a truth and one-and-a-half truths. The 'halfness' suggests incompleteness – but also an absolute economy which uses no more words than needed; complete simplicity which nevertheless states everything necessary. This is the resistance to demonstration which characterises the Derridean aphorism: the sense, as Pompey exclaims at the beginning of *Novel on Yellow Paper*, that 'all to say had been said'.²⁷⁰

Formally, then, these stanzas are at once generously expressive, insisting on their own significance, and reticent. The simultaneity of these impulses reflects the balance between deep, emphasised emotion, and a carefully-delimited modesty of desire. The widow's grief is underscored ('Oh my darling why did you leave me / To lie so cold where I cannot come'), but her love's expression is imagined in undemanding terms ('I only wanted to have you by me'). Paralleling this experience of grief is her response to the mountains' beauty: expressed in superlatives ('so quiet', 'How beautiful'), but enacted in a humbly small wish against this sublime landscape ('I should like to walk on the mountain / While it is light').

This is, in each case, an expansive emotional reaction with a small outcome: magnitude modulated into something simple. It is both one-and-a-half and half; both potent and dismissable. Because of this, and because the stanzas reflect each other in their tonal and structural self-sufficiency, the widow can grieve and then pass, almost impalpably,

²⁷⁰ Smith, *Novel*, 3.

from her grief. Very gently, the Englishwoman transitions from mourning to forgetfulness.

Becoming alert to this rhythm enables us to rehabilitate the aphorism's frustratingly withheld revelation. The failure of a reader or character to fully grasp, or effectively use, a form of knowledge which is (or claims to be) defined by excessive magnitude and significance can comprise a benevolent relief-offering: the Englishwoman passes from her grief because it is unsustainably severe. The aphoristic aesthetic involves both a swelling into (emotional, semantic) excess, and the construction of an escape-route out of that burdensome excess: the aphorism's excessive truth-claim can be abandoned because its brevity offers us reprieve. It enables the exit service which Smith, strikingly, places at the centre of the poetic function: 'The human creature is alone in his carapace. Poetry is a strong way out.'²⁷¹

Accordingly, Smith's aphoristic aesthetic stages a build-up of untapped, untappable, troublingly excessive significance (bulging, perhaps, under that carapace) from which escape is cast as relief. Pompey performs this most obviously in *Novel on Yellow Paper*. She tells the story of Karl, slowly and digressively, landing at one point at a question whose terrible answer is dimly beginning to take form:

I too can see that idea of sleeping, dreaming, happily dreaming, Germany, her music, her philosophy, her wide fields and broad rivers, her gentle women. But the dream changes, and how it is to-day, how is it to-day in this year of 1936, how is it to-day?²⁷²

²⁷¹ Stevie Smith, 'My Muse,' in *Me Again*, 126.

²⁷² Smith, *Novel*, 33.

Without answering, Pompey changes tack. The story has become too troubling, she suggests: ‘gentle reader you have been very patient very kind and forbearing indeed in this matter of Karl’.²⁷³ So we are treated to ‘some more nice little quotations’.²⁷⁴ In other words, aphoristic interjections, erupting into the text like the explaining angel in ‘The English Visitor’, become themselves the rupturing means of escape, the agent of the text’s own dismissal.

These are ready-made conclusions which do nothing to conclude. Yet somehow, as in ‘Never Again’, they are ‘enough’. I am reminded of how Smith summed up her own poems in the most banal analytic terms:

Sometimes she delivered her poems in a bluff chant...but capped them with exclamations such as ‘Oh, that’s awfully good, isn’t it?’ or ‘Oooh, that’s terrific!’²⁷⁵

Spalding’s ‘capped’ is appropriate. Smith’s bland formulations seal her poems into aphoristic impenetrability, discouraging further comment or interrogation. Climax and conclusion are replaced by simple termination: an empty summary which apologises neither for its own simplicity, nor for anything which has preceded it. In its economy, the gesture is analogous to the non-revealing revelation of Smith’s ‘Never Again’. The transition from building climax to nonfulfilment is slight, yet entirely unapologetic. Rather than evading a terrible, important truth, these movements of the aphoristic aesthetic constitute the quiet lapses palpable in ‘The English Visitor’. In *Novel on Yellow Paper*, this lapse is a small rest, a brief period of relief, which eventually allows

²⁷³ Ibid., 33.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Spalding, 194.

the story of Karl to be finished. Similarly, ‘The English Visitor’'s interludes of quiet oblivion in fact enable the widow to remember and return to her grief. A passing angel instructs us, explicitly, not to read her passing-by mourning as callous:

And the people said she would never think of Alan again
And it was typical of Englishwomen.
But, No, said an angel, you are wrong
She will think of him freely and frequently
She is not less sorry than you are... (CP, 349)

Her sorrow remains – she will return to thoughts of her husband ‘freely and frequently’ – but her grief needs to be characterised by periods of interruption and lapse. Instead of being less potent for that, this rhythm speaks of an emotion too intense to sustain for a long duration. A period of intensely-experienced grief does not work itself out in a single encounter. It does not, if pursued intently, reach a climax, decline, and conclude forever. Its endings are always temporary. It may finish for a while, when one is too tired to continue experiencing it. Then, presently, it resumes again. A pattern emerges where, as in our engagement with the aphorism, we can only negotiate intense (intellectual or emotional) experience through alternating departure and return. Since the aphorism’s potential outstrips the reader’s cognitive capacity, the reader can pass by in the knowledge that they can always – and will, ‘freely and frequently’ – come back. Stern hints at this potential in the aphorism, suggesting that they:

...spur us on, every time anew, to the discovery of...new insights...yet, when we have surveyed the landscape which the aphorism illuminated for us we do return to it once again...²⁷⁶

²⁷⁶ Stern, 221.

In this light, Smith's recurring set-piece phrases, such as Death who comes when we call, take on new significance. Seeing these repetitions as aphoristic acknowledges that they constitute epiphanies which are absolute, but which both Smith's characters and Smith's readers need nevertheless to have again and again. In every moment of encounter, the epiphanic phrases exceed one's cognitive capacity: they must be left unused, and later returned to.

This is a model of interpretation which makes room for – which necessitates – the lightness built into the truth-claim. It elicits a mode of textual engagement in which the text is not fully used; which does not depend on analytical mining of depths. This sense of a text which derives its value not from depth but from surface, which invites lateral and back-and-forth movement rather than downwards, forms the subject of the next chapter. The aphorism's rhetorically smooth surface may invite not a drilling-down, but a going-on, across its flat terrain.

Chapter Two: Flat Stevie

In *Novel on Yellow Paper*, Stevie Smith's protagonist Pompey is bored. Nodding drearily over her office-work, stretched thin by too many friends, she returns again and again to two daydreams. Both are fantasies of flatness: of spaces left unused or not fully used. The first centres upon a flat field 'empty of human interest' which 'stretches away far and wide', interrupted only by a haystack.²⁷⁷ In the second daydream, Pompey walks along a road which becomes flatter and flatter. Trees and road and track give way, until 'there is nothing but this marsh and samphire beds...'²⁷⁸ She arrives in a deserted house, where a good meal has been left for her. And after she has eaten, she can prepare for bed – for all this palaver, as so often in Smith's work, is a prelude to blissful sleep:²⁷⁹

And the bed is a high bed, it has no head board and no foot board, it is high and flat, there is only one pillow and the sheets are turned back, and the bed is standing in the middle of the room. It is a large square flat high straight hard bed, the sheets are white and dry and fine as dust. And so you kick off the slippers, you throw off the dressing gown, you climb up into the bed and lie down flat.²⁸⁰

Pompey reiterates the bed's flatness twice in as many sentences. It is puritanical: hard, one meagre pillow, no headboard or footboard. There is nothing to see or to focus on, but still the bed seduces us with a chanted cycle of repeating detail: high, flat, flat, high. Repetition keeps us attentively poised on the image, and although the narrative stalls, we linger on in a space where, as in Smith's poem 'Thoughts about the Person from

²⁷⁷ Stevie Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper* (London: Virago, 2015), 26.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

²⁷⁹ See, for instance, Stevie Smith, *The Holiday* (London: Virago Modern Classics, 1979), 202.

²⁸⁰ Smith, *Novel*, 60.

Porlock’, ‘there is nothing to keep us’.²⁸¹ All that happens in this paragraph is that Pompey goes on to make herself flat too, and then goes to sleep. ‘No dreams’.

Whether she is describing ‘The House of Over-Dew’ in a performance introduction as, opaquely, ‘a very long poem indeed, and flat’ (CP, 778), or the inland sea as ‘all blue and flat and blue and flat’ in ‘The Engine Drain’ (CP, 364), flatness emerges as a crucial motif across Stevie Smith’s writing. Her narratives depict landscapes and surfaces which yield nothing: they offer neither height, depth nor a focal point for the eye.

Flatness offers a key topographical model for Smith’s use of aphorism. Stylistically accomplished, aphoristic and epigrammatic texts possess (or claim) the smoothness and wit which repel further interrogation. Unable to penetrate aphorism’s boundaries, the reader skims instead over the surface, and eventually abandons the attempt to get further. And yet, despite its refusal to yield insights, that polished imperviousness of style draws and retains the reader’s attention. The reader lingers in a space configured to insist that it is worth attending to, but which does not instruct them, specifically, on how to attend or to what. Unable to penetrate the text, the reader passes on from aphorism to aphorism, over smooth surfaces which balance, as Chapter One suggested, between weighty significance and light dismissability.

In Smith’s hands, aphorism acts as a form from which nothing – neither moral lessons nor applicable wisdom – can be derived; to which one returns again and again without result. An aphorism may be apposite to a situation, but it does nothing to change that

²⁸¹ Stevie Smith, *The Collected Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith*, ed. Will May (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), 446. All further references to this edition are indicated parenthetically in the text, with *Collected Poems* abbreviated to CP.

situation. It has no effect beyond the immediate shock of pleasure at how well it fits. Aphorism may therefore become affectless: an emblem for emotional flatness, or withdrawal from an inhospitable world. It shrinks from explanation: it says its piece, and then folds itself away. Appropriately, John Gross bookends his collection of aphorisms with texts which testify to their own uselessness, their own exempt status from the run of everyday life:

Everything has been said before, but since nobody listens we have to keep going back and beginning all over again.

ANDRE GIDE, *Le traité du Narcisse*, 1891²⁸²

All the good maxims already exist in the world; we just fail to apply them.

PASCAL, *Pensées*, 1670²⁸³

Like a flat, barren landscape, then, aphorism, in Smith's hands, defies engagement and use. By considering Smith's use of flat motifs, this chapter explores what is at stake in her fascination with such a deflated aesthetic. Reading Smith involves becoming sensitive to an aphoristic 'flatness': a statement of fact which refuses argument, denying anything further beyond what is explicitly stated, and sabotaging our capacity to seek meaningful depth.

Smith's Flatnesses

'Will Man Ever Face Fact and not Feel Flat?' Smith asks in the title to one poem. Christianity, the text suggests, is nothing but a fairytale – but beyond that fairytale lies only flatness: the disappointment of a bleak, godless world. Flatness, here, carries an

²⁸² John Gross, ed. *The Oxford Book of Aphorisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 1.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 365.

expectedly gloomy weight, signalling depression, fatigue and emptiness. These low feelings fascinate early critics of Smith, who foreground her significant episodes of despair. Michael Tatham and John L. Mahoney focus on her ambivalence and distaste for Christianity's cruelty,²⁸⁴ and Jeni Couzyn argues that Smith's sadness and fear offer 'a source of power and energy' for the poet's work.²⁸⁵ However, Smith's introduction to this poem in her essay 'The Necessity of Not Believing' nuances her portrayal of flatness into something beyond a synonym for depression. Though it still seems something to be endured rather than enjoyed – 'we must...put up with flatness',²⁸⁶ she laments – Smith develops our sense of what that 'put[ting] up with' might entail:

I like this flatness, I feel at home in it, I like the icy indifferent wind that blows across the flat spaces of geological time, I like to think of geological time and the years that go ~~pit-pat~~ and ~~pit-pat~~ on for a million million years, it lifts the mind, I find, it lifts the weight from the nerves and the mind.²⁸⁷ I am much indebted to...Mr. Fred Hoyle, for he gave to me this sense of freedom, of liberation, when he spoke of the expanding universe and the years going on a million million times, and the flatness, he gave me that, and the large space to lie out in.²⁸⁸

If flatness suggests an inability to hope, Smith signals that it may also offer a refuge from a tiring world. The thought of flatness may insulate one from the demand to act or to be cheerful. An image of a vast flat space of geological time dilutes the burden of the

²⁸⁴ Michael Tatham, 'That one must speak lightly ... A Study of Stevie Smith,' *New Blackfriars* 52, no. 626 (1972): 318; John L. Mahoney, *Seeing Into the Life of Things: Essays on Religion and Literature* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 326.

²⁸⁵ Jeni Couzyn, *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets: Eleven British Writers*, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1985), 35.

²⁸⁶ Stevie Smith, 'The Necessity of Not Believing,' 10, Series 2, Box 3, Folder 15, Stevie Smith papers, 1924-1970. Coll. No. 1976.012. McFarlin Library. Department of Special Collections and University Archives. The University of Tulsa.

²⁸⁷ On Smith's interest in geological time, see Kay Dick, *Ivy and Stevie* (London: Allison & Busby, 1983), 76; Stevie Smith, 'Poems, Drawings and Music,' n.pag., Series 2, Box 4, Folder 17, Stevie Smith papers, University of Tulsa.

²⁸⁸ Stevie Smith, 'The Necessity of Not Believing,' 12, Series 2, Box 3, Folder 15, Stevie Smith Papers, University of Tulsa.

individual moment. Despite Smith's attribution of this image of flatness to Fred Hoyle, the motif is absent from Hoyle's *The Nature of the Universe* (the radio talks contained in that volume are the most likely way in which Smith accessed Hoyle's ideas about the expanding universe and the vastness of its age).²⁸⁹ She brings this image to bear, herself, on the scientist's ideas. Flatness, for Stevie Smith, becomes a space to 'lie out in', to relax into and rest undisturbed.

As a peaceful space, flatness may also offer, therefore, safety from the precipices and potential falls which litter Smith's poetry in texts like 'Harold's Leap':

Harold, I remember your leap,
It may have killed you
But it was a brave thing to do.

Two promontories ran high into the sky,
He leapt from one rock to the other
And fell to the sea's smother. (CP, 267)

While Smith praises Harold in 'Harold's Leap' for his courage, the admiration may be envy rather than a commitment to emulation. Far more often, her speakers meet challenges by wishing that they were dead instead: that they could make a premature exit from pressure experienced as intolerable. Lee Upton suggests that evading intimacy allows Smith's characters to avoid overwhelming demands.²⁹⁰ Certainly the fantasies of death which Smith's characters entertain in 'If I lie down' (CP, 196), 'Nourish Me on an Egg' (CP, 148) and 'Mr Over' (CP, 299), to name just a few, suggest that remaining flat might be psychologically safer than entering on or continuing an inadequate life, or

²⁸⁹ Fred Hoyle, *The Nature of the Universe* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1960).

²⁹⁰ Lee Upton, 'Stevie Smith and the Anxiety of Intimacy,' *CEA Critic: An Official Journal of the College English Association* 53 (1991): 25.

even a life in which one might try and fail. So in Smith's fable of human creation in 'From the Coptic', the red clay refuses to enter existence at all, to get up and become Man. Instead, it 'lay flat' (CP, 324). This is a refusal to begin, to take risks. Flat-out, still inchoate and unused, the clay also refuses flatly to move or change. Only when the clay is promised eventual death does it rise up and become Man: only, in other words, when insured by the promise of future flatness will it consent to leave flatness behind, and embark on life.

Smith's later poems in particular linger on this image of flatness as a site of mercy or relief. Elizabeth Lawson describes how water, sea, lakes and grasslands consistently act as images of peace for Smith: all, we note, flat expanses.²⁹¹ In 'Scorpion', the speaker fastidiously curates the flatness and emptiness of the heavenly space she would like God to call her to:

I should like my soul to be required of me, so as
To waft over grass till it comes to the blue sea
I am very fond of grass, I always have been, but there must
Be no cow, person or house to be seen.

Sea and *grass* must be quite empty
Other *souls* can find somewhere *else*. (CP, 593)

'Scorpion' emphasises that flatness is the result of careful, laborious preparation. Smith's cantankerous speaker fussily arranges everything to her own satisfaction. She empties all animals and buildings out of paradise, leaving only the flat, 'quite empty' spaces of sea and grass. Like the 'icy indifferent wind' across the spaces of geological time, her soul can now drift freely across her Eden. Stripping away the agents of

²⁹¹ Elizabeth Lawson, 'Stevie Smith and the Metaphors of Disengagement,' *Sydney Studies in English* 9 (1983-4): 97.

narrative and event, this view now yields nothing. And that failure to yield a result is particularly compelling, precisely because that flatness involved so much labour to produce. Effort and meticulous styling produce nothing at all, in the end, to look at. It is that contradiction which holds the eye, which makes flatness a space in which one wishes to linger.

Officious as the speaker's intervention may be, the end of the poem reveals the impulse behind this meticulously curated flatness: 'Scorpion so wishes to be gone', she laments. Death, of course, offers an ultimate flatness. Steven Connor observes, in his remarkable essay 'Flat Life', that flatness happens when things are finished. Corpses are flat when life ends, like the deathly line on the heart monitor.²⁹² Flatness exists both before and after use: before something has begun, and after something has ended.

So the bed, in *Novel on Yellow Paper*, left perfectly prepared, has the flatness of something finished or completed. Early on in the novel, Pompey announces that 'all to say had been said'.²⁹³ We recognise, in this passage, the same sense of the superfluity of further additions. Pompey's fantasized flat bed is a zone in which all that there was to do has been done. No further intervention is needed. Everything has been left ready for her; she can simply sleep.

Flatness and Narrative

²⁹² Steven Connor, 'Flat Life,' March 2001, accessed May 8, 2016, <http://stevenconnor.com/flat.html>.

²⁹³ Smith, *Novel*, 3.

This association of flatness with an event which has already happened maps on to our topographical sense of plot. We imagine climax and narrative in terms of landscape. A text *rises* to a climax; if it falls flat, the assumption is that the narrator has tried but failed to reach a satisfyingly high pinnacle. So Dryden can complain about Milton's 'flats among his elevations' with the relative values of flats and elevations taken for granted.²⁹⁴ The assumption is that narrative attempts to escape flatness, to replace it with a varied landscape. Anticlimactic flatness becomes failure or bathos. When you expect a topographical rise into climax, and it does not materialize, the text has fallen flat.

Stevie Smith's poetry resists and evades climax. It does so most obviously through bathos: falling flat, from the sublime to the absurd, in what Christopher Ricks called (with a nod to Alexander Pope), 'the art of sinking, the stone of bathos falling through the waters of pathos'.²⁹⁵ For Pope in *Peri Bathous*, anticlimax occurs 'where the second Line drops quite short of the first',²⁹⁶ is tonally or in content inappropriate to what has preceded it. Ricks describes how, similarly, Smith's ostentatiously failed rhymes foreclose the possibility of a satisfying poetic topography. Hinging his argument on the 'couple/rubble' half-rhyme in 'Advice to Young Children', he finds that, although we expect 'coupling which will rise as an arch', we find only 'a couple which leaves all in rubble'.²⁹⁷ Smith's poem 'Lady 'Rogue' Singleton' iterates this fall even more

²⁹⁴ John Dryden, *Sylvae: or, the second part of poetical miscellanies* (London: 1702), n. pag.

²⁹⁵ Christopher Ricks, 'Stevie Smith: The Art of Sinking in Poetry,' in *In Search of Stevie Smith*, ed. Sanford Sternlicht (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 208.

²⁹⁶ Alexander Pope, *Peri Bathous: The Art of Sinking in Poetry*, ed. Edna Leake Steeves (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968), 53.

²⁹⁷ Ricks, 'The Art of Sinking,' 206.

emphatically. The first three lines of the two closing stanzas are filled with declarative gusto, before dropping abruptly on the fourth line each time:

I could never make you happy, darling,
Or give you the baby you want,
I would always very much rather, dear,
Live in a tent.

I am not a cold woman, Henry,
But I do not feel for you
What I feel for the elephants and the miasmas
And the general view. (CP, 216)

Each stanza plummets from lofty contemplations of marital (un)happiness to the practical mundanity of life in a tent, from the weighty full line to the light half-line. In a poem like 'The Rehearsal', on the other hand, bathos originates not from dropping short physically but from running long:

I always admire a beautiful woman
And I've bought you some flowers for your beautiful bosom. (CP, 311)

Smith's over-long line overflows past expectant pleasure into dismissability. 'Bosom' does not quite rhyme with 'woman'; the lines of the couplet do not match up. This is a sinking in poetry, as Pope notes, which can derive also from excess: 'whenever you *start* a Metaphor, you must be sure to *Run it down*, and pursue it as far as it can go.'²⁹⁸ The speaker in 'The Rehearsal' canters too enthusiastically after his subject, saying too much about her 'beautiful bosom' with a candidness which plunges the poem into absurdity. Groaning under this unnecessary excess, the poem falls flat.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 47.

Bathos is key to Smith's poetic model, and a significant part of her drive towards flatness. Chapter One discussed, however, how poems like 'Never Again' deflate our capacity to receive an understated ending as anticlimax: it becomes, in Smith's hands, enough in itself. Smith fosters narrative flatness in ways beyond bathos and anticlimax: most notably, a cancellation of the conditions under which climax could occur in the first place. If bathos is a disappointing falling-flat, then Smith's elisions of climax create a poetic topography which refuses to entertain the possibility of anything except flatness.

Smith's long poem 'The House of Over-Dew', about the Minnim family's decision to establish a retreat for missionaries, evades climax in this way. It appends events, one after the other, without adjudicating on how we are to assign emotional and narrative significance:

Mrs Minnim had courage and was cheerful
But she was by now an old lady. Suddenly
There was the gift of a little money. Mr Minnim
Bought chasubles for visiting priests. But at first
There were no visitors at all... (CP, 641)

'The House of Over-Dew' simply goes on, keeping the same level, with one occurrence flatly following another. The responsibility for excitement and tangible event lifts: the flatness of this plot resides, to quote Adorno's description of Hölderlin, in the 'supreme passivity' of seriation, with each new event proffered as self-evidently enough in itself.²⁹⁹ This flattening parataxis – signalling unresistance, refusing climax in favour of patiently appending one event to another as though they are of equal significance and usefulness – is, as Franco Moretti notes, an important property of modernist novels such

²⁹⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, 'Parataxis: On Hölderlin's Late Poetry,' in *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 2:135.

as *Ulysses*.³⁰⁰ What is unusual about Smith's approach, however, is her decision to describe the technique, in a performance introduction, in terms of flatness:

The House of Over-Due is a very long poem indeed, and flat. It is meant for several voices, say half a dozen, each playing in with each, as people do in conversations about friends they have in common who are not there. So there will be a flat statement, then another voice coming in with something else they have remembered, to fill it out.³⁰¹

What does Smith mean here by 'flat'? The word, as the previous section has already hinted, spans different meanings. When she describes the poem as 'very long...and flat', she seems on the first level to refer to its reluctance to lift into climax: the way that one event follows another, without apparent significance. When she describes orchestrating the text for several voices, however, she does so in terms of the 'flat statement': a statement being made, then followed by another, bringing in another piece of just-remembered knowledge. The 'flat statement' does not, it seems, connect intrinsically to what came before or after. One can be appended to another without visible connection, as soon as it is called to mind. As in an aphoristic series, succeeding units do not respond to those which came before, and they do not build up into a larger cohesive whole.

This lack of responsiveness – where a statement is made but not followed up, not graced with the explicit recognition as significant, as worth attending to and recuperating, which absorption into a cohesive and connected narrative would offer – foregrounds the tragedy of the poem. 'The House of Over-Dew' is about repeated failed attempts to get

³⁰⁰ On parataxis in modernism, see Franco Moretti, *Modern Epic: The World-System from Goethe to Garcia Marquez*, trans. Quintin Hoare (London and New York: Verso, 1996), 153.

³⁰¹ Stevie Smith, introduction to 'The House of Over-Dew,' Series 2, Box 1, Folder 4, Stevie Smith papers, University of Tulsa. Smith moved, in drafts, between the spellings 'Due' and 'Dew'.

what one wants. Cynthia loses Georgie, the Minnims lose their savings on their wild scheme, Georgie does not get the post at Oxford that he hopes for. The final line of the poem is part of a Latin prayer which Cynthia reads to her class. 'Come, love of God', she cries, but no love is forthcoming; the cry remains there, baldly unanswered, on the page. Mirroring this indifferent world, Smith's flat (unemotional, emphatic) delivery of a family's tragic downfall deflates the affective potential of what she describes, limiting the reader's ability to feel or express pity. To sing this poem as one 'flat' statement after another reflects its aesthetic of unsuccess: the way one abortive bid for advancement follows another. Flatly presenting flat statements attenuates our emotional reaction to the very average disappointments which this poem describes, caused by nothing and of no real significance to the world: failed engagements, failed careers, the loss of savings, the drudgery of washing dishes. The 'flat' statements remark on these facts, but keep them apart from a cohesive feeling of tragedy. These descriptions of quotidian heartbreak are not allowed to build into anything greater, each remaining contained both physically and emotionally, in the extent of the affective demand they make on the reader.

In terms of this focus on emotional containment, it is significant that Smith imagined this poem as orchestrated for 'several voices': for performance, to be spoken or sung aloud. As Chapter One explored, Smith could not sing. Elisabeth Lutyens, who collaborated with Smith to set some of her poems to music, remarked in interview that the poet 'couldn't sing in tune at all'.³⁰² Smith knew it too: she describes being asked

³⁰² Derek Parker, 'Waving and drowning,' BBC Radio 4, June 23, 1974.

not to sing at school, because she was putting the other little girls off.³⁰³ Nevertheless, Stevie Smith sang her poems.

What did Smith's flat renditions contribute to her poetry's reception? Tuneless and occasionally giggly, Smith's performance seems to signal that it carries no real weight, can be enjoyed without the pressure of being remembered or valued beyond the immediate moment. On an LP which recorded some of her performances, Smith's renditions of 'Do Take Muriel Out' and 'Le Singe Qui Swinge' quickly go flat, and are preserved that way.³⁰⁴ On other occasions, however, Smith's monotonous singing offers emphasis and seriousness. When she performs 'Oh stubborn race of Cadmus' seed...', she sings the final line of the poem, about the suffering of Ismene, all on one note.³⁰⁵ Smith cues her audience to stop following the tune through its highs and lows, to linger on one level and think. Singing which runs flat offers a relationship to the text which maps on to an onlooker's relationship with flat aphorism: potentially both weighty and light, empty and riveting, worth inhabiting fully and sincerely even as one giggles over it or passes it by.

In Smith's performance of 'One of Many', her flat, monotonous rendition displays further expressive possibilities of flatness. 'One of Many' and its paratexts signal full confession, laying everything out full to view. In her performance introduction to the poem, Smith describes, frankly, her experience of being overwhelmed by the periodic

³⁰³ See Jessica Walsh, 'Stevie Smith: Girl, Interrupted,' *Papers on Language and Literature* 40, no. 1, (2004): 61.

³⁰⁴ Stevie Smith, *Stevie Smith reads and comments on Selected Poems*, introduced by Iain Crichton Smith, recorded 30 July 1965 (Marvell Press, 1965), LP.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

and disconcerting realisation that she is not in fact *sui generis*, that she is only one of many writers. ‘Then one may grow rather shrill. I would rather be sad than shrill, and I will sing the next poem’.³⁰⁶

In Smith’s description, singing seems to modify shrillness (flatten it, perhaps), or reduce it to sadness. That paratactic ‘and’, however, keeps that relationship between sadness, shrillness and singing ambiguous. Singing may offer consolation; it may equally be the next passive step, following emotional responses about which nothing at all can be done. Smith declares her preference for sadness baldly, and proceeds on with her performance before her audience can react. The monotone in which she then sings ‘One of Many’ drowns out her intrusive contemporaries. More strikingly, it cancels the audience’s ability to express (or even feel) concern for or sympathy with her stark statement of sadness.³⁰⁷

This sense of ‘flatness’ as self-sufficiency, as the refusal to ask questions or answer them other than in the most gnomic and lateral way, takes us back to Derrida’s definition of the aphorism: a mode of speech offering nuggets of information, ‘dissociated’ from each other.³⁰⁸ Yet ‘The House of Over-Dew’ calls on us to receive each of its paratactically-offered nuggets, each ‘flat statement’, as significant. The voices loom authoritatively out of the darkness; their lack of mutual connection presents them as absolute rather than situational or contextually-valid truths. To say something

³⁰⁶ Stevie Smith, *British Poets of Our Time: Stevie Smith, Adrian Mitchell: Poems read by the authors*, ed. Alan Brownjohn and Charles Osborne (Argo Record Company, 1973).

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁸ Jacques Derrida, ‘Fifty-two Aphorisms for a Foreword,’ in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg, trans. Andrew Benjamin (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 2:117.

‘flatly’ insists on its undeniability. It stresses that it has said everything necessary, and that no further argument or response is possible. The only thing that can follow a ‘flat statement’ is another ‘flat statement’, just as aphorism follows aphorism.

To think about aphorism in terms of ‘the flat’ opens up a range of interpretative possibilities. On one level, the word alerts us to the ways in which a text composed of aphorisms or quotations might occasion a kind of lateral movement across its surface. As in Smith’s collection of aphorisms in ‘My Muse’, we move quickly from one to another; the appearance of the new text cuts short any inclination to burrow down interpretatively into the depths of the older one. Repetition of a sealed nugget of writing across texts can create a sense of flatness. When a stanza moves laterally between ‘Angel Face’ and ‘The Frozen Lake’, cropping up as the second verse in both texts, its repetition across Smith’s oeuvre signals that it is not to be interrogated, but read and reread:

White and silent is the snowflake
Falling, falling, and it will make
Soon all flat and like a white lake
In a white and silent state
Beaming flat and vacant. (CP, 455, 563)

Looping monotonously around the words ‘flat’ and ‘silent’, lingering obsessively on an image of flatness which draws and retains the eye, the stanza binds itself into a self-sufficient unit. The repetition justifies, internally, what has come before, needing no external justification or development. Yet the stanza’s independence and portability, its very irrelevance to everything that happens before and after it, in both texts, draws eyes to it as the poem’s central point of significance. Its intensive, heavily-stressed rhythm

reinforces its status as the poem's centre of gravity. Repetition within this stanza, and in fact repetition of the stanza across texts, establish this as a significant aspect of flatness: recurrence without implication or effect, which derives its value from an intensity of presence rather than a capacity to slot into, and contribute to, a narrative. Smith dwells hypnotically on this slowly-accumulating flatness. Her speaker fantasises about it with audible, anticipatory desire, as Pompey does in *Novel on Yellow Paper*, contemplating just how rivetingly and emptily flat it will be.

Smith repositions interest into flatness, then, rather than variation or depth, as something to spend time contemplating. This shifted relationship between flatness and depth brings with it, as a corollary, the distinction between irony and humour which Gilles Deleuze describes in *The Logic of Sense*:

Paradox appears as a dismissal of depth, a display of events at the surface, and a deployment of language along this limit. Humor is the art of the surface, which is opposed to the old irony, the art of depths and heights.³⁰⁹

Smith's complex of wit, humour, darkness and despair seems to promise irony – a discovery of despair “under” an amusing surface – but, on inspection, that relationship is not often easily establishable. Reading Smith involves constantly having to reposition her irony as humour, as the depths which might nourish irony from beneath are found to have dried up. Although Mark Halliday finds only about forty of Smith's poems ‘distinctly funny’, he argues that her poetry tends towards humour rather than irony.³¹⁰

³⁰⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale (London: The Athlone Press, 1990), 9.

³¹⁰ Mark Halliday, ‘Stevie Smith's serious comedy,’ *Humor* 22, no. 3 (2009): 296.

‘The Engine Drain’ manically flaunts its own light-heartedness, dancing around repeated words and phrases:

And all about the cottage floors
It flowed and rose and flowed and rose
Till in their beds at night you’d see
Quite half afloat the midnight peasantry... (CP, 364)

Later in the poem, water-snakes swimming in the inland sea signal to ‘The Ancient Mariner’ in a reference whose significance immediately dries up to nothing. When the ‘blue and flat’ inland sea is drained, it leaves behind ‘A fertile flat and farming land’. Flatness reveals only more flatness: burrowing downwards reveals nothing new. Water snakes, which signal the Mariner’s turning point towards release in Coleridge’s poem, mean nothing here, nor does the apparently-catastrophic draining of the sea. In fact, Smith describes ‘The Engine Drain’ in a performance introduction as ‘a poem that is quite unemotional’, which refuses to accommodate deep affective responses on the part of either speaker or reader.³¹¹ The poem’s black moments, against its blithe singsonging, leads us to expect irony where none exists in any familiar terms. Flatness, here and across Smith’s writing, emerges as a way of reinscribing a central strangeness in her work: that attempts to parse her meanings return her readers inexorably to a surface which signalled, all along, that there was nothing further beneath it.

Smith and Interpretation

³¹¹ Stevie Smith, introduction to ‘The Engine Drain,’ Series 2, Box 4, Folder 2, Stevie Smith papers, University of Tulsa.

Faced, then, with the strange episode about sleep in *Novel on Yellow Paper*, with which this chapter opened – withholding clues to its function within the novel, lacking the ‘headboard and footboard’ of clear narrative climax and post-climax as it circles around its tiny words – what interpretative opportunities are available to Smith’s critics? One could begin by considering the style of the passage. Pompey fantasises about a simple pleasure (sleep) in unornamented monosyllables: repeated, they stall plot rather than allowing it to build to a climax. This childlike, seemingly aimless diction has attracted a critical rhetoric of simplicity to Smith’s work. Frances Spalding calls her writing ‘simple, flat and poignant’,³¹² in phrasing which implies that the ‘trick’ of her work is openly available to view (laid out on a flat surface). In the lines from *Novel on Yellow Paper*, flatness supports such an aesthetic of complete disclosure. The bed is so simple that it can conceal nothing. The sheets are ‘turned back’, exposing a single, ascetic pillow. Accordingly, Steven Connor identifies a flat world by the fact that it has ‘no interiority, no depth, no secret, nothing hidden from view’.³¹³ And Smith herself seemed to agree that her work had ‘no secret’, as she tells John Hayward in a 1942 letter:

I am sure people read a lot of sophistication into my stuff that isn’t really there. I mean they think it *couldn’t be like that* just straight. Oh couldn’t it.³¹⁴

But a reading of Smith as ‘simple’ risks straying into language of charm and innocence which minimises her literary accomplishments. Smith insisted that her poetry should not be brushed off as amusing, writing to Anna Kallin that her verse was ‘not *at all*

³¹² Frances Spalding, *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), xvi.

³¹³ Connor, n. pag.

³¹⁴ Spalding, 165.

whimsical...but serious'.³¹⁵ The question arises, then, of how we interpret something which positions itself as worth pondering even as it declares its simplicity. The stark, descriptively circled and re-circled bed in *Novel on Yellow Paper* is flat in this new sense: in its insistence on its own existence. 'Standing in the middle of the room', it asserts itself 'flatly'; it refuses to be overlooked. The connotation becomes more audible still if we connect Smith's description of the bed as 'high and flat' to her remark, in the essay 'History or Poetic Drama?', that 'Truth is far and flat'.³¹⁶ That phrasing further echoes a *Times Literary Supplement* review of Smith's poetry from 1957, which notes how Smith's 'catastrophic let-down of the last line is an example of the precision instrument which Miss Smith uses to reduce the funny-peculiar to flat fact'.³¹⁷ The minimised or failed climax explicitly engenders flatness, though not, for this reviewer, disappointment or dissatisfaction. Across these three texts, Smith's flatness is emphatic, associated with the significance of 'fact'.

Sensing, then, that this arrestingly flat bed is in some way important or deserving of attention, a traditional critical response would embark on interpretation of the episode. The most obvious approach focuses on the fatigue which drives Pompey's daydream: activates, in other words, the sense of 'flatness' as lack of affect, understood directly as depression. In line with the interpretations which Smith has attracted to date, we might link this depression in with her conflicted emotions about domesticity (the novel describes her engagement to Freddy, and its breaking-off), or perhaps with her musings on European politics. Pompey is tired because the patriarchy makes too many demands

³¹⁵ Stevie Smith, *Me Again: The Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith*, ed. Jack Barbera and William McBrien (London: Virago, 1982), 304.

³¹⁶ Stevie Smith, 'History or Poetic Drama?' in *Me Again*, 152.

³¹⁷ Quoted in Jack Barbera and William McBrien, *Stevie: A Biography of Stevie Smith* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 209.

on her, we could say. Or: Pompey's refusal to engage wholeheartedly with the implications of her own anti-Semitism manifests as fatigue, as a death-drive.³¹⁸

These are what we, following Louis Althusser, might call 'symptomatic readings': interrogating the text in order to uncover what is unsaid or repressed.³¹⁹ Paul Ricoeur identified this approach approvingly as the 'hermeneutics of suspicion',³²⁰ and Fredric Jameson institutionalised it in *The Political Unconscious* (1981): the interrogation of a text to unmask what is latent, 'restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history [of class struggle]'.³²¹ This approach, suggests Rita Felski, has become institutionally mandated, and its emotional aspects concealed by its proximity to nineteenth-century scientific methods, which emphasised the probing, interpretation and classification of insights unavailable to the naked eye.³²² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick used 'symptomatic reading' to great effect in her seminal *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), in which silences in a text, or what a text leaves unsaid, can be 'as pointed and performative as speech' in its testimony.³²³

Stevie Smith seems as though she would reward symptomatic reading. Her dense allusiveness, childlike diction and moments of ambiguity suggest the interpretative potential which we associate with literary value. Heather Love describes how 'no

³¹⁸ For Smith as subversive feminist, see (for instance) Julie Sims Steward, 'Ceci n'est pas un Hat: Stevie Smith and the Refashioning of Gender,' *South Central Review* 5, no. 2 (1998): 16-33; for Smith as political critic see Romana Huk, *Between the Lines* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

³¹⁹ Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: NLB, 1970), 28.

³²⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 32.

³²¹ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 1983), 4.

³²² Rita Felski, 'Suspicious Minds,' *Poetics Today* 32, no. 2 (2011): 221.

³²³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 4.

term...carries more value in the humanities than “rich”. For a text to be worthwhile, it must possess the depth and complexity this word implies.³²⁴ So our reflexive response to Smith’s nursery-rhyme-schemes and talking animals is to designate her work ‘*fausse-naïve*’,³²⁵ or ‘deceptively simple’.³²⁶ For symptomatic critics, apparently simple writers like Stevie Smith must, as Leonard Diepeveen notes, be redeemed by the knowledge that she is hiding complexity from us. Smith’s slightly-embarrassing, occasionally unsophisticated surface must be excused through a revelation of richness, of secret depth.³²⁷

But, as we have seen, when we bring traditional critical tactics to bear on Smith’s writing, we struggle to discover and articulate the depth (often, we assume, a hidden, subversive commentary on politics or gender) which we expect to find beneath the nursery-rhyme surface. Smith resists coherent critical analysis. She stops tantalisingly short of subverting her childlike forms and motifs. She hinges whole poems on amusing mishearings (‘Duty was his Lodestar’, CP, 290), and delivers conventional sentiments with no apparent irony (‘The Pleasures of Friendship’, CP, 237). Accordingly, many attempts to delve below the surface and discover political or symbolic significance in Smith’s writing have to ignore significant portions of her diverse, anarchic and often internally contradictory canon. Because Smith resists these ideologically utilitarian readings, literary criticism struggles to ‘enlarge [itself] to make room for [her].’³²⁸ Even approaches, introduced in Chapter One, which emphasise Smith’s polyvocality and

³²⁴ Heather Love, ‘Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn,’ *New Literary History* 41 (2010): 371.

³²⁵ Philip Larkin, ‘Frisivolous and Vulnerable,’ in *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982* (London: Faber & Faber, 1983), 153.

³²⁶ Sanford Sternlicht, ‘Introduction,’ in *In Search of Stevie Smith*, ed. Sanford Sternlicht (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 26.

³²⁷ Leonard Diepeveen, *The Difficulties of Modernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 189.

³²⁸ Peter Orr, ‘Stevie Smith’ in Sternlicht, *In Search of Stevie Smith*, 35.

multiple personae, such as those of Sheryl Stevenson and Will May,³²⁹ still position symptomatic reading as an assumed baseline to Stevie Smith's writing. In suggesting that Smith traps the reader in misinterpretations, May implies that her poetic approach centres on a subversion of our tendency towards symptomatic reading. But might we read Smith in ways which do not position symptomatic reading as central, either as a mode welcomed or subverted? What are the alternatives to a symptomatic critical narrative of Smith as 'deceptively simple', but revealing depth when interpreted?

The conflicted sensation we feel when encountering a perfectly flat surface derives from two simultaneous experiences. We are arrested by its uncompromising self-assertion, even as we instinctively move to dismiss a space without variation as uninteresting. Smith positions her texts as pure surface without depth (flat), but also as a demanding, insistent surface to which we should pay attention (her work presents itself flatly, with an aphoristic refusal of argument). Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) captures this split response when it associates secrets with flatness. When used as an organising principle, Deleuze and Guattari suggest, secrets become thinner and more ubiquitous until form and content dissolve into each other, and nothing is left to hide.³³⁰ Secrecy becomes disconnected from concealment, with the latter's associated language of depth. People exist, the book suggests, who talk and hide nothing, but who are nevertheless 'secret by transparency, as impenetrable as water'.³³¹ J. Hillis Miller's 1994 essay, 'Derrida's Topographies', finds a similar opacity in the flat surface, even as it seems to hide nothing. Miller presents Jacques Derrida's 'crypt'

³²⁹ Sheryl Stevenson, 'Stevie Smith's Voices,' *Contemporary Literature* 33, no. 1 (1992): 27; William May, *Stevie Smith and Authorship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 17.

³³⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 289.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, 290.

in ‘Fors: The English Words of Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok’ as an analogue to a literary secret. While a crypt is so deep that ‘all approach to it is baffled’, ‘the literary secret...is all on the surface, a surface with no depth.’³³² Yet, Miller notes, both are versions of the same structure: ‘To say the secret is on the surface is to say that it generates the illusion of hiding a secret at some fathomless depth.’³³³

For Deleuze and Guattari, and for Miller via Derrida, flatness becomes associated not with a lack of interest or content, but with a particular kind of content whose profoundly evasive interest inheres precisely in that flatness, in that open revelation.³³⁴ Stephen Best’s and Sharon Marcus’s notion of ‘surface reading’, arguing that ideological critique has become redundant in a post-ideological world, seems to offer a tempting methodological approach.³³⁵ Surface reading moves via Anne-Lise François’ conception of the ‘open secret’,³³⁶ towards experimentation with (in the terms Sedgwick uses later to qualify the claims of her earlier work) non-paranoid ways of reading texts.³³⁷ The method – such as it is, since ‘surface reading’ is a contested and emerging practice – begins by refusing to assume that the text is hiding something (coded sexuality, hidden feminist subversion), which we must winkle out. Surface reading can entail, among other things, an attentive and detailed account of what is clearly open to view in the text.

³³² J. Hillis Miller, ‘Derrida’s Topographies,’ *South Atlantic Review* 59, no. 1 (1994): 18.

³³³ *Ibid.*, 18.

³³⁴ Pierre Macherey gestures towards this strategy in ‘On the Process of Exposition of Capital (The Work of Concepts),’ in Louis Althusser, Étienne Balibar, Roger Establet, Pierre Macherey and Jacques Rancière, *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition*, trans. Ben Brewster and David Fernbach (London and New York: Verso, 2015), 184: ‘we have to leave aside what at first appearance seems the essential thing, the content, so as to attend, with a myopic attention, to the actual detail of the writing... what [then] leaps to the eye is the very thing that the traditional regard casts aside as waste, and that thus escapes it...’

³³⁵ Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, ‘Surface Reading: An Introduction,’ *Representations*, 108 (2009): 2.

³³⁶ Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

³³⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, ‘Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,’ in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (London: Duke University Press, 2003), 126.

Though Rita Felski resists the use of the term ‘surface’ to describe a resistance to ideological critique, arguing that although poststructuralist critique ‘rejects hidden truth’ and depth it still aims to ‘decipher larger structures of cultural production’,³³⁸ she proposes a way of reading which sounds very similar to that of Best and Marcus: ‘to slow down at each step, to forego theoretical shortcuts and to attend to the words of our fellow actors rather than overriding them – and overwriting them – with our own.’³³⁹ Heather Love connects this importance of simply describing to the concerns of surface reading: ‘Surface reading...is descriptive; it defers virtuosic interpretation in order to attempt to formulate an accurate account of what the text is *like*’.³⁴⁰

Surface reading continues to struggle to make a case for itself. It defines its workings through negatives (it is not ideologically-focused, not depth-related, not beginning from a stance of suspicion) rather than accumulating a positive case for what it could be or do. This thesis does not practice ‘surface reading’, nor does it disavow depth-focused readings of Smith. What it does suggest is that an author like Stevie Smith, whose texts are unusually resistant to coherent political and ideological stances even in comparison with other twentieth-century writers, whose epigrammatic structures and aesthetics necessarily refuse to add up into larger models, might be well served by lingering slightly longer on a surface which is in itself so engrossing, combining as it does weight and lightness, confident assertion and inanity, emptiness and fascination. The flat surfaces of Smith’s texts generate their own paradigms for reading: accommodating an aphoristic withdrawal from cohesiveness, from penetrability and usability. Smith presents facts flatly, stating them with aphoristic ‘flatness’ as absolute truth while

³³⁸ Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 55.

³³⁹ Rita Felski, “‘Context Stinks!’,” *New Literary History* 42, no. 4 (2012): 578.

³⁴⁰ Heather Love, ‘Close Reading and Thin Description,’ *Public Culture* 25, no. 3 (2013): 412.

refusing access to any postulated depth of meaning. And the result is flat narrative: aclimactic, refusing engagement or narrative variation or topographical rise and fall.

These distinct but intersecting ideas inform the following close reading of Smith's poem 'I rode with my darling...' from her 1950 collection *Harold's Leap*. I argue that the text exemplifies a mode of revelation which does not derive from rising climax, or a sudden drawing-back of concealing veils. Rather, it models the reading experience of poised but mystified encounter with a flat surface which withholds interpretative depth. Cued in by the poem's subject-matter (an encounter with physical flatness which leads, ultimately, to the flatness of affectlessness), this section will give a detailed account of what lies on the poem's flat surface, of what the poem displays flatly and without explanation. Doing so allows us to linger on a crucial moment in the poem, which recalibrates our sense of the work done by 'I rode with my darling...'

Pledged to the Plain

I rode with my darling in the dark wood at night
And suddenly there was an angel burning bright
Come with me or go far away he said
But do not stay alone in the dark wood at night... (CP, 296)

Robert Browning was important to Stevie Smith. She signalled her allegiance to his 1855 poem 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came' in a letter to Betty Miller in January 1953:

To go on, being so apparently in so many ways "unsatisfactory" (as the Aunt says) and yet to go on. No wonder it is Childe Roland one always comes back to, the startling bravery of the unusual hero, crawling staunchly where others before

him pranced knightly – and then the slug-horn and the mere news he had arrived, and what grins from the dark hills, but the last grin his.³⁴¹

The Aunt's disapproving 'unsatisfactory' pivots easily to her 'unnecessary' described in the previous chapter. The charge, in both cases, is of not being adequate or appropriate to a situation, but nevertheless going on, being dwelt on and given value. Smith is riveted by this image of 'go[ing] on', bleakly but doggedly, across a landscape which offers no potential. Childe Roland cannot discover anything useful to him, or hope for anything. Nevertheless, he tries again and again, passing flatly on through a flat and unchanging landscape. In 'A Soldier Dear to Us' (CP, 605-7), Smith returns to Browning's poem as a model for the Great War's lingering, inescapable impact on shellshocked soldiers, recurring in memory without relief:

Basil never spoke of the trenches, but I
Saw them always, saw the mud, heard the guns, saw the duckboards,
Saw the men and the horses slipping in the great mud, saw
The rain falling and never stop, saw the gaunt
Trees and the rusty frame
Of the abandoned gun carriages. Because it was the same
As the poem 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came'
I was reading at school. (CP, 606)

'Childe Roland' lasts and lasts. It 'goes on' beyond the space of Browning's poem, a version of its imagery haunting the traumatised soldiers and their fascinated child-friend 'always'. Trauma repeats itself: the devastated character returns to its scene, again and again, unable to use it up. Though Basil never speaks of the trenches, her reading of 'Childe Roland' makes them acutely and permanently present to the child: a continual but unspoken presence, palpable but never acknowledged.

³⁴¹ Quoted in Spalding, 212.

Although Smith's poem 'I rode with my darling...' does not explicitly mention Childe Roland, Romana Huk notes its similarity to Browning's poem. Her sensitive essay finds that Smith does not subvert patriarchal structures in predictable ways, but it reads the poem in gendered terms. The speaker who leaves her husband in the dark wood to pursue an angel is departing from her conventional role. When the second half of the poem does not pass judgement on her decision to escape her darling, Huk suggests that Smith's characters engage in dialogue with patriarchally complicit instructional voices without committing to their view or indeed any other.³⁴² I want to add to Huk's reading by pausing before tackling the moments in this poem which seem pregnant with symbolic suggestion (angel, darling, wood, tower), and instead paying attention to its more muted, invisible episodes.

Defending Browning from the charge of being unbeautiful or unpoetic, G. K. Chesterton maps his verse in tellingly topographical terms:

...the traveller will often hear the advice from local lovers of the picturesque, "The scenery round such and such a place has no interest; it is quite flat." To disparage scenery as quite flat is, of course, like disparaging a swan as quite white, or an Italian sky as quite blue. Flatness is a sublime quality in some landscapes, just as rockiness is a sublime quality in others.³⁴³

For Chesterton, Browning derives his interest from a lack of the qualities which draw readers to other texts: what draws Chesterton is Browning's plainness and flatness.

³⁴² Romana Huk, 'Poetic Subject and Voice as Sites of Struggle: Toward a "Postrevisionist" Reading of Stevie Smith's Fairytale Poems,' in *Dwelling in Possibility: Women Poets and Critics on Poetry*, ed. Yopie Prins and Maera Shreiber (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 160-1.

³⁴³ G. K. Chesterton, 'Browning as a Literary Artist,' in *G. K. Chesterton: A selection from his non-fictional prose*, ed. W. H. Auden (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), 22.

Browning's writing refuses to reward its readers in the terms they expect. He recedes from graspability. Noting that the title of Browning's 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came' is itself a quotation from *King Lear*, Barbara Everett suggests that it marks a tendency, in Browning, to construct receding corridors out of accumulating quotations, 'the great tradition of poets interlinked one with another only by the high hopelessness of the enterprise they share.'³⁴⁴ The connection with Smith's quotations which lead to dead-ends, rather than interpretative 'richness' is clear. In promising and then withholding interpretative depth, we are reminded of another of Browning's lines which Smith quoted several times in performance introductions, describing a decision not to delve below surfaces: 'Where the apple reddens / Never pry.'³⁴⁵

Browning's 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came' traces Roland's solitary journey across a plain in his quest for the Tower. In Smith's poem, 'I rode with my darling...' a woman stays in a dark wood at night despite the warnings of her lover and an angel who 'suddenly' appears. Like Childe Roland, she discovers a tower, unexpectedly, after a key encounter with the topographical flatness which characterises the landscape of Browning's poem. Smith's reinterpretation of 'Childe Roland' hinges, I argue, on this repositioning of flatness as narratively interesting in itself, rather than an indication that narrative is flagging. The earlier poem is ghosted by Roland's hope for an event: the possibility of escaping from the flatness of the empty plain by reaching the vertical Dark Tower. Smith's rendition, however, rewrites how we are to receive flatness. The

³⁴⁴ Barbara Everett, 'Browning Versions,' in *Poets In Their Time: Essays on English Poetry from Donne to Larkin* (London: Faber, 1986), 180.

³⁴⁵ Stevie Smith, 'People often ask poets...', 1, Series 2, Box 4, Folder 11, Stevie Smith papers, 1924-1970. Coll. No. 1976.012. McFarlin Library. Department of Special Collections and University Archives. The University of Tulsa.

flat cornfield which her protagonist finds elicits only a neutral response, with no expectation that things might ever be otherwise.

Browning's Roland is bewildered by the flat landscape: like Smith's early critics, he cannot believe that what he sees could be 'like that just straight'. Without the organisation of landmarks, Roland finds himself in a panicky interpretative impasse. Harold Bloom has established that the question of interpretation is key to Browning's poem. 'Roland rides with us as interpreter', he notes, yet 'his every interpretation is a powerful misreading'.³⁴⁶ Though Bloom describes Roland's experience as a 'trial by landscape', it is worth emphasising that Roland focuses his interpretative efforts on the bare plain:

Then came a bit of stubbed ground, once a wood,
Next a marsh, it would seem, and now mere earth
Desperate and done with...³⁴⁷

Here, Roland differentiates between categories of flatland, opposing 'marsh' to 'mere earth'. He struggles to assign them origin-stories which would at least build in a historical topographical variation. Nothing succeeds. The sensation is of finality, a landscape which is 'done with'; come to an interpretative and discursive halt.

Roland finds the landscape psychologically unacceptable because it refuses variation so adamantly. It enforces its own flatness: 'If there pushed any ragged thistle-stalk / Above

³⁴⁶ Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 106.

³⁴⁷ Robert Browning, *Browning: Poetical Works 1833-1864*, ed. Ian Jack (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 619.

its mates, the head was chopped'.³⁴⁸ This is a landscape struggling and failing to be inflected, to be inclined in both senses: to have gradient, as well as the desire which propels plot. Wholly flat, it inclines to nothing. Though Roland's attention lingers, he can find no 'safe road', no content to interpret which would confer topographic variation and secure depth of meaning on what he sees. All he can do is 'go on': try to find the Tower whose verticality will provide an alternative value-system to the flatness he is trying to resist.³⁴⁹ He hopes it will structurally embody a climax, an ascent to an ending.

When Smith echoes Browning's poem in 'I rode with my darling...' she pointedly omits Roland's struggle for interpretation. As in many of her texts, Smith cuts out all connective tissue. Events happen without explanation. The speaker had wanted to stay in the dark wood – but then rides 'suddenly' after her darling. Instead of her darling, she finds a cornfield. She gazes at it for a few moments, then rides, without justification, into the dark wood. In contrast to Browning's poem, Smith's text strips interpretative labour from its plot; the protagonist allows her experiences to remain flat and depthless.

Given the narrative (and perhaps, in passing, affective) flatness of her protagonist, contrasting with Browning's anguished hero, it is appropriate that Smith allows her poem to turn on a single, spotlighted encounter with topographical flatness:

And suddenly I rode after him and came to a cornfield
Where had my darling gone and where was the angel now?
The wind bent the corn and drew it along the ground
And the corn said, Do not go alone in the dark wood. (CP, 296)

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 616.

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

In a poem which opened *in media res*, within a dark thicket of poetic plot anticipating revelation, the speaker now bursts upon an area of flatness. She finds neither the angel nor the darling who she expects. Though this episode is clearly open to view in the poem, it has passed without significant critical comment. I contend that this is because it fits none of the interpretative narratives to which Smith's critics tend to default. The cornfield refuses to yield to our probing. Nothing happens in the field, except 'The wind bent the corn and drew it along the ground.' When the corn speaks, it adds nothing new, only the poem's well-trodden refrain. The scene is innocent, simple, hiding nothing and yielding nothing; it is both topographically and interpretatively flat.

Stark and open, the cornfield impresses itself upon the speaker's consciousness. Yet Smith defuses the capacity of this flat moment to be experienced as startling or significant. Throughout, her half-rhymes slow and flatten the poem.

My darling grew pale he was responsible
He said we should go back it was reasonable...

My darling said goodbye and rode off thoughtfully
And suddenly I rode after him and came to a cornfield... (CP, 296)

The rhymes of 'responsible' and 'reasonable', as well as 'thoughtfully' and 'cornfield', are versions of Christopher Ricks's stones of bathos. Laid simply on the ends of the lines, with their lumpy syllables left unworked, they weigh the poem down: prevent it from lifting into sharpness and clarity. Across the lines, half-rhymes and echoes further disrupt the auditory hierarchy which tends to position significance at a line-ending:

‘suddenly’, part-way through the line, rhymes more exactly with ‘thoughtfully’ than the latter’s counterpart, ‘cornfield’. So Smith takes her poem beyond bathos, which depends on an abrupt fall into flatness. Instead, she generates a pervasive mood of pre-emptive anti-climax: anti-climax before climax could ever have a chance to occur.

Smith ensures that the physically flat and empty cornfield stays narratively flat – not noticeably lifting into dramatic climax – by visibly refusing to hinge the moment on the word ‘suddenly’. The poem depends on things being sudden, or – unexpectedly – not being sudden. So the angel appears ‘suddenly’: ‘burning bright’, impressive and dramatic. In contrast, ‘suddenly’ floats near the appearance of the cornfield, but is not attached to it: the speaker rode ‘suddenly’ after her darling, ‘and came to a cornfield’.

The cornfield is not experienced as ‘sudden’, then, although it appears suddenly in the poem, with no apparent function or connection to anything which precedes or follows. It is unexpected for the speaker, who hesitates there. But, ghosted by that word, it is no more than almost ‘sudden’.

E. M. Forster, we recall, suggested in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) that a character in fiction is flat if it is not capable of surprising in a convincing way.³⁵⁰ Smith’s description of flatness in ‘I rode with my darling...’ casts both the ‘surprising’ and the ‘convincing’ into doubt. Surprise is evaded and displaced (physically, on the line); the speaker’s unexplained ride after her darling, and her hesitation before an innocent-seeming cornfield, are deliberately too minimal to convince. There is a sense here of

³⁵⁰ E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (London: Penguin, 2005), 81.

revelation which has let out its own air, which flattens its climactic potential in the moment it materialises. In this, Smith follows her predecessor. Browning's Childe Roland does not realise, towards the end of the poem, that he is in fact looking at the very tower he sought:

Dotard, a-dozing at the very nonce,
After a life spent training for the sight!

What in the midst lay but the Tower itself?
The round squat turret, blind as the fool's heart...³⁵¹

When the quest-object is abundantly available, laid out on a flat surface and waiting only to be noticed, revelation becomes a non-event. By the time it is fully achieved, it is already in the past. Even when it is noticed, the tower is 'squat'; 'low and close to the ground', as Donald S. Hair notes,³⁵² it tends towards the flat plain from which it represents only a minor variation. Roland's climax has failed. Longing to escape flatness, he has to shore his plot up with heightened emotion by raging against his own obliviousness.

In contrast, the encounter of Smith's protagonist with the cornfield – flatter yet than Browning's 'squat' tower – is rendered affectlessly. We can identify Smith's cornfield as the closest the poem comes to a "climax" – despite its emotional and physical flatness, despite its noticeable failure to be 'sudden' – because, in its minimal way, it makes something happen. Neither the angel nor the darling could induce narrative climax. But, gazing at the cornfield, as it insists flatly on itself, Smith's speaker comes

³⁵¹ Browning, 620.

³⁵² Donald S. Hair, *Robert Browning's Language* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 107.

to a decision. In a dramatically-rendered two lines, she rides with finality into the dark wood:

Then the wind drew more strongly and the black clouds covered the moon
And I rode into the dark wood at night. (CP, 296)

The cornfield causes an experience of impasse. When she asks it, ‘Where had my darling gone and where was the angel now?’ it replies only with the mute, non-teleological motion of the wind moving the corn. In that unanswered or obliquely answered question – in that failure of the narrative or the landscape to rise to the occasion, to be what was needed – something was revealed to Smith’s speaker. She does not annotate the experience; pokerfaced, she rides into the wood.

If we read Smith’s poem without attempting to penetrate beneath its flatness – if we pause before speculating on, for instance, the Freudian significance of the dark tower, or the patriarchal implications of the speaker’s relationship with her partner – we learn the following. Smith’s speaker encounters a flat field. It brings her to a decision. She goes into a dark wood, where she finds a windowless tower. The speaker then vocalises the emotional flatness which has pervaded the whole poem:

Loved I once my darling? I love him not now.
Had I a mother beloved? She lies far away.
A sister, a loving heart? My Aunt a noble lady?
All all is silent in the dark wood at night. (CP, 297)

The speaker’s answers to her own questions are tonally flat. They balance between yes and no: falling flat, or short of what she elicits. We are kept on the surface, never

allowed to settle into interpretation. Flatness has led not to catastrophe or anguish, nor Childe Roland's dramatic note on his slughorn, but simply to more flatness. The tower is 'tall', but more importantly it is 'heavy'; its stones 'resisting without belief'.

Is this let-down ending a nightmare? Do we read this as a poem about the horrors of flatness? This poem is one of many in Smith's oeuvre whose protagonist flees family, lovers and obligations into a natural space. In 'My Hat' (1957) the speaker is magicked away from the nightmarish 'right sort of chap' to the peace of a desert island. This salvation is not unmitigated bliss, however; the speaker manages only grudging approval. 'Am I glad I am here? Yes, well, I am...' (CP, 362). Similarly, when Joan escapes into a garden in 'The Lady of the Well-Spring' (1957), the ending is non-committal: 'Do not think of her as one who loses' (CP, 358). These are models of escape without dramatic victory; where affect, like Roland's tower, is barely raised above the flat. And yet we recall that it is seeing that framed exhibit of flatness, the cornfield, which leads the poem's narrator to her final, flat ending. The cornfield foreshadows what was to come, and still Smith's speaker rides into the dark wood.

Stones which 'resist without belief' do not fall and vanish, anti-climactically. They go on, flatly: they insist on themselves, refuse to conceal themselves, even as they affectlessly refuse to lift out of listlessness. Flatness provides a language for Smith's texts: daring us to interpret them, they nevertheless refuse to privilege any interpretative handle, remain pokerfaced on the subject of their own significance.

Smith's 'Childe Rolandine', yet another of her reworkings of Browning's poem, brings out this redemption of flatness, of the small space in which nothing happens and which has no depth beyond what is immediately visible. Childe Rolandine has started a job as a typist; she urges herself to reveal her sense of oppression, in phrasing which presents this disclosure as almost a moral responsibility:

But then she sang, Ah why not? tell all, speak, speak,
Silence is vanity, speak for the whole truth's sake.

And rising she took the bugle and put it to her lips, crying:
There is a Spirit feeds on our tears, I give him mine... (CP, 381)

Childe Rolandine makes a vast, dramatic, formal declaration: aided by her namesake's bugle, which appears at just the right moment to emphasise her words. Yet no one responds; while Roland was dissolved into sublimity with the end of Browning's poem (as Smith remarks 'the last grin his'), the Spirit does not consume her in the way she offers. Childe Rolandine is still alone; she can still only dream, once her workday is over. The text ends with a simple, anti-climactic action:

Childe Rolandine bowed her head and in the evening
Drew the picture of the spirit from heaven. (CP, 381)

Her final response is the act of a child; she draws a picture. Her truth-claim flattened into nothing; it did not lend itself to implementation, and had no palpable effect. Nevertheless, Childe Rolandine's gesture of downheartedness – bowing her head – can be read as an act of reverence as much as defeat. She balances between an admission of failure and an offering of (presumably accepted) worship: an acknowledgement of respect for her statement, perhaps, as sufficient in itself. The fact that her actions had no

effect manages, as in ‘Never Again’ in Chapter One, to not quite matter. David Punter describes how, if ‘Childe Rolandine’ cries out for pity, then it simultaneously shows contempt for pity.³⁵³ In other words, an appeal is made, but tidied away from actually eliciting the emotions it seemed to invite. Smith creates the possibility of redemptive value within this flat anticlimax: the dissipation of this truth claim becomes an act of reticent grace, which involves its own (ambiguously constituted) triumph.

What Smith’s emotionally and tonally flat endings may hint is that, in its refusal to incline towards something, flatness allows space for alternative ways of thinking and writing. Flatness states something strongly, but resists interpretation of that strongly-stated declaration. It establishes itself as the end of sight, an interpretative and narrative endpoint: a space in which nothing else remains to be done. As a result, a flat space (in the English imaginary, at least) is free of responsibility to act, to have an impact. In a flat textual landscape, new kinds of affect and behaviour may be possible: acts which expect to have no consequence, expressions of emotion which make no bids for sympathy, which bear an improper or illegible relationship both to their apparent causes and to what comes afterwards.

Smith’s flattening-out of bold declarations allows her, as the next chapter will suggest, to position them beyond hearing and heeding. The classical narratives which she so often reworks offer a model for revelation which either does not materialise at all, or which – in the case of the messenger-speech of Greek tragedy, with its aphoristic core – arrives too late to be attended to. By the time it becomes audible to the audience and to

³⁵³ David Punter, *The Literature of Pity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 126.

the other characters, they find that they have already passed by that aphoristic moment of revelation. Receiving it too late, they cannot penetrate its flat, hard surface for guidance.

Chapter Three: Aphoristic Messages, Too Late

And when they have killed me I shall stand in the Dark Hall
And cry: Orcus, see that my sister does not suffer at all.³⁵⁴
(Stevie Smith, 'Oh stubborn race of Cadmus' seed...')

I in my new land learning
Snow-drifts on the fingers burning.
Ice, hurricane, cry: No returning.
(Stevie Smith, 'Persephone', CP, 284)

By frequently reworking classical narratives, Stevie Smith's poems position her readers in a familiar textual space. The stories are well-known, and their events are familiar. Even climactic moments of high drama do not come as a surprise to this well-prepared audience. As a result, a kind of leisureliness, or deliberate stagedness, comes to identify the characters' dramatic pronouncements in Smith's retellings. Like Childe Rolandine in Chapter Two, these figures make grand gestures which retain climactic outlines and affectations, even though their climactic quality has been deflated, and they are stripped of convincing affective force. Though Smith's classical characters declare their intentions and wants with aphoristic vigour, the announcements in fact isolate themselves from any power to have an impact on the (already-known) plot.

In the poems quoted above, as well as her captioned drawings, Smith's versions of Antigone and Persephone cry out small pithy sentences, declaring their identities and intentions. Her *Some are More Human than Others* (1958), a book of captioned drawings, appends to one image of a woman the line, 'I am Antigone and I shall bury

³⁵⁴ Stevie Smith, *The Collected Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith*, ed. Will May (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), 281. All further references to this edition are indicated parenthetically in the text, with *Collected Poems* abbreviated to CP.

my brother!’, and to another, “Je suis Persephone – et je dois régner!”.³⁵⁵ These announcements derive their impact from their staginess, forcefully absolute language (‘at all’, ‘No’, ‘dois’) and brevity: their smallness and density allow them to survive their speakers’ deaths, penetrating through from the underworld. They are acts of recitation, the heroic statement which forms the climax of a stage-play: they promise and threaten, seeming to imply a future impact.

Yet Smith associates the dramatic with the belated. In ‘Oh stubborn race of Cadmus’ seed...’ young Antigone orders Orcus not to let her sister suffer – but she only makes that declaration after she herself is dead. By this time, the declaration has been emptied of power, and the speaker cannot enforce it. Several times, in performance introductions to this poem, Smith specifically emphasised the belatedness of Antigone’s statement:

It is heartrending, is it not, this backward looking cry, too late, to her sister the soft Ismene.³⁵⁶

From Hades, with the fire-flush of Hell upon her cheeks comes the young Antigone, with a loving thought – now too late – for her sister, the soft Ismene.³⁵⁷

Too late it may be, a now-useless statement, yet Antigone articulates it anyway. It feigns an impossible certainty, rhetorically reinforcing its impact despite its untrustworthiness in making a command which cannot be obeyed. Drawn by the glamour of this declaration, Smith presents the lordly sentence with admiration. The

³⁵⁵ Stevie Smith, *Some Are More Human Than Others* (London: Peter Owen, 1990), n. pag.

³⁵⁶ Stevie Smith, performance introduction to ‘Oh stubborn race of Cadmus’ seed...’, Series 2, Box 2, Folder 11, Stevie Smith papers, 1924-1970. Coll. No. 1976.012. McFarlin Library. Department of Special Collections and University Archives. The University of Tulsa.

³⁵⁷ Stevie Smith, performance introduction to ‘Oh stubborn race of Cadmus’ seed...’, Series 2, Box 2, Folder 11, Stevie Smith papers, University of Tulsa.

too-late proclamation remains as the indigestible remainder which cannot be absorbed, which is given to generations to pass down.³⁵⁸

This was Smith's sense of the classical line: impressive, if only emptily memorable. Smith drew her knowledge of Latin and Greek poetry largely from school impositions for infractions, which on at least one occasion took the form of a passage of Catullus to learn.³⁵⁹ Catullus's obscene, explicit poems seem a startling choice of text to make a schoolgirl memorise. Depending on the text in question, therefore, it would have been necessary (from the school's point of view) for Smith to recite the poem without understanding it. This mode of engagement, in which one stays on the surface of a text instead of penetrating into its meaning, met with Smith's approval in later life. As described in Chapter One, she advocated learning poetry by heart, even when the texts memorised exceeded a child's comprehension.³⁶⁰ What this haphazard, gendered mode of education offered was a type of engagement with the classics stabilised at a schoolgirl's point of entry, which prioritised grandeur and recitability above, or at least equal to, content or pragmatic value.

Smith's classical lines therefore become weightless, offering pithily-rendered simulacra of revelations which are invariably in doubt. They actually reveal and effect nothing; they come too late to be used or heeded. In Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936), excess detail swallows up the aphorism, preventing its revelatory promise from being located, let alone listened to or allowed to have an impact. Yet these aphoristic moments

³⁵⁸ On Antigone's speech-acts, as the sites in which her deed is constituted and reified, see Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 10.

³⁵⁹ Frances Spalding, *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 28.

³⁶⁰ Stevie Smith, 'At School,' in *Me Again: The Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith*, ed. Jack Barbera and William McBrien (London: Virago, 1982), 119-120.

survive, in the novel and elsewhere in Smith's writing, despite their belatedness and uselessness. Their failure to reveal what they promised means that they linger on, impenetrable as monuments, standing in for the never-achieved revelation in the form of epitaph.

Smith and the Classics

The classics Smith learned at school survived, in her mind and her writing, for decades after she left. As she mentions in her first novel *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936), she played the Second Messenger in the upper sixth's school production of Euripides' *Bacchae*. As a member of the lower sixth, Smith was recruited as an extra performer. She describes in an interview with Patrick Garland the 'terrific effort' involved in learning her lines, but that she then never forgot them.³⁶¹

This encounter with the *Bacchae* as a teenager set the terms for Smith's engagement with the classics. For her, they were sealed and dramatic recitables, deriving impact from their brief assertive lines. They remained with her: Will May connects her poem 'From the Greek', for instance, to the closing lines of Pindar's Pythian 12:³⁶²

To many men strange fates are given
Beyond remission or recall
But the worst fate of all (tra la)
's to have no fate at all (tra la). (CP, 22)

³⁶¹ Stevie Smith, interview with Patrick Garland, Series 3, 1:24A, Stevie Smith papers, University of Tulsa.

³⁶² Will May, *Collected Poems*, 745.

'Dido's Farewell to Aeneas', from Smith's 1957 collection *Not Waving but Drowning*, translates Dido's final speech from Book IV of Virgil's *Aeneid* (CP, 379), and a recently-published poem is entitled 'Professor Snooks Does His Worst with a Grecian Fragment' (CP, 708). Her *Batsford Book of Children's Verse* includes neo-classical pieces such as S. T. Coleridge's 'Catullan Hendecasyllables',³⁶³ as well as quotations from Sophocles' *Oedipus Colonus*, presented and framed as poems in their own right:

Chorus: Not to be born at all
Is best, far best that can befall,
Next best, when born, with least delay
To trace the backward way.³⁶⁴

Smith's epigrammatic presentation of these lines underscores the fact that her reception of the classics often privileges the memorable aphorisms for which ancient Greece and Rome were known. Ben Grant describes how what we now call aphorisms were known to the Ancient Greeks as 'gnomes', and of great importance in literary texts. Each of the Seven Sages was identified with a gnome which encapsulated his philosophy, and Greek philosophers emphasised single, pithy propositions.³⁶⁵ Hippocrates' pithy medical precepts acted, according to Richard T. Gray, as a kind of mnemonic allowing symptoms and treatments to be easily remembered and repeated.³⁶⁶ Epigrams originated as engravings on monuments to mark an event or occasion, before developing into a literary genre. Roman epigrams were pointed and satirical. Catullus, of whom Smith learned so much as a punishment, wrote many epigrams which have survived; he influenced Martial's epigrams – brief, addressed to a pseudonymised individual, often

³⁶³ Stevie Smith, ed. *The Batsford Book of Children's Verse* (London: Batsford, 1970), 23.

³⁶⁴ Smith, *Batsford Book*, 23.

³⁶⁵ Ben Grant, *The Aphorism and Other Short Forms* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 7.

³⁶⁶ Richard T. Gray, *Constructive Destruction: Kafka's Aphorisms: Literary Tradition and Literary Transformation* (Munich: Walter de Gruyter, 2012), 24.

witty and cutting – which have come to exemplify the contemporary sense of the epigrammatic.³⁶⁷

Smith writes several poems which participate in this epigrammatic tradition: ‘Lord Say-and-Seal’, for instance, addresses a named individual with satirical, critical brevity:

Lord Say-and-Seal, Lord Say-and-Seal
Why not for once say and *reveal*
All the dark thoughts your words go over
To make a pretty bog-hole cover. (CP, 528)

More widely, Smith builds her favourite aphoristic tags, over and over again, into her classical adaptations. The first two lines of ‘Dido’s Farewell to Aeneas’ echo the phrasing of a ‘Roman motto’ which Smith enjoyed and quoted frequently: *Fata nolentem trahunt, volentem ducunt* (The fates drag the unwilling, the willing they lead).³⁶⁸ Dido, Smith suggests, is being led; she is one of the willing, accepting her externally-imposed fate:

I have lived and followed my fate without flinching, followed it gladly
And now, not wholly unknown, I come to the end. (CP, 379)

To the end of the poem, Smith adds two lines which have no precedent in the classical original:

Come Death, you know you must come when you’re called
Although you’re a god. And this way, and this way, I call you. (CP, 379)

³⁶⁷ On Catullus’s influence on Martial, see Bruce W. Swan, *Martial’s Catullus: The Reception of an Epigrammatic Rival* (Zürich and New York: George Olms, 1994). Swan notes that Martial mentions a ‘Catullus’ at least twenty-five times in his writing (33).

³⁶⁸ See, for instance, Smith, ‘What Poems Are Made Of’ in *Me Again*, 128.

The sentiment lasts across Smith's writing. It turns up in *Novel on Yellow Paper*, when eight-year-old Pompey realises she can summon death whenever she likes, and in Smith's last poem, 'Come, Death (2)'.

Ah me, sweet Death, you are the only god
Who comes as a servant when he is called, you know... (CP, 658)

Smith adds a conclusion to 'Dido', in other words, which has survival value: 'portability', in John Fagg's terms,³⁶⁹ a brief punchiness which enables it to survive across texts, being quoted and requoted.

These final lines are aphoristically self-sufficient. They promise an inevitable outcome, lay claim to power over a god, refuse any doubt. As such, they stand out particularly strongly against the tone of vagueness and uncertainty which Smith has introduced into her retelling:

As for my abominable brother, I don't think I've been too lenient.
Was I happy? Yes, at a price, I might have been happier
If our Dardanian Sailor had condescended to put in elsewhere. (CP, 379)

Dido does not wholeheartedly assent to her own conclusions. Her phrasing builds a lack of declarative certainty into sentences which David West's translation of Virgil's Latin renders as forcefully assertive:

³⁶⁹ John Fagg, *On the Cusp: Stephen Crane, George Bellows, and Modernism* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009), 136.

...I have lived my life and completed the course that Fortune has set before me, and now my great spirit will go beneath the earth. I have founded a glorious city and lived to see the building of my own walls. I have avenged my husband and punished his enemy who was my brother. I would have been happy, more than happy, if only Trojan keels had never grounded on our shores.' She then buried her face for a moment in the bed and cried: 'We shall die unavenged. But let us die...' ³⁷⁰

What work does Smith's rewriting of the Dido legend perform? Reworkings of mythical narrative along feminist lines may subvert patriarchal norms or reveal new possibilities for lived female experience. Hélène Cixous sees, in myth, an opportunity to write for and through the female body, connecting one's life with the whole of feminine history. ³⁷¹ Susan Sellers underlines this drive towards real-world function when she notes how 'women's rewritings frequently alter the form of their source-myths and set them to very different purposes'. ³⁷² These purposes centre around reclamation. This can be, as Vanda Zajko notes, of myth itself as a particularly feminine force: 'Feminism's identification with myth can be understood as a desire to reclaim the underprivileged term in the gendered opposition between rationality and the mythical'. ³⁷³ More specifically, rewritings of myth by women privilege female voices, allowing them to be heard. Myth, in this work, becomes a means of challenging authority.

Accordingly, Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* (1938), published two years after Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper*, uses the figure of Antigone to illustrate the male desire to control women and resist their power. She maps Creon's abuse of Antigone on to the

³⁷⁰ Virgil, *Aeneid*, trans. David West (London: Penguin, 1991), 88.

³⁷¹ Hélène Cixous, Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, 'The Laugh of the Medusa,' *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 882-3.

³⁷² Susan Sellers, *Myth and Fairy Tale in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 128.

³⁷³ Vanda Zajko and Miriam Leonard, *Laughing with Medusa: Classical Myth and Feminist Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 10.

‘picture of dead bodies and ruined houses’ which stands in for the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War.³⁷⁴ Along similar lines, therefore, critics often begin from the stance that Smith uses myth to resist oppressive systems, since Smith rewrote classical narratives (as in ‘Oh stubborn race of Cadmus’ seed... ’ and ‘Persephone’) from the viewpoint of female protagonists. Laura Severin suggests that ‘Smith uses retelling...to parody dominant discourses’;³⁷⁵ similarly, Stephen Wade argues that she uses legend ‘to inspect or dissect received ideas’.³⁷⁶

Yet, as Jan Montefiore hints, Smith’s reworkings hold short of overthrowing patriarchal structures to enable escape. She notes how, while Anne Sexton, for example, reinterprets the stories she retells, Smith instead ‘shift[s]the emphasis of the story so that the result is an entirely new plot’.³⁷⁷ This is not subversion. We are not being encouraged to view a known story in a new light. What Smith’s reworking of Virgil does suggest is that what outlasts myth and tragedy – what remains, textually and in memory, after the moment has passed – is a remnant which nevertheless cannot be trusted. Smith highlights the contingency of authoritative texts or moments, despite their formal claims to truth through ‘grand words’ and boundary-effects. Smith’s Dido remembers with uncertainty, weighing up her actions, thinking through moments of self-doubt.

³⁷⁴ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own and Three Guineas*, ed. Morag Shiach (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 2008), 363.

³⁷⁵ Laura Severin, *Stevie Smith’s Resistant Antics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 18.

³⁷⁶ Stephen Wade, *No Secondary Themes: essays on the poetry of Peter Russell, Stanley Burnshaw, Peter Dale, Stevie Smith and Idris Davies* (Nottingham: Paupers’ Press, 1992), 59.

³⁷⁷ Jan Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women’s Writing* (London: Pandora, 2004), 48.

'Dido's Farewell to Aeneas' therefore manifests a complex of reliability and unreliability. Critical commentaries on Smith's use of the classics have picked up on this ambiguity, this refusal to settle into a single interpretation. Laura Severin focuses on Smith's reworking of the Persephone myth in *The Holiday* (1949): Celia, Smith's protagonist, does not choose between worlds, opting instead for 'travel and fluidity'.³⁷⁸ Lauryl Tucker uses the Narcissus-myth in Smith's oeuvre as a route into Freudian symbolism and its consequences for Smith's ambiguous view of religion.³⁷⁹ Demmy Verbeke finds that Smith uses the figure of Hermes (who travels to and fro between the mortal and spirit worlds) to illustrate her ambivalence about the idea of death.³⁸⁰ The character of Hermes, Will May suggests, 'offers Smith both concealment and visibility'.³⁸¹ Most recently, Stephen James focuses on the portrayal of Hermes in Smith's poem 'The Ambassador', highlighting Smith's chameleonic treatment of classical sources to foreground the riddling nature of the poem.³⁸²

Novel on Yellow Paper opens, accordingly, with an invocation to this riddling, trickster god Hermes. Hermes/Mercury/Camilus becomes the novel's mascot, its 'tutelary deity...double-facing, looking two ways...'³⁸³ Smith positions him as a kind of army standard, 'a dark name to fight under'.³⁸⁴ For Stephen James, her treatment of the Hermes figure creates 'the sense that Smith is withholding something that one needs to

³⁷⁸ Laura Severin, 'Recovering the Serious Antics of Stevie Smith's Novels,' *Twentieth Century Literature* 40, no. 4 (1994): 466.

³⁷⁹ Lauryl Tucker, 'Progeny and Parody: Narcissus and Echo in Stevie Smith's Poems,' *Twentieth Century Literature* 60, no. 3 (2014): 336-366.

³⁸⁰ Demmy Verbeke, 'On Knowing Greek (And Latin): Classical Elements in the Poetry of Stevie Smith,' *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 16, no. 3/4 (2009): 469.

³⁸¹ William May, *Stevie Smith and Authorship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 69.

³⁸² Stephen James, 'Stevie Smith, 'A Most Awful Twister',' *Essays in Criticism* 66, no. 2 (2016): 242-259.

³⁸³ Stevie Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper* (London: Virago, 2015), 164.

³⁸⁴ Smith, *Me Again*, 255.

discover', but ultimately cannot.³⁸⁵ Two-faced Hermes, after all, is not just a trickster. He juggles many roles in classical myth, including god of merchants and escort to hell, but his most significant identity is that of messenger. Where his role as messenger comes together with his role as trickster, we find Smith's use of the classical aphorism. Aphorism, despite its origins in the natural sciences, has a reputation for vagueness and mystery. As Grant explains, the Greek oracle provides another model for ancient Greek aphorism: its answers to questions are enigmatically condensed, opaque, open to interpretation.³⁸⁶ Gray notes that Hippocrates' aphorisms demonstrate a suggestive lack of specificity: lines like 'Art is long, life is short' have no medical application.³⁸⁷ A concrete, insistent message is delivered, but we cannot understand or use it. As with the Greek oracle, the sense is of Derridean 'monumentality': hard and barely understood, but charged with significance. Smith's classical messages, I suggest, offer revelation which is visible but inaccessible: displaced beyond reach.

Hermes and *Novel on Yellow Paper*

Having begged the messenger Hermes' 'winged tufts' for herself in the invocation which opens *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936), the protagonist Pompey goes on to assume his mythic role. The novel is autobiographical, with Smith's role played by the character Pompey Casmilus: Smith describes Pompey's life at home with her aunt, with her friends, and her engagement (eventually broken) to 'Freddy', a thinly-disguised version of Smith's real-life fiancé Eric Armitage. In the centre of the text, Pompey remembers the zealous Miss Hogmanimy who visited her school, to educate the girls about sex and

³⁸⁵ James, 'Stevie Smith, 'A Most Awful Twister', 242.

³⁸⁶ Grant, 7.

³⁸⁷ Gray, 24.

spread her message of temperance. Listening to Miss Hogmanimy condemn alcohol, Pompey remembers her school production of the *Bacchae*, in which she played the second messenger.

Smith's interest in her own performance of the messenger-role points up the appeal which the part had for her. The messenger is lithe and androgynous: elusive, always in motion, resisting characterisation. He represents a marginal figure, darting between worlds and groups, always keeping himself, as Smith described her ex-centric existence in an interview with Kay Dick, 'well on the edge' of life.³⁸⁸ Yet he is a hugely significant character: in Greek tragedy, it is the messenger who brings the news of the play's catastrophic turning-point. The messenger couples marginal status with immense significance, and draws serious and sustained attention from all the characters as he expounds in vivid, writerly detail on what has happened, and passes objective judgement on them.

The messenger, Michael Halleran notes, performs a set function within Greek tragedies. He delivers a long speech in which he describes, in immense and often graphic detail, and with epic diction, the events which he has witnessed.³⁸⁹ While the chorus states how things are, commenting on the status quo and what the audience has watched unfold, the messenger primarily testifies to the unseen. Though the audience does not see the horrifying events, the messenger gives these events reality by bearing witness to them. It is within the message that the most destructive and impactful parts of the play's action can happen for the spectators.

³⁸⁸ Kay Dick, *Ivy and Stevie* (London: Allison & Busby, 1983), 70.

³⁸⁹ Michael J. Halleran, 'Episodes,' *A Companion to Greek Tragedy*, ed. Justina Gregory (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 174.

The *Bacchae* is unusual among Euripides' tragedies in having not one but two messengers. Refusing to recognise the divinity of Dionysos, King Pentheus of Thebes orders the arrest of anyone caught engaging in Dionysian worship. His guards return with Dionysos himself. Infuriated at the god's enigmatic remarks, Pentheus locks him up in the stable, but Dionysos promptly breaks out. As Pentheus confronts Dionysos again, the first messenger arrives from the mountain, where he had been herding his cattle. He describes the bacchanalian revels of Dionysos's worshippers there, demonstrating the god's awe-inspiring power, and urges Pentheus to receive him into the city:

And so, O master,
Receive this god, whoever he may be,
Into our city, because his power is great –
Both in other matters and also, as I
Have heard them say, in this: it's he who gave
To mortals the vine that stops all suffering.
And if wine were to exist no longer, then
Neither would the goddess Aphrodite,
Nor anything of pleasure for us mortals.³⁹⁰

Pentheus ignores the first messenger, but Dionysos works on the king, gradually persuading him not to kill the revellers but to spy on them. He dresses Pentheus in women's clothes and sends him off to the mountain.

The second messenger then returns. He reports that Pentheus desired to see better, so Dionysos used his divine powers to place the king at the top of a tree. Dionysos then drives the wild Maenads to tear Pentheus limb from limb. Agave, Pentheus's mother,

³⁹⁰ Euripides, *The Complete Euripides: Volume IV: Bacchae and Other Plays*, ed. Peter Burian and Alan Shapiro, trans. Reginald Gibbons and Charles Segal (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 272-3.

appears, carrying her son's head under the delusion that it belongs to a mountain lion that she fought and killed. Finally, the messenger concludes his description with a sombre, aphoristic reflection on the events of the play:

Wise moderation and a reverence
For what is of the gods – this is what's best.
And this, I think, of all possessions owned
By mortals, is the wisest one to use.³⁹¹

What Pompey likes in Greek tragedy, she says in *Novel on Yellow Paper*, is its 'bright lovely hard and religious formalism': something 'very strong and very inevitable and impersonal'.³⁹² The distilled, stark and absolute moment appeals to her, one which possesses the hardness and the emotional indifference (her language suggests) of the aphorism: 'very strong', 'very inevitable', 'bright lovely hard'. Even Euripides himself does not quite live up to her standards for the 'representative Greeks'; Pompey describes him as a 'dark shadow of emotion', in comparison with which the ideal outlines of Greek writing stand out in 'hard relief'.³⁹³ To be properly Greek, in other words, is to be engraved like an epigram on a monument.

Despite feeling that Euripides might ideally be harder and drier, Smith dedicates several pages in the published version of *Novel on Yellow Paper* to a description of the *Bacchae*'s plot. Her narration takes up so much space that she has to defend the inclusion in a letter to Denis Johnston:

³⁹¹ Euripides, *The Complete Euripides*, 288.

³⁹² Smith, *Novel*, 96, 98.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, 96.

[Kenneth Clark] doesn't like the amount of time I spend talking about the *Bacchae* well that is a pity but it is in now and cannot come out also I like it very much and enjoyed doing it because it comes in so pat upon Miss Hogmanimy...³⁹⁴

Smith's defence seems in some ways very arbitrary: 'it is in now and cannot come out'. Yet it participates in the same trope of lateness which characterises Antigone's declaration in 'O stubborn race of Caedmon's seed...' Things happen, Smith signals, to writers and characters alike, which cannot be altered or amended. The episode of the *Bacchae* remains in the novel, a residue which testifies to regrettable but unchangeable narrative decisions. Its presence highlights, in fact, the significance of aphoristic lateness which will form the focus of this section.

In the original manuscript, Pompey's description of the *Bacchae* extends even further. More than a page, scored out in ink, follows the sentence 'And Pentheus is never seen again alive'. Following the flippant line 'Three cheers for Euripides and Miss Hogmanimy' which survived into publication, Pompey allows herself, in her role as messenger, to enter the narrative in a passage scored out in the manuscript, presenting her lines with the dramatic staginess of her speakers in 'Oh stubborn race of Cadmus' seed...' and 'Persephone':

And then at the end of my speech I am talking to the King{,} I am talking to Pentheus and explaining as messengers in Greek plays always do{,} what has been happening{,} I am giving Pentheus stop press news I have brought straight from the ~~horses-mouth~~ {front.} I have come running over the mountains straight from Citaeron "where the snow never melts"{.} I am telling him all that is happening{,} with the women running mad on the mountain{,} and how I have spied upon them{,} and Agave the Queen has known that I was there{,} and

³⁹⁴ Stevie Smith, *Me Again*, 254.

how I have barely escaped and so at the end I plead with this obstinate King and I say:

{//} This God, whatever he is, receive him into the city, for he is not only great but also as I have heard he has given the pain-killing wine to man{. A}nd then I finish up with the other two lines: Take away wine and there is no joy left{.} No Cyprian{,} nothing at all left for man.³⁹⁵

In line with Shirley A. Barlow's argument that Euripides designs his messenger's imagery 'to convey a rational account of objective fact',³⁹⁶ Pompey underscores the eyewitness status of her report in a jumble of mixed metaphors ('stop press news', 'straight from the horses mouth'), highlighting its comprehensiveness ('telling him all that is happening') in a present-continuous stream. Pompey scrupulously includes every part of the narrative in her rendition, through piling paratactic 'and's. These turn, at the end, into the 'and so' which introduces the core of her speech: an epigrammatic finale which reflects on the wonder of alcohol.

The epic diction of this traditional messenger speech culminates, as many do, in aphorism.³⁹⁷ In *Herakles*, the messenger concludes his long description of Herakles' murder of his wife and sons in madness with 'No human being could be more miserable';³⁹⁸ the messenger speech of *Phoenician Women* ends with a summing-up: 'Some of this day's struggles / ended in joy for our city, others in bitter sorrow'.³⁹⁹ The

³⁹⁵ Stevie Smith, typescript of *Novel on Yellow Paper*, U DP-156-1, 81, Stevie Smith Papers 1935-1969, Hull History Centre. Braces indicate sections which have been added to the typescript by hand; parts scored out have been crossed out in the typescript by hand. Over these initial edits, indicated in the text, the whole passage has been scored out in the typescript.

³⁹⁶ Shirley A. Barlow, *The Imagery of Euripides* (London: Methuen & Co, 1971), 61. Compare with Malcolm Heath, who views the messenger's reports as 'obvious set-pieces' (Malcolm Heath, *The Poetics of Greek Tragedy* (London: Duckworth, 1987), 132), and Simon R. Perris, who suggests that Euripides' messengers are 'metatheatrically aware self-parodies' (Simon R. Perris, 'What Maketh The Messenger? Reportage in Greek Tragedy' in *ASCS 32 Proceedings* (2011), ed. A. Mackay, 2, available at <http://www.ascs.org.au/news/ascs32/Perris.pdf> (accessed November 19, 2017)).

³⁹⁷ '[G]nomic conclusion...is typical of a messenger speech.' Michael Lloyd, *The Agon in Euripides* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 97.

³⁹⁸ Euripides, *The Complete Euripides*, 73.

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 177.

messenger in *The Children of Heracles* concludes even more succinctly – ‘Fortune may vanish in one day’⁴⁰⁰ – and the messenger in *Iphigenia in Aulis* prefigures King Lear: ‘The ways of gods are never such as men expect; / They save those who are dear to them.’⁴⁰¹ In all these messenger-speeches, detail accumulates and accumulates, only to be smelted down to a nugget: the core of the message, all that can survive. Only the hard, sealed aphorism is small and contained enough to be conveyed, finally, across the timeline of the play and into history. Finishing a messenger speech with a truism positions the aphorism as its ‘moral’.

In keeping with this idea of the closing aphorism of messenger-speech as the moral of the story, Smith’s typescript version of *Novel on Yellow Paper* reorders the events of the *Bacchae* to position the delivery of the message right at the end of the narrative, after Pentheus has gone after the maenads, been dismembered, and had his head carried back by Agave.⁴⁰² The speech she outlines comes far earlier in the play – it belongs, in fact, to the First Messenger. Not only does Smith shift it to the end of her narrative (typically a more climactic space) but she compounds this effect by claiming that Pompey is not the First but the Second Messenger. It is the Second Messenger who brings the news of the horrifying events which have occurred.

And these particular lines of Pompey’s, the close of her speech, do survive, very tangibly, in and beyond Smith’s canon. Smith reprints them in *Nimbus* in 1955, in a gesture which emphasises their aphoristic portability:

⁴⁰⁰ Euripides, *Orestes and Other Plays*, ed. and trans. Philip Vellacott (London: Penguin, 1972), 133.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 426.

⁴⁰² This part of the account was cut from the manuscript.

O Lord!
From 2nd Messenger's Speech to King Pentheus, Bacchae

This god then, O lord whoever he is do receive into the city
For not only is he great but also as I have heard
He gave the pain-killing vine to men.
Take away drink, where's Love?
Any pleasure come to that, O lord there is nothing left.⁴⁰³

More immediately, they survive into the published version of *Novel on Yellow Paper*.

Smith transfers them into an imagined confrontation with the fastidious Miss Hogmanimy:

The last four lines of my speech, there were four of them in the Greek, and they went like this and meant just this, that I always wanted to get up and shout at Miss Hogmanimy because it was what she was saying, what she could not avoid saying, with all the weight of Education behind them. The words were, these were the words: Take away wine and there is no Cyprian, No other joy, nothing left to man.
Three cheers for Euripides and Miss Hogmanimy.⁴⁰⁴

The eventual delivery of this aphorism seems to be all that is argumentatively necessary. Pompey imagines that they conclude the argument, trump everything Miss Hogmanimy has said, culminating in a triumphant 'three cheers' as the field is, instantly, won. The message, Pompey signals, has been delivered: no more needs to be said or done.

The Undelivered Message

Yet, of course, Pompey never delivers her aphoristic message to Miss Hogmanimy at all. This aphorism might secure something: stabilise the situation, induce a revelation. But

⁴⁰³ Stevie Smith, *Me Again*, 242. Note that Smith also, here, preserves the misattribution of these lines to the second messenger.

⁴⁰⁴ Smith, *Novel*, 103.

in the end, she says nothing. The message is considered, then discarded, without reaching its recipient.

The *Bacchae*, *Novel on Yellow Paper*'s touchpoint text, offers a model for Smith's work in its loss of a singular, powerful message. By splitting its messenger-function across two separate figures – one bringing a warning, the other a description of the catastrophe which ensued when the first warning went unheeded – the *Bacchae* spreads messages out across the text. The doubling of the messenger, Anne Pippin Burnett suggests, allows the second messenger to '[repeat] the movements of the first, and [bring] a new meaning to them.'⁴⁰⁵ This doubling blurs any singular centre, and dissipates the force of the discrete message. Revelation diffuses over the course of the text, reinforcing Charles Segal's observation that anagnorisis happens very gradually in the *Bacchae*. First the maenads return, then Pentheus realises (too late) that he will die, then Agave realises what she has done, then Kadmos realises his age and impotence.⁴⁰⁶ No single moment of realisation can be located or delivered in this play.

Against these unreliable messages in *Novel on Yellow Paper*'s touchpoint text, Pompey becomes the messenger in Smith's novel (sporting Hermes' 'winged tuft[s]' and carrying news from the mountain in the *Bacchae*), and an appropriately unreliable one. She abandons messages undelivered; she buries them under a deluge of information whose significance we cannot locate. *Novel on Yellow Paper* is a book characterised by the unlocatable revelation buried under detail. Her reviewers sense this: Rodney Ackland calls the book a 'stream of confidences, anecdotes, reminiscences, character

⁴⁰⁵ Anne Pippin Burnett, *Catastrophe Survived: Euripides' Plays of Mixed Reversal* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 61.

⁴⁰⁶ Charles Segal, 'Introduction [to *Bacchae*],' in *The Complete Euripides*, 228.

sketches, asides, digressions, rhymes, poems, printed idiocies...'⁴⁰⁷ A reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* describes the text in terms of interruption: the book contains 'evidence of a cultivated and thoughtful mind, interrupted by and often expressed in the language of a devotee of lower-class American films.' She 'dash[es] wildly from one subject to another.'⁴⁰⁸ Writing in the *Spectator*, Peter Burra characterised her novel as a mishmash with 'features assembled from many faces'.⁴⁰⁹

Smith's style derives from Pompey's aversion to thinking a thought through. Even regarding the most mundane issues, she avoids a fully-delivered explanation or message:

Well, partly it is like this. You see, they run cheap rides in the Row. On cheap horses? Well, no, not that either so much. Well, here goes my horse.⁴¹⁰

This quotation demonstrates Smith's real aptitude for the dismissive conjunction. 'Well' operates like Seamus Heaney's 'So', in his introduction to his translation of *Beowulf*: 'so' acts as an expression that obliterates all previous discourse and narrative, and at the same time functions as an exclamation calling for immediate attention.⁴¹¹ It implies that an explanation is forthcoming, but simultaneously works to dismiss, and dissociate itself from, what has previously been said. In fact, the original manuscript of *Novel on Yellow Paper* revolves around just such a Heaneyesque 'So' in its retelling of Euripides' *Bacchae*. To cite just one instance:

⁴⁰⁷ Rodney Ackland, 'Bear up Chaps.' *Spectator* 223, Aug. 30, 1969.

⁴⁰⁸ 'Without Title'. *Times Literary Supplement*, Sept. 12, 1936, 727.

⁴⁰⁹ Peter Burra, *Spectator*, Sept. 18, 1936.

⁴¹⁰ Smith, *Novel*, 1.

⁴¹¹ Seamus Heaney, 'Introduction,' in *Beowulf: A New Translation* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), xxvii.

So he is the son of Zeus and Semele. So Pentheus is ruler of this Theban land.
{S}o Pentheus is the ~~brother~~ {nephew} of Semele that died...⁴¹²

The published version softens the impact of that drumming, relentless ‘so’ by replacing most of the ‘so’s with ‘and’s. The conjunction ‘and’ is expansive and accommodating; it stabilises what has already been said in the same gesture as inviting in more. In contrast, Smith’s original ‘so’s cause the account to buckle under the weight of a ponderous implied causality (one statement as following naturally from what preceded it) which also collapses that causality in the same gesture: it constantly begins anew. Each remark is immediately scribbled over by the sentence that follows: each presenting itself as the most important, revelatory element, but immediately deleted by the next. So Smith’s dismissive conjunctions promise revelation but in the same gesture veer away from it. The question of revelation is constantly made central even as it is perpetually withheld.

Stevie Smith’s cuts to the manuscript of *Novel on Yellow Paper* reflect a two-faced ambivalence about fully inhabiting the messenger role. When she published the novel in 1936, she completely cut the section describing herself, as messenger, delivering her aphoristic warning to King Pentheus. So, in *Novel on Yellow Paper*, Pompey re-presents the story of the *Bacchae* in a manner which ultimately drains away her own messenger function, and the message itself. The closing aphorism of her speech redirects towards Miss Hogmanimy – but, as demonstrated above, neither onstage nor in the sex education class is it ever discharged.

⁴¹² Stevie Smith, annotated typescript of *Novel on Yellow Paper*, U DP-156-1, 76, Stevie Smith Papers 1935-1969, Hull History Centre.

If Pompey is a bad or vanishing messenger, so too is Miss Hogmanimy. The sex educator's tone and bearing imply that she brings all-powerful truth to her schoolgirl audience: 'to listen to Miss Hogmanimy you'd think just knowing straight out how babies was born was to solve all the problems of adolescence straight off.'⁴¹³ Miss Hogmanimy casts herself not simply as messenger but as evangelist-prophet, whose message can have a tangible impact, and save its hearers from a terrible fate. Yet the revelation which Miss Hogmanimy actually engenders is a non-revelation:

...we waited and waited, and hoped some time we would get the facts, but no it was all this funny breathless whisper.⁴¹⁴

Revelation hovers around the edges of Miss Hogmanimy's speech, but never materialises. Miss Hogmanimy and Pompey reflect each other in their failure as messengers. And that failure of the message to appear becomes its own revelation, of the nothingness at the centre of the messenger-act.

On one level, this is Smith playing with the fragmentary potential of classical writing in reception: suggestively missing crucial parts, leaving gaps for the reader to fill in. A recently-published poem of Smith's, 'Professor Snooks Does His Worst with a Grecian Fragment', stages this same loss of the longed-for message:

... CHORUS: I am certain he will come again
And lighten our remarks with a religious strain
Or else he'll say
... (here a line is missing and the chorus finishes)
Ah ah ah ah ah. (CP, 708)

⁴¹³ Ibid., 94.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., 136.

Smith's confected manuscript suffers the loss of a line, conveniently, at just the moment when 'his' words are about to be revealed; instead, the chorus fades away in sound, 'Ah ah ah ah ah.' The loss of the central message strips the whole sequence of its communicative function: it becomes a marking of time.

All that exists, in these models, is the buildup to revelation. Smith surrounds Pompey's aphorism from her messenger speech, in *Novel on Yellow Paper*, with phrases which promise immediate revelation while acting to defer it. '[T]hey went like this' and 'The words were' keep Smith's readers on tenterhooks, awaiting this seemingly-imminent revelation. Yet they also mark time, delaying that revelation. When it finally appears, it turns out to be nothing at all. What, then, is at stake in Stevie Smith's revelations of nothing?

Belated Revelation

In a way, Pompey does not deliver her aphoristic message to Miss Hogmanimy because she does not need to. Even as Pompey stresses the significance of her message, she deflates its localised, urgent value. It is what Miss Hogmanimy 'was saying, what she could not avoid saying'.⁴¹⁵ Its heart is beating through the educator's words, unavoidable, inevitable and palpable. The aphorism has already been said. It cannot be avoided, and makes itself known even through words which express its contrary. In a sense, it comes too late; it is superfluous to narrative.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., 103.

This superfluity, this belatedness, is fundamental to the messenger role in Greek tragedy. Firstly, what the messenger brings back is already known in the sense that the audience would have prior awareness of the broad outlines of the tragedy's story. Alan Sommerstein reminds us that even a Greek audience seeing the play for the first time would have a basic knowledge of the plot.⁴¹⁶ The women will always go mad; Pentheus will always be ripped apart. The overall structure was fairly fixed; the appeal for the Greek audience was to see which secondary elements of the familiar story would be altered and how.

Secondly, revelation may reveal something which the characters already know. This is perhaps a more significant trope in reception than in the plays themselves; *Oedipus the King*, in conjunction with Aristotle's *Poetics*, has positioned *anagnorisis* as more central to the workings of tragedy than the texts themselves actually suggest. In Sophocles' play, however, the already-known revelation is the hinge on which the drama turns.

OEDIPUS:

I have a terrible fear the blind seer can see.
I'll know in a moment.⁴¹⁷

Oedipus knows, at this point, of the terrible act he has inadvertently performed, but must summon messengers and shepherds to testify, one after the other, until what is already-known becomes unignorable. He holds full knowledge at arms' length,

⁴¹⁶ Alan H. Sommerstein, 'Tragedy and Myth,' in *A Companion to Tragedy*, ed. Rebecca Bushnell (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 169.

⁴¹⁷ Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*, trans. Robert Fagles (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), 203. For evidence of Smith's interest in this mode of resisted knowledge, see 'Angel Boley', CP, 610-614: 'I know now, she said, and all the time I have known / What I did not want to know...' (CP, 611).

assembling all the possible evidence before he can admit what he already knew. Euripides reworks Aeschylus' *The Libation-Bearers* in his *Electra*, to emphasise the same process. Whereas in Aeschylus's tragedy, Electra receives the lock of hair and footprints as evidence for Orestes' being alive (which she is already primed to believe), Euripides has Electra reject sign after sign until the full knowledge of Orestes cannot be denied.⁴¹⁸

More subtly, the messenger's role necessitates that he carries a report of events which are, in most cases, already over. The most climactic events of Greek tragedy take place offstage, and are attested to after the moment, by the messenger. The important events of Greek tragedy can seldom, therefore, exist in the present. Occasionally, we are cued into the moment of their happening by, for example, a scream offstage.⁴¹⁹ More often, however, events are relegated either to the past or to the future, slipping in their actual moment of occurrence. A truly on-time messenger is a spatial impossibility. Though his narrative style partakes of the epic, he lacks the omniscience of an epic narrator: he can only describe what he has witnessed, 'straight from the front'. The messenger reports events after they have already happened. His role necessarily bears witness to the belated.

Such belatedness-onto-itself characterises the *Bacchae* in particular. The first word of the play, ἤκω, means 'I am here' or 'I have come'.⁴²⁰ The instantaneousness of this

⁴¹⁸ For another interpretation of Euripides' reworking of Aeschylus, see Diana M. Culbertson, *The Poetics of Revelation: Recognition in the Narrative Tradition* (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1988), 39-40.

⁴¹⁹ For instance, in *Electra*, the chorus wonders, 'Do you hear a shout from the house?' (Euripides, *Medea and Other Plays*, trans. James Morwood (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1998), 113), signalling Clytemnestra's murder.

⁴²⁰ Charles Segal, 'Introduction [to *Bacchae*],' in *The Complete Euripides*, 215.

appearance – precisely what gives it the quality of stunning, immediate revelation – in fact removes its immediacy. ‘I have come’ announces an action already completed. Similarly, by the time Dionysos steps on to the stage to speak, the events he describes have occurred: ‘I *have* stung these sisters / To a frenzy’ (my emphasis).⁴²¹ This slippage of the moment is intrinsic to the story of the *Bacchae*, occurring also in Ovid’s version of the tale: ‘Liber adest; festisque fremunt ululatibus agri’.⁴²² Liber or Dionysos *has come*, Ovid declares. The moment of Dionysos’s appearance vanishes: what remains is a message, a declaration of something which has already happened.

The *Bacchae*’s final revelation, conveyed by its second messenger, is already known. It is known because the substance of the news had already been communicated (‘Pentheus, Ekhion’s child, is dead’) in a terse single line; further, however, it is already known to the audience as a familiar story. The content of the message is perfunctory, for the purposes of dramatic continuity. The tragedy’s outcome, its climax, is known. The narration of the prolonged message serves only to reinforce its pastness, its already-knownness.

In his later discussion of Dionysiac *anagnorisis*, Segal implicitly recognises this belated quality to the *Bacchae*’s epiphanies, as he traces the play’s series of grim revelations. In all situations, these realisations involve events which have already occurred. Segal further acknowledges the difference between the *Bacchae*’s *anagnorisis* and that of Oedipus in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannos*. Though Oedipus’s too-late realisation led to a deeper understanding of himself – and therefore had some broader purpose – the

⁴²¹ Euripides, *The Complete Euripides*, 246.

⁴²² Ovid, *Metamorphoses: Volume I*, trans. Frank Justus Miller (London: William Heinemann, 1960), 160.

belated revelations in the *Bacchae* engender only ‘shock and horror’, occluding any ‘deeper moral understanding’.⁴²³ Not only, then, are Euripides’ revelations or messages belated, they are also useless in comparison to those of contemporary dramatists. They cause no good, only horror.

Stevie Smith’s reworking of Greek tragedy explores this mode of speech and action which has no effect at all. An unease about what is necessary, what should be said and what should not need to be said – either because it is already known or because it comes too late to have an effect – runs throughout *Novel on Yellow Paper*, and illuminates much of Smith’s juggling with the messenger-role, as she wavers between inclusion and omission. Pompey inserts herself into the manuscript as messenger, then Smith cuts her out for publication.

More crucially, Pompey/Smith misattributes her own lines. She changes her role as First Messenger (who, unusually for Greek tragedy, delivers a message at a point where it might have had an effect, if only Pentheus had listened) to the role of Second Messenger, who brings news too late to be acted upon. In other words, Smith puts the First Messenger’s warning (pointing to the future) in the place of the Second Messenger’s lament (pointing to the past). She places her messenger-speech – which urges Pentheus to learn from it and take heed, and might have had an impact – in a decidedly terminal, too-late position. Even an aphorism which could, theoretically, have an effect on the narrative action is stripped of agency through this repositioning, rendered literally too late.

⁴²³ Segal, ‘Introduction [to *Bacchae*],’ 228.

Pompey, as messenger to her reader, is always running late. By the time she reveals the inflection or significance of a narrative, it is already too late to do anything about it:

...though the war stayed the advance, the armistice already saw the builders busy at work, and the streets of houses going up, and the paving stones going down. And presently it was already a suburb.⁴²⁴

The word 'presently', a favourite of Smith's,⁴²⁵ in itself designates a sedately linear passage of time, in which events succeed in an orderly and calm fashion, to take the stage of the 'present'. Here, by coupling 'presently' with 'already', Smith undoes the 'present' in 'presently'. It ceases to imply a gently succeeding future, or even a present moment; it becomes the epitaph, the surviving aphoristic trace, of an already-past moment. We are already post-suburb before the moment of suburbisation has tangibly occurred; the houses and paving-stones have failed to add up to that moment until after the fact.

This approach roots in a sense that things happen too early: that they take an irrevocable form before characters receive enough warning of change to enable them to intercede. In this loss of interventionary power, Smith's digressions often originate, particularly at the beginning of the novel, in a conviction that finishing her thought is actually superfluous. 'Didn't I say all to say had been said?' she asks.⁴²⁶ Repeatedly she couches

⁴²⁴ Smith, *Novel*, 128.

⁴²⁵ 'And presently the trees give way and there is nothing but the road, and presently the road gives way and there is nothing but a track...' (Smith, *Novel*, 58).

⁴²⁶ Smith, *Novel*, 3.

her anecdotes in terms of the self-evident: ‘Well, this girl was christened Gladys, but of course that wouldn't do.’⁴²⁷

This circumspection derives, at least in part, from the embarrassment of spelling out the self-evident. In agony over her broken engagement, Pompey manages at last to articulate something which is true to her:

For me but one significant fact that stands out, and for which I would live or die.
But this fact. That is this fact. That is. That is what I cannot bring myself to
write. It has been written so many times and soiled with every falseness and base
simplicity. Can you not see it?

Oh little creature form'd of joy and mirth,
Go, love without the help of anything on earth.

Indeed we have done this.⁴²⁸

Pompey circles Blake's aphorism with the wariness she described in an interview with Jonathan Williams: she stays away from Blake, she explains, because she finds his echoes ‘easy...to catch’.⁴²⁹ Blake invites Smith to fall into easy, well-worn rhythms whose familiarity is alluring. So Pompey prevaricates before revealing Blake's aphorism from his Notebooks. She stutters: ‘That is. That is...’ The line is overwritten, she protests, self-evident (‘Can you not see it?’), ‘soiled’ with overuse and triteness.

The aphorism therefore discloses something which is simultaneously formally marked as thunderously revelatory, and contextualised as entirely obvious, always already known. Smith couches the revelation as at once unexpected and expected, surprising

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 17.

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 194-5.

⁴²⁹ Jonathan Williams, ‘Much Further Out Than You Thought,’ in *In Search of Stevie Smith*, ed. Sanford Sternlicht (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 43.

and inevitable. Aphoristic revelation is deferred because it is taken for granted: a given which problematises its own necessity and urgency.

Viewing revelation as both thunderous and unnecessary in this way allows Smith's opening salvo in *Novel on Yellow Paper* to resolve into a kind of sense:

Beginning this book...I should like if I may, I should like, if I may (that is the way Sir Phoebus writes), I should like then to say: Good-bye to all my friends, my beautiful and lovely friends.⁴³⁰

An over-prolonged beginning is maintained through a build-up of opening phrases, mounting to a climax (a 'message', some content for the sentence) without quite reaching it. Then the colon which should present that climactic message instead closes it off: Pompey wishes her friends goodbye, closing off her narrative before it has even begun. The implication is that everything that follows in the novel, its entire substance, is instead after-the-fact, belated. The whole book is the aphoristic remnant, the problematic message of the *Bacchae's* messenger which bears witness only to the loss of events to a devouring past before they have even been apprehended. The event has not occurred, and then it has already happened. The climax is excised; the post-climactic moment is already belated:

Now, Reader, I am going on my holiday to Germany. This is already several years ago.⁴³¹

As soon as we have absorbed the information which claims grammatically to be the present moment ('I am going'), Pompey informs us that we are already too late to

⁴³⁰ Smith, *Novel*, 7.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*, 70.

engage with it. In an instant, it has been relegated, in an act which skips the moment of relegation itself and leaps straight to its aftermath. Smith herself uses the word ‘already’, in a subtle reproach to the reader (why did you not come earlier?). The message is missing in its moment of delivery.

So when Pompey eventually laments, ‘My sweet boy Freddy has left me’, it has of course already happened, and neither Pompey nor the reader, we feel, had any control over it. Even the novel’s events which are “significant” within the rules of romance (a lover leaving one, for instance) are drained of substance. They are inevitable, as past and fixed as the myth behind the *Bacchae*. The narrative model of *Novel on Yellow Paper* is mythic in this sense: that the events in it have already happened, and yet – in its recurring motif of the present-continuous tense – they go on happening:

So now as she is away I am staying with Harriet and every weekend I go down to my aunt and sister who are staying at Felixstowe. I am enjoying this very much indeed.⁴³²

The present-continuousness has given the novel its reputation as stream-of-consciousness real-time chatter – yet it conceals the fact that, for Pompey, the climactic present is always (already) past. This is time which can't be escaped. Over and over again, it is trapped in bearing witness to its own belatedness.

The Belated Aphorism

⁴³² Ibid., 55.

The form of aphorism builds in a particular kind of embarrassment: a sense that the known or obvious is being restated. Often it literally is: proverbs are well-used and well-known, for instance, and Karl Kraus's aphorisms adapt clichés into a new signification.⁴³³ More obliquely, though, the aphorism's elegant phrasing establishes it as something which could not be expressed any other way: which has surely always existed. As a result, the appearance of aphorisms can seem belated. The brevity of the form reinforces this sense: brevity allows the aphorism to discharge its force then withdraw quickly from the ring, managing its sense of its own superfluity through a performative frugality.

In 'Aphorism Countertime', Derrida associates the aphorism with survival against the grain of a literary text and its narrative: 'One aphorism in the series can come before or after the other, before *and* after the other, each can survive the other...'⁴³⁴ In Greek tragedy, a messenger comes to deliver the news of deaths, to explain that survival has not occurred. Instead of making the deaths visible to us onstage, directly experienced by the audience, the playwright instead gives the tragic messenger an aphorism to deliver.

Here, tentatively, we can locate the use-value of the aphorism in the messenger speech. The messenger in Greek tragedy performs an essential consolatory function. Christopher Cannon notes that, at the end of Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale*, for instance, the fox reproves himself with a proverb after he has already let Chauntecleer go. Here,

⁴³³ See, for instance, Karl Kraus, *Half Truths and One-and-a-Half Truths: Karl Kraus: Selected Aphorisms*, ed. and trans. Harry Zohn (Manchester: Carcanet, 1986), 124.

⁴³⁴ Jacques Derrida, 'Aphorism Countertime,' trans. Nicholas Royle, in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 2:128.

Cannon notes, the ‘cited wisdom is apt but it comes too late’.⁴³⁵ Cannon argues that the belatedly-offered proverb did at least offer the comfort of community, of knowing that others had made the same mistakes before.⁴³⁶

The delivery of the too-late aphoristic message remains essential, therefore, despite (and perhaps because of) its belatedness. Jennifer Wallace notes that the ‘story of pain’ which Greek tragedy’s messenger-figures recount both forces the listener to experience horror vicariously, and is the first stage in the reconstruction of a ruptured world.⁴³⁷ This reparative function of the messenger reflects Richard Seaford’s belief that the messenger’s function is ‘to control and stage the experience so that it is assimilable to the spectator bit by bit in an ordered way’, distancing the story so that it can be digested by the viewers.⁴³⁸ The messenger speech’s closing aphorism performs part of this useful function. As a textual survivor, it acts as epitaph; it confers a form of survival on the dead. They are immortalised, granted longevity.

Smith is interested in this idea of the surviving remnant, the ruined residue from what has occurred. Pompey’s own name, she notes in passing, gives her the status of a kind of ruin:

There’s something meretricious and decayed and I’ll say, I dare say, elegant about Pompey. A broken Roman statue.⁴³⁹

⁴³⁵ Christopher Cannon, ‘Proverbs and the wisdom of literature: The Proverbs of Aldred and Chaucer’s Tale of Melibee,’ *Textual Practice* 24, no. 3 (2010): 411.

⁴³⁶ Ibid.

⁴³⁷ Jennifer Wallace, *The Cambridge Introduction to Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 111.

⁴³⁸ Richard Seaford, *Euripides: Bacchae* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 14.

⁴³⁹ Smith, *Novel*, 10.

The focus is on what has survived from this decay, which acts as an epitaph for what has passed. Pompey enjoys her own name because it acts, to quote Derrida's remarks on aphorism, as both 'ruin and monument'.⁴⁴⁰ Derrida's description of aphorism connects to the epigram's classical origin as an engraving on a monument, testifying to the memory of a person or event.⁴⁴¹ Baumbach, Petrovic and Petrovic sum up the particular workings of the public epigram:

...fixed both in time and space: the passer-by comes, sees, reads, reacts and – eventually – passes by. Epigrams, in particular, which are closely in dialogue with their material monuments...are not meant to leave their place and be 'taken away' by the passer-by, as they would lose parts of their meaning.⁴⁴²

The contradiction is that epigrams demand to be decontextualised – their handy, pithy form begs to be taken away, quoted and requoted – even as, in their classical usage, they remained physically immovable. Ultimately, they can only be passed by. Even as the epigram evolved, in the Renaissance, into a more mobile form,⁴⁴³ its stony origin means that it retained what Livingstone and Nisbet call a 'playful ambivalence' between mobility and stasis. Literary epigrams, they claim, 'know they come from stone, and are forever throwing hints of making the return trip.'⁴⁴⁴

Twenty years before Smith's first book, the 'stony' brief poems of the Imagists signal their affiliation to this epigrammatic tradition. Frequently, they focus on monuments.

⁴⁴⁰ Jacques Derrida, 'Fifty-two Aphorisms for a Foreword,' in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg, trans. Andrew Benjamin (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 2:125.

⁴⁴¹ Niall Livingstone and Gideon Nisbet, *Epigram* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 5.

⁴⁴² Manuel Baumbach, Andrej Petrovic and Ivana Petrovic, 'Archaic and classical Greek epigram: an introduction,' in *Archaic and Classical Greek Epigram*, ed. Manuel Baumbach, Andrej Petrovic and Ivana Petrovic (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 15.

⁴⁴³ James Doelman, 'Epigrams and Political Satire in Early Stuart England,' *Huntington Library Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (2006): 31.

⁴⁴⁴ Livingstone and Nisbet, *Epigram*, 8.

Richard Aldington's 'To a Greek Marble' summons up a silent statue, and H.D.'s 'Epigram' (1913) rewrote an engraving on a tomb. Subtitled 'After the Greek',⁴⁴⁵ it sits as a precursor to Smith's 'From the Greek':

The golden one is gone from the banquets;
She, beloved of Atimetus,
The swallow, the bright Homonoëa:
Gone the dear chatterer;
Death succeeds Atimetus.⁴⁴⁶

Smith positions herself within this lineage. She is fascinated by the epitaph: its bid to encapsulate and preserve the salient elements of the deceased. Readable or unreadable, it recurs in her poetry. Individual poems often present themselves as mysteriously decontextualised epitaphs; for instance, 'Suicide's Epitaph':

Oh Lord have mercy on my soul
As I had none upon my body.
And you who stand and read this rhyme
How do you do, Tomnoddy?

Sois punie par où tu as tant péché,
dit-il, en me regardent d'une
manière froide et énigmatique. (CP, 172)

However, the memorialisation they enact or describe is seldom fully successful. In 'Death Bereaves our Common Mother / Nature Grieves for my Dead Brother', the speaker struggles to assemble a suitable epitaph for a dead lamb:

Lamb dead, dead lamb,
He was, I am... (CP, 41)

⁴⁴⁵ See Eileen Gregory, *H.D. and Hellenism: Classic Lines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 55 for a suggestion that Pound, not H.D., assigned this title to the poem.

⁴⁴⁶ H.D., *Collected Poems 1912-1944*, ed. Louis L. Martz (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1984), 309.

The speaker experiments: she tries it both ways, chiasmically. But she finds that the text is equally meaningless regardless of its arrangement. She cannot talk the death, or indeed the lamb, into importance:

Can I see lamb dead as mutton
And not care a solitary button? (CP, 41)

This epitaph is evacuated, already belated. Smith takes it one step further, forcing it to bear witness only to its own lack of significance. Her poem memorialises emptiness and absence just one degree of separation beyond an epitaph's standard efforts: like ancient Greek epigram, epitaph is engraved at sites where something happened (a life, an event) which has now come to an end.

At the close of his message, the messenger in Greek tragedy leaves us with an aphorism: to mark a place where something has happened, give us the meaning to carry away. The epigram becomes a monument in Derrida's terms: not only portentously sizeable, but standing in for an absence. The aphorism becomes a circumscribed memory, an authoritatively-delimited memorialisation which carries mythology in seed form. It exists only for the benefit of those who will come after.

In a Bit

The failure of revelation to materialise fully is, as Franco Moretti notes, visible in High Modernist texts. In *Ulysses*, for example, he describes how 'the great novelty of the stream of consciousness consists in its proceeding for pages and pages *without the*

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*slightest revelation.*⁴⁴⁷ Here, the amazement of revelation's disappearance derives from the sheer bulk of text: how can so much be said and so little revealed? *Novel on Yellow Paper* mimics that bulk through a polyvocality which hides, overwrites and over-promises revelation. Aphorism is available to Pompey in hindsight. It is in looking back on what has happened that she can make out a single aphoristic surviving idea from what has passed. '[O]ne significant fact...stands out' against the digressive chaos of her writing, in the form of Blake's aphorism. She can pick out the hard musculature under her excess of distracting detail, and carries that message to the reader: too late, for us and for her, but no less essential to say.

This faithful deferring of reading and identification to a point in the future, where truth can be seen entire, underpins Stevie Smith's 'Magna est Veritas' (published in her 1957 collection, *Not Waving but Drowning*):

And I do not deceive because I am rather simple too
And although I collect facts I do not always know what they amount to.
I regard them as a contribution to almighty Truth, magna est veritas et
praevalebit,
Agreeing with that Latin writer, Great is Truth and will prevail in a bit. (CP, 427)

The speaker participates in the fact-gathering which represents such a familiar trope in Smith's work. In *Novel on Yellow Paper*, Pompey amasses 'FAVOURITE QUOTATIONS' into a list, which interrupts her narrative at two points:

From the East African Courier: No more popular figure in Holy Orders ever
motor- bicycled in Mombasa.
Venus...quae quoniam rerum naturam sola gubernas.

⁴⁴⁷ Franco Moretti, *Modern Epic: The World-System from Goethe to Garcia Marquez*, trans. Quintin Hoare (London and New York: Verso, 1996), 153.

Pompey is an arrogant high hollow fateful rider, In noisy triumph to the trumpet's mouth...⁴⁴⁸

These lines are pleasurable in their own right because of this gap between Pompey's presentation of them as epiphanic, and the reality of these lines as already-known and utterly familiar. This gap overlaps with the gap between the drama of their delivery, and the banality of their content. Coyle's aphoristic boundary-effects surround only emptiness. As a result, the collection of these grand-but-empty statements compounds that satisfaction, since the act of collection is also a kind of boundary-effect, promising a significance which may never materialise.

When collected, as in Smith's lists of 'nice little quotations', they remain aphoristically separate, refusing to 'amount to' or build up into a larger coherent structure. Smith's speaker in 'Magna est Veritas' admits frankly to the same problem. Her collection of facts is disparate; she does not 'know what they amount to'. She displaces interpretative responsibility on to 'almighty Truth', allowing her to be philosophical about her own invisibility.

With streaming long hair, Smith's unnamed speaker in this poem presents herself as an unusually placid Cassandra. She is unbelieved by those around her, like the Hellenic prophetess; the facts she accumulates cannot be used or understood.⁴⁴⁹ Smith's nod to the 'temple' of the tall hat further strengthens this link with the classics, which the final lines clinch. Smith has her speaker quote an aphorism from a 'Latin writer': 'magna est veritas et praevalerebit.' Her unique mistranslation of the Latin line builds in delay: truth

⁴⁴⁸ Smith, *Novel*, 27-8.

⁴⁴⁹ On the capacity of tragic figures to disbelieve or dismiss messengers, see Simon Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 8-9).

will prevail, she promises, ‘in a bit’. Her phrasing allows these processes to take as much time as they need. It acknowledges that the duration of their activity can't be predicted, that an ending can't be enforced. In short, this phrasing renounces responsibility for the prevailing of almighty Truth.⁴⁵⁰ Collecting the poorly understood involves a leap of faith: it demonstrates a belief that, with the passage of ‘a bit’ of time, the meaning and significance of the items collected will be revealed. The sentiment reflects Isaac D’Israeli’s defence of the apparently-trifling in his *Dissertation on Anecdotes* (1793):

It is certainly safest, for *some* writers, to give us all they know, than to permit themselves the power of rejection; because, for this, there requires a certain degree of taste and discernment, which many biographers are not so fortunate as to possess...an anecdote, or a circumstance, which may appear inconsequential to a reader, may bear some remote or latent connection, which a mature reflection often discovers. It is certain, that a biographer, who has long contemplated the character he records, sees many relations which escape an ordinary reader.⁴⁵¹

Preserved for posterity, the final two lines of ‘Magna est Veritas’ justify themselves, self-legitimising through the cast of classical authority conferred on them by Latin. Smith plays on the double meaning of ‘bit’: this ‘bit’ or scrap of language, the overheard and preserved nugget redeemed from waste, is also, she believes, the place in which truth will prevail. Aphorism-like, these are enough in themselves, representing or signalling truth without necessarily being successful at expounding it, deferring the revelation of their own meaning. In Stevie Smith’s classically-framed texts, revelation disappears from the tiny aphoristic compasses, the knife-edges between before and after,

⁴⁵⁰ For a reading of this poem which emphasises the speaker’s lofty grandeur rather than her surrendering of interpretative responsibility, see James Najarian, ‘Contributions to Almighty Truth: Stevie Smith’s Seditious Romanticism,’ *Twentieth Century Literature* 49, no. 4 (2003): 478.

⁴⁵¹ Isaac D’Israeli, *A Dissertation on Anecdotes; by the author of Curiosities of Literature* (London: Kearsley and Murray, 1793), 78-9.

which promise to contain them. Aphorisms can only be read and received when it is too late. They freeze instead into epitaph: a memorial for what might have happened. Even the most innovative aphorism signals – in its self-sufficient form, withdrawing almost physically from the situation on which it comments – that it is already dated, of only marginal relevance to the matter at hand. And it takes only a little time for the maxim to become cliché: to be absorbed, once its origin is defaced, and its past life is blurred into vagueness, into the sphere of ‘proverb’. If aphorisms which signal their own flattened novelty always come too late, that lateness, in the case of proverb – that sense that this is age-old wisdom, handed down from the collective voices of history – offers the form its rhetorical power, conveying comfortingly what we already know.

Chapter Four: Proverbs through Fairytale

Cool as a cucumber calm as a mill pond sound as a bell
Was Mary
When she went to the Wishing Well.

But a fairy came up out of the well
And cursed her up hill and down dale
And cursed her from midnight to morning hail.

And now she gets worse and worse
Ever since she listened to the fairy's curse
She is nervy grim and bold
Looks over her left shoulder and does not do what she is told.⁴⁵²

If aphorisms in the tradition of La Rochefoucauld, Nietzsche and Karl Kraus are cutting, alienating, witty, bordering on revelation, then their flip side is the proverb or platitude: the well-thumbed phrase, offering comfort in its familiarity. The opening line of 'Cool as a Cucumber' offers three proverbial idioms in quick succession, situating us immediately in an imagined rural English environment where standards for both behaviour (cool, calm, sound) and modes of language (traditional, nothing fancy) are thoroughly known. Smith explored the form of the proverb in her collection *Mother, What is Man?* (1942), with brief poems offering nuggets of familiar, folkly "wisdom":

A couple of women is one too many,
Oh, how I wish I could do without any! ('The Fool', CP, 240)

My child, my child, watch how he goes,
The man in Party coloured clothes. ('Hast Du dich verirrt?', CP, 244)

⁴⁵² Stevie Smith, *The Collected Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith*, ed. Will May (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), 275. All further references to this edition are indicated parenthetically in the text, with *Collected Poems* abbreviated to CP.

Proverbs issue from a place of wisdom, or at least (in the case of ‘The Fool’) experience. The tone of ‘Hast Du dich verirrt?’ is particularly paternal, offering guidance which promises to be reliable if gnomic. So, in ‘Cool as a Cucumber’, Mary was, previously, neatly subject to the proverbial phrases issued by her elders. In the poem’s first line, the speaker, who channels the tone of a stern aunt, remembers fondly how Mary managed to exemplify three clichéd idioms of sedateness at once. Since then, however, Mary has moved, in classic fairytale fashion, from her ordinary home into an enchanted space: a fairy emerges from a wishing well, and curses her, and her behaviour changes. She is now, the elders tut, ‘nervy grim and bold’. The newly disobedient Mary does not behave as she ought.

When the elders call Mary ‘nervy grim and bold’, it is a three-part summary which carries, or attempts to carry, the same disciplinary effect as the three proverbial similes which opened the poem. ‘Cool as a cucumber calm as a mill pond sound as a bell’ stylised Mary into a stereotype and put her in her (quiet, cool, sound) place. ‘[N]ervy grim and bold’, similarly three-part, makes the same disciplinary bid.

In Smith’s final novel *The Holiday* (1949), the wise and paternal Uncle Heber trades particularly in these managing three-word utterances. Celia, Caz and Tiny stay with Heber in Lincolnshire for a holiday, longing, in the limbo of the post-war, for the old, safe, predictable world he represents, and for the security of his certainties. Heber is an Anglican priest, and a fountain of wisdom, and Celia lingers on the authoritative, proverbial guidance that he offers, desiring to find comfort by submitting to it. Early in

the novel, Celia recounts Heber's remarks after a disruptive party had ended: 'He said: 'Solitude, reform and silence.''.⁴⁵³

Heber's summative, economical language defines a whole matter in three words, after which no more needs to be said. Later in the novel, Celia will come under this three-word fire, and counter it with her own:

My uncle now began to storm and rave at me: You are blasphemous, spoilt and evasive.

No, Uncle, I am nervy, bold and grim.⁴⁵⁴

In 'Cool as a Cucumber', the same phrase came as a line of condemnation from Mary's disapproving elders, seeking to keep her in her place; in Celia's hands, it becomes an act of defiance. Yet it follows the same rhetorical rules as her uncle's line. Celia contradicts Heber's three-word summary, but keeps herself within its world. Her proud self-definition is, at the same time, an act of passing judgement on herself, as she steals the pre-made phrase from another text.

In their familiarity or survival across texts, their authoritative three-part structure which refuses argument, and their espousal of conservative and submissive values, Celia's and Heber's remarks occupy the same textual space as the proverb. This space, as 'Cool as a Cucumber' makes clear, is also the territory of the fairytale. This poem features many of the fairytale's greatest hits (the wishing well, the fairy, the curse) as well as a string of proverbs. The 1857 edition of *Grimms' Fairy Tales* which Smith would have read is full

⁴⁵³ Stevie Smith, *The Holiday* (London: Virago Modern Classics, 1979), 23.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 192.

of proverbs.⁴⁵⁵ Fairytale often appears to be an elongated version of proverb, or proverb an abbreviated version of fairytale. Both often centre on, or originate in, a ‘folk’ atmosphere – smallholdings, forests, the activity of the farmyard and the dairy, observations of everyday animals – presenting clear visual images which are striking if not startlingly novel. And the tripartite structure which often underpins proverbs, especially the Biblical proverbs which a Western audience tends to associate with the form, also spearheads climax and change in the Western fairytale: transformation occurs at the third attempt, say, or is effected by the third child.⁴⁵⁶

This close connection between fairytale and proverb bolsters a sense of cosy recognition. In its secure childhood space, fairytale’s disciplinary pattern (the good are rewarded, the bad punished) is already known, anticipated and enjoyed. Proverb and fairytale enjoin us to behave as we know we must. Fairytale passes between the generations; like proverb, it is anonymous and evolving, a familiar narrative shaped by a collective. Just as ‘nervy grim and bold’ moved through the fairytale territory of ‘Cool as a Cucumber’ to pop up again in *The Holiday*, Smith’s final novel actually depicts the shaping of quasi-proverbial wisdom through repetition and recycling. Caz, Heber and Heber’s son Tom repeat the same preachy, slightly irritating line, apparently without reference to one another:

⁴⁵⁵ See, for instance, ‘The Cat and the Mouse in Partnership’ (‘All good things come in threes’, 5), ‘The Woodcutter’s Child’ (‘Whoever will repent and confess their sins, they shall be forgiven’, 11) and ‘The Wonderful Musician’ (‘Who wishes to attack must take care of himself’, 33), in Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Household Stories*, trans. E. H. Wehnert (London: David Bogue, 1857).

⁴⁵⁶ See, for instance, ‘Puss in Boots’, ‘Rumpelstiltskin’, ‘Snow White’, ‘East of the Sun and West of the Moon’, among numerous others.

And Tom said it was different with boys, this classical idea, and it was a burden and a misery and an outrage, and that twice was he flogged through Homer...⁴⁵⁷

I was flogged twice through Homer, said Caz with another malicious look in my direction.⁴⁵⁸

Pronouncing simply in his lovable sober manner, our uncle said:
I hold with discipline, control, sobriety and diligence. I was myself twice flogged through Homer.⁴⁵⁹

Celia detects the melancholy, dogged pride in this act of formalised selective memory. The men collectively organise a distressing childhood experience into a recurring phrase; it cycles around the novel, until it is unclear who invented it, or indeed whether it originates from a past beyond any of them. The line moves laterally, with the flatness explored in Chapter Two, rebuffing interrogation or questioning as it recurs and recurs. For the proverbial edict to seem credible, the hearer must experience it as absolute and foreordained. Rules issuing from an individual, as maxims do, are tyrannical, or at best bullying and open to dispute. Rules shaped anonymously by a collective, in contrast, undermine our capacity to protest, or to see them as other than self-evidently true. Unlike other variants of aphorism, the proverb has become separated from its original speaker, repeated over generations until it assumes a stable form. Shirley L. Arora describes how the proverb's anonymity allows its speaker to redirect responsibility and guilt on to a nameless, past source.⁴⁶⁰ Since no one person can be said to have composed the proverb (shaped into its final version, as Wolfgang Mieder notes, by a

⁴⁵⁷ Smith, *Holiday*, 117.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁴⁶⁰ Shirley L. Arora, 'The Perception of Proverbiality,' in *Wise Words: Essays on the Proverb*, ed. Wolfgang Mieder (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1994), 4.

cross-generational collective) no one can dispute it.⁴⁶¹ Proverb's status on the margins of cliché means that we experience the proverb as a reminder, rather than the often startlingly new information offered by the maxim or aphorism.

Earlier chapters have suggested that aphorism is less useful than it seems; that it suggests a mode of transformative revelation which it nevertheless stops short of offering. Aphorism originating from a particular individual gets away with this failure because of its arresting form and promise of novelty. Proverbs, in contrast, represent an exception among aphorisms in that they are the opposite of arresting: their status as already-known means that it is necessary that they should never surprise us. A proverb can only derive value from being useful: 'practical' wisdom, or '*strategies* for dealing with *situations*', in Kenneth Burke's phrase.⁴⁶² In *The Holiday*, Smith strips proverbs and quasi-proverbial modes of use, ensuring that they fail to enable the practical action which they advise. Instead, I will suggest, Smith trains her reader to read the proverb differently: through the phenomenon of fairytale survival. Our attention is drawn away from the proverb's didactic content, and towards the sensational images which exist just adjacent to these disciplinary messages: the cores of these forms, which survive most strongly.

Circling the Fairytale

⁴⁶¹ Wolfgang Mieder, *American Proverbs: A Study of Texts and Contexts* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1989), 23.

⁴⁶² Kenneth Burke, 'Literature as Equipment for Living,' in *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), 296.

Stevie Smith relished fairytales, and kept a copy of *Grimms' Fairy Tales* by her bed.⁴⁶³ Fairytales are a crucial part of Pompey's visit to Germany in *Novel on Yellow Paper*; the Schloss in *Over the Frontier* is a fairytale space as much as a reference to Kafka's *Das Schloss* (1926), and countless of Smith's poems centre on or rework fairytale narratives.⁴⁶⁴ Smith's archives hold one completed fairytale, 'The Poet and the Pussycat', one half-finished in typescript, and one half-finished in a notebook. In the completed story, 'The Poet and the Pussycat', the perfect cat Sukeina leaves Pussy-cat Land to find out who she is and where she comes from. Eventually she meets a poet, who explains to her that she is looking for love. Poet and pussycat fall in love, and when the poet confesses to Sukeina, she transforms into a beautiful girl.⁴⁶⁵ Smith's story centres rhetorically on a feigned assumption of shared common knowledge, into which she casually institutes the reader:

As everybody knows, the job of pussycats in the world is to look after People.

But of course they must rest. So back they go to Pussy-cat Land [...] they know a very special language, a language of their own. If you watch a cat while it is in the ordinary world, looking after people, you will see them try and teach them the same language. But of course it is very difficult and only a few learn it. (my emphasis)

This collusion between storyteller and listener is key to the fairytale: the sense that even the most outrageous claims spring out of, or are corollaries to, what one already knows.

Jack Barbera and William McBrien connect Smith's interest in fairytales with a

⁴⁶³ Though Smith's interest in fairytale is broad ('The Castle', for instance, riffs on the Norwegian 'East of the Sun and West of the Moon) she returns most often, in her broadcasts and poem introductions, to the Grimms. This chapter focuses, therefore, on this particular tradition.

⁴⁶⁴ See, for instance, 'I rode with my darling...' (CP, 296), 'The Fairy Bell' (CP, 351), 'The Frog Prince' (CP, 471). 'The Fórlorn Sea' (CP, 608).

⁴⁶⁵ Stevie Smith, 'The Poet and the Pussycat,' Series 2, Box 5, Folder 5, Stevie Smith papers, 1924-1970. Coll. No. 1976.012. McFarlin Library. Department of Special Collections and University Archives. The University of Tulsa.

fascination with myth and its capacity to ‘universalise common experiences’.⁴⁶⁶ Even when told or written for the first time, the fairytale still presents itself as a retelling, a recalling of shared knowledge which brings the circle of teller and hearers closer together. In ‘The Poet and the Pussycat’, Smith deflates her stranger claims (such as her suggestion that cats shoulder the responsibility of caring for human beings) into statements of familiar, everyday experience. So when Jan Montefiore suggests that Smith’s interest in fairytales springs out of her plain and quotidian idiom,⁴⁶⁷ one might add that Smith’s fairytales are also invested in establishing and defining what counts as plain and quotidian: marking out a territory of assumed familiarity within the space of the fantastic.

Smith establishes this familiarity – often belatedly, in the sense of making something new appear instantly well-known and established – in part through her use of a refrain in her fairytale poems. Fairytales, as already suggested, accrete around repetition: things often need to happen three times before the desired outcome can be achieved. This is part of their pleasure (as in Chapter One, centring on the need to have an experience of the short text again and again), but repetition is also as key to their legitimacy as it is to the authority of proverbs. ‘I rode with my darling...’ and ‘The Forlorn Sea’ centre around a line whose repetition establishes and justifies its power, giving it weight to convince. In ‘I rode with my darling...’ the girl remains in the wood, outside the social systems which the repeated line, warning her not to stay in the dark wood at night, shored up (CP, 296-7). ‘The Forlorn Sea’, meanwhile, circles around a refrain of

⁴⁶⁶ Jack Barbera and William McBrien, *Stevie: A Biography of Stevie Smith* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 96.

⁴⁶⁷ Jan Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women’s Writing* (London: Pandora, 2004), 38.

‘fòrlorn sea’ as it describes a visit to a palace shared by a princess and fairy king, who are waited on by white cats (CP, 608-9). This refrain pulls the poem’s centre of gravity towards its otherworldly setting, its strangeness emphasised by the shifted accent in the word ‘forlorn’. ‘Fòrlorn sea’ assumes the status of a set phrase, a known quantity which carries weight, a shorthand for all manner of fairytale implications. Like ‘nervy, bold and grim’, or ‘flogged twice through Homer’, its repetition pushes it back towards the status of an unquestionable truth, establishing it retrospectively as somehow prior to the text in which it was coined.

Romana Huk’s nuanced examination of Smith’s use of fairytale involves a consideration of the genre’s familiar language. Smith’s poem ‘Cool as a Cucumber’, for Huk, merges fairytale diction with colloquial language to dramatise how discursive codes collude in the formation of identity.⁴⁶⁸ Her essay ‘Eccentric Concentrism’ examines ‘The Frog Prince’ and ‘I rode with my darling...’, finding that ‘fairytale’s dreamland of freedom’ involves its own kind of entrapping circumscription; for neither speaker is there any easy sense of what freedom looks like.⁴⁶⁹ Huk’s chapter on ballad explores how fairytale transmits stories of female experience as discourses which shape Smith against her will, even as she probes them.⁴⁷⁰ A 1997 essay notes that Smith’s fairytale poems tend not to conclude in ironic or alternative terms; Huk finds their originality in the way that they instead cast traditional narratives such as fairytales into

⁴⁶⁸ Romana Huk, ‘Eccentric Concentrism: Traditional Poetic Forms and Refracted Discourse in Stevie Smith’s Poetry,’ *Contemporary Literature* 34 (1993): 255.

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 253-4.

⁴⁷⁰ Romana Huk, ‘On “the Beat Inevitable”: The Ballad,’ in *A Companion to Poetic Genre*, ed. Erik Martiny (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2012), 127.

dialogue with ‘oppositional others’.⁴⁷¹ In 2005, further, Huk suggests that such ambiguity and clashes of ‘cultural-textual trajectories’ are fundamental, in fact, to the fairytale; Smith has her characters get lost in that nexus rather than escape it neatly.⁴⁷² For Huk, therefore, fairytale does not permit Smith’s characters to escape from entrapping social discourses; rather, it reasserts those discourses.

According to Huk’s analyses, Smith resists the fairytale (or stages the consequences of her failure to) because it threatens to entrap: to tie up or elide loose ends in ways which subsume dissent within comforting quasi-religious sop narratives. Fairytale and proverb seem to invite us into a too-sweet childhood space, which nevertheless derives its cosiness from a repressive disciplinary function. The good are rewarded and the bad (the immoderate, the imprudent) are punished; Tiny’s nasty brother Clem is ejected from Uncle Heber’s house. It is no surprise, therefore, that *The Fairchild Family*, that infamous Victorian children’s book describing punishments for small childhood sins, forms a recurring motif in *The Holiday*,⁴⁷³ as well as the men’s reminiscence of being ‘flogged twice through Homer’.

Because of their aggressively authoritative ethos, proverbs have a particular capacity to gloss over situations, or cover up the unpleasant. Towards the end of the book, Celia’s cousin Caz also parodies Heber’s three-part rhetorical style:

⁴⁷¹ Romana Huk, ‘Poetic Subject and Voice as Sites of Struggle: Toward a “Postrevisionist” Reading of Stevie Smith’s Fairytale Poems,’ in *Dwelling in Possibility: Women Poets and Critics on Poetry*, ed. Yopie Prins and Maera Shreiber (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 149.

⁴⁷² Romana Huk, *Stevie Smith: Between the Lines* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 286.

⁴⁷³ Smith, *Holiday*, 69, 195.

Observation, discipline and company, said my cousin, as if he were offering a plate of sandwiches, with the flag stuck on them to say what they were.⁴⁷⁴

Caz's proverbial parody redirects the attention forcibly away from all but these ascetic Christian virtues. Like the sandwich-flag to which Celia compares it, the line acts as a signifier of respectability and social participation in a set of niceties. In the unpublished, unnamed fairytale which Smith left unfinished in a tan notebook, proverbs perform this social glossing-over. King and queen, classic fairytale protagonists, muse on how to raise their sons:

As to the children – well boys would be boys – young people must learn to fend for themselves – no school like that of experience – let them carve out their own destinies – and with these comforting platitudes they turned their sons out to graze.⁴⁷⁵

Here, proverb works parodically within the fairytale to smooth over social rupture, its soothing clichés securing and reinforcing societal norms. Jack Zipes points out that the fairytale, like the proverb, had a didactic socialising function, training its listeners in proper behaviours.⁴⁷⁶ As Gill Plain notes in her analysis of Smith's *Over the Frontier*, fairytale narratives 'teach us to accept the consequences of our actions'.⁴⁷⁷ The sense, in both proverb and fairytale, is of reasserting rather than disrupting (as other kinds of aphorism do) the natural order of things, maintaining rather than re-evaluating the status quo.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid., 194.

⁴⁷⁵ Stevie Smith, unfinished fairytale, Series 5, Box 1, Folder 7, Stevie Smith papers, University of Tulsa.

⁴⁷⁶ Jack Zipes. *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 2012), 7.

⁴⁷⁷ Gill Plain, *Women's Fiction of the Second World War: Gender, Power and Resistance* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 84.

Although Frances Spalding argues that fairytale attracted Smith because of its model of Fate as ‘simple and peremptory’,⁴⁷⁸ Smith shows suspicion of this aspect of fairytale and proverb: clear answers and comforting authority. In her radio broadcast ‘World of Books’, as she dismisses the solace often found in religion, she balances between confessing a love of fairytales and rejecting them:

...[if man is lonely he] must just be lonely...It’s better than making up fairy stories, though nobody loves fairy stories more than I do, provided they’re recognised as being fairy stories...⁴⁷⁹

For Smith, fairytales and religion both reassure, but are ultimately untrue; they should be avoided, unless they can be held at a critical distance. Smith’s performance introduction to ‘The Castle’ reflects this ambivalence towards the form. Her edits minimise the poem’s alliance with fairytale, instead slipping it in casually, and subordinating the text primarily to a classical narrative:

Here is a happy love poem. ~~But of course it is a fairy story really.~~ It is based on the {fairy story} ‘East of the Sun and West of the Moon’ ~~story~~ which is also {of course} the Cupid and Psyche one.⁴⁸⁰

Amended introductions to ‘I rode with my darling...’ conceal the fairytale connection even more vigorously:

~~I will now read some of the lost and fearful poems, where things have gone go awry and shapes have been are changed, it may be through magic and witchcraft,~~

⁴⁷⁸ Frances Spalding, *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 21.

⁴⁷⁹ Stevie Smith, TS of ‘World of Books’, Series 2, Box 6, Folder 20, Stevie Smith papers, University of Tulsa.

⁴⁸⁰ Stevie Smith, TS of ‘The Castle’, Series 2, Box 2, Folder 9, Stevie Smith papers, University of Tulsa. Braces indicate sections which have been added to the typescript by hand; parts scored out have been crossed out in the typescript by hand.

~~they are fairy stories – often.~~ Of course, some people choose to be lost. The girl in this poem had a lover and kind friends and relations, but she rode away from them, she chose to be lost.⁴⁸¹

In these narratives of escape – of ‘choos[ing] to be lost’ – fairytale itself becomes something to be escaped, either because its childish associations mean that it lacks credibility, because the tightly-controlled narrative of fairytale is limiting, or because fairytale promises an idealised response to human behaviour which Smith’s writing refuses to deliver. The question then becomes why, despite her suspiciousness of fairytale neatness, fairytales and proverbial turns of phrase still recur so often in Smith’s writing.

Smith’s use of proverbs, I argue, activates a particular historical disjunction between fairytale narrative and its proverbial moments. The critical view of fairytale as bolstering disciplinary social narratives derives, to a large extent, from tales which had undergone significant revision. As the Grimms went through their editions the tales became more sanitised and ornamented, adding, as Lüthi describes, more detail and psychological explanation.⁴⁸² Also added, Wolfgang Mieder notes, are many of the proverbs with which the tales have become so closely identified.⁴⁸³ Mieder describes how Wilhelm Grimm’s fascination with proverbs led him to incorporate newly-identified proverbial texts into later editions of the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*,

⁴⁸¹ Stevie Smith, TS of ‘I rode with my darling...’, Series 2, Box 2, Folder 10, Stevie Smith papers, University of Tulsa.

⁴⁸² Max Lüthi, *The European Folktale: Form and Nature*, trans. John D. Niles (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1982), 103.

⁴⁸³ Wolfgang Mieder, “‘Ever Eager to Incorporate Folk Proverbs’”: Wilhelm Grimm’s Proverbial Additions in the Fairy Tales,’ in *The Brothers Grimm and Folktale*, ed. James M. McGlathery, with Larry W. Danielson, Ruth E. Lorbe, and Selma K. Richardson (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 112.

justifying his additions on the grounds that he was preserving the folk speech which belonged to fairytales.⁴⁸⁴

Maria Tatar outlines the consequence of this addition of proverbial moral lessons to tales to which they are not fundamental. Though the father in ‘The Frog King’ lectures his daughter on the importance of keeping promises, the spell on the frog is not broken until the princess acts cruelly towards him, throwing him against the wall. Ethical codes, she suggests, are not intrinsically relevant to fairytale narrative.⁴⁸⁵ The proverb which we expect to comprise the tale’s moral is not reflected by the story: is not, in fact, an abbreviated version of the overall tale. It may instead be belatedly added, reframing a fairytale’s reception.

Smith can position her use of proverb, therefore, in the juncture where fairytale and proverb fall out of sync: where the historical contingency of their relationship becomes visible. In her writing, fairytale represents neither a space of freedom, as Ruth Baumert and Ingrid Hotz-Davis imply,⁴⁸⁶ nor yet entirely a space of entrapment, as Huk argues. Smith is drawn to fairytale’s capacity to be a haunting form: however, she repurposes its historical trauma, offering it a different way to haunt and survive. Fairytale pervades her writing, visible but unacknowledged, frequently restrained from entering the foreground. This is the relationship of proverb to fairytale. Fairytale presents a proverb (often added

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid., 112, 116.

⁴⁸⁵ Maria M. Tatar, ‘Beauties vs. Beasts in the Grimms’ Nursery and Household Tales,’ in *The Brothers Grimm and Folktale*, ed. James M. McGlathery et al. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 143.

⁴⁸⁶ Ruth Baumert, ‘Fear, Melancholy, and Loss in the Poetry of Stevie Smith,’ in *The Abject of Desire: The Aestheticization of the Unaesthetic in Contemporary Literature and Culture*, ed. Monica Mueller and Konstanze Kutzbach (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 204-5; Ingrid Hotz-Davies, ‘“My Name is Finis”: The Lonely Voice of Stevie Smith,’ in *In Black and Gold: Contiguous Traditions in Post-War British and Irish Poetry*, ed. C. C. Barfoot (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1994), 226.

late in its history), but strips it of narrative power, allowing it to fade from memory when other, more cryptic images survive.⁴⁸⁷ Proverb's moral message, its particular instruction for action, appears clearly and visibly (for instance, the king's admonition to the princess in 'The Frog King') but it remains outside authorial and readerly focus. *The Holiday* models the same draining away of the proverb's use-value.

Repositioning the Proverb

Uncle, I say, I was reading the Proverbs last night, what I just quoted, they are very practical, but in some fashion also they make an unpleasant picture of a too practical, too self-advantageous virtue. The ones that are repeated too often, you know? Don't waste time talking to fools, don't chatter, don't go after strange women, don't stay in bed. Be a squirrel, be an ant, the improvident person shall have nothing to eat in the winter. Don't spare the rod, beat your children, beat sense into your little ones, etc. And above all, don't back bills for strangers. There is, of course, this real noble love of wisdom, this is very strong, but it is so often the wisdom of Polonius, 'looking out for Number One'. Uncle, a lot of gay and generous people...chatter an awful lot, and borrow money, and are not ants or squirrels. It is necessary to be practical. But it is not the whole of wisdom, it is not, only a part. Everything in this world is in fits and splinters, like after an air raid when the glass is on the pavements; one picks one's way and is happy in parts.⁴⁸⁸

As Celia digs potatoes with Heber, she finds herself protesting against Biblical Proverbs: the model of wisdom, recommending prudence in sententious terms, in which Uncle Heber participates. She criticises Biblical Proverbs because they are 'too practical', excluding the unnecessary or the frivolous in favour of direct, useful observations.

⁴⁸⁷ This fairytale capacity for the cryptic, argues H. J. Blackham, differentiates it from the fable. While the fairytale contains hidden, ambiguously symbolic content, the inventions of fable 'have a different orientation and source, openly explicable' (H. J. Blackham, *The Fable as Literature* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 189).

⁴⁸⁸ Smith, *Holiday*, 142-3.

This focus on the moral status of usefulness and practicality emerges in another text which Smith published, like *The Holiday*, in 1949. In 'Beside the Seaside: A Holiday with Children', the childless Helen goes on holiday with gentle Margaret and her family. Smith based Helen on herself (Helen recites part of Smith's 'Advice to Young Children', describing it as 'the moral poem I wrote'),⁴⁸⁹ and Margaret on her friend Betty Miller, whose novel *Farewell Leicester Square* (1941) explored the struggles of a young Jewish film-maker against anti-Semitic attitudes.⁴⁹⁰ Smith's short story estranged her from Miller, in part because of her unsympathetic portrayal of Miller's children, but also because of the anti-Semitism which Helen expresses in the story:

'I do not hold with the theory that the Jewish people is an appeasing, accommodating people, knowing, as some say, on which side their bread is buttered, and prepared to make accommodations with conscience for their own advantage. No, I think that they are an obstinate and unreasonable people, short-sighted about their true interests, fanatical...'⁴⁹¹

Helen's objection to the Jews here seems to be that they are (to adopt Celia's terms in *The Holiday*) not 'practical', not 'self-advantageous'; they cannot or will not act in their 'true interests'. Prejudice and practicality become doubly linked. Helen expresses an anti-Semitic prejudice that Jews are not practical; equally, practicality (as Celia imagines it in *The Holiday*) involves acting on prejudice. One stays away from fools, strange women, strangers. Prejudice, like proverb, operates through shorthand: its 'shrewdness', Christopher Ricks argues, in part 'consists in its not going out on the limb of insisting that it will be proved right.'⁴⁹² Prejudice, in other words, restrains itself from

⁴⁸⁹ Stevie Smith, 'Beside the Seaside: A Holiday with Children,' in *Me Again: The Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith*, ed. Jack Barbera and William McBrien (London: Virago, 1982), 13.

⁴⁹⁰ Betty Miller, *Farewell Leicester Square* (London: Robert Hale, 1935).

⁴⁹¹ Stevie Smith, 'Beside the Seaside: A Holiday with Children,' *Me Again*, 19.

⁴⁹² Christopher Ricks, *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 11.

explanation or justification. It positions itself prior to the possibility of interrogation. The shorthand of prejudice and proverb enables quick decisive action, based on what is peremptorily assumed to be true: in that sense, both may share a destructive ‘practical[ity]’. Prejudice may be practical, may make one’s life easier and more convenient. But in *The Holiday*, Celia places herself on the side of the impractical: the chattering, the borrowing, the unwisely happy.

This nexus of terms does not minimise the anti-Semitic prejudice expressed in ‘Beside the Seaside’. It does accommodate a reversal of connotation: prejudice is practical, but practicality can derive, in a way disturbing to Celia, from prejudice. Proverb, for Celia, uses partial or skewed knowledge as a convenient shorthand. ‘[R]epeated too often’, positioned as pre-existing wisdom which demands to be used and acted upon, proverb excludes other ways of thinking and acting from the world.

In *The Holiday*, therefore, Celia evacuates usefulness from the proverb. She plays with it, makes it light: sound and flashes, rather than something which can be listened to or put into action. A world in ‘fits and splinters’ demands not certainty but free experiment; not usefulness but precisely that ‘gay and generous’ frivolity which, Celia feels, the proverb risks excluding. So her handling of the proverb in *The Holiday* repositions the form as a site of pleasure. When Caz quotes a proverb, Celia swiftly steers the line away from any potential use-value by countering with a quotation of her own:

Care killed the cat, said Caz.
The foolish reader bites the man of genius.
The dog it was that died.
I laughed: I like best, Who bites the Pope dies of it.

We fell asleep in the sun.⁴⁹³

The typescript shows that this exchange of proverbs was inserted into the first draft on a separate page. Since Smith edited comparatively lightly, the change demonstrates that the proverb game is part of a deliberate narrative strategy, rather than a writer simply running on.⁴⁹⁴ Caz's quotation of a proverb immediately gives way to a game of 'capping quotations'. In manuscript, the text is explicit that this game is being played: instead of 'I like best', the original reads 'I'll cap that with my favourite, I said'.⁴⁹⁵ Capping quotations is an aristocratic performance of learning held lightly, with a line seen as valuable not in itself but as a swappable cipher. We see one performance in Dorothy L. Sayers' *Gaudy Night* (1935):

'You look,' said the Dean, 'like a nervous parent whose little boy is about to recite *The Wreck of the Hesperus* at a School Concert.'
'I feel,' said Harriet, 'more like the mother of Daniel.'

King Darius said to the lions:—
Bite Daniel. Bite Daniel.
Bite him. Bite him. Bite him.'

'G'rrrrr!' said the Dean...
... 'Miss Shaw's got a new frock,' said Harriet.
'so she has! How posh of her!

And she was as fine as a melon in the corn-field,
Gliding and lovely as a ship upon the sea.

That, my dear, is meant for Daniel.'⁴⁹⁶

⁴⁹³ Smith, *Holiday*, 159.

⁴⁹⁴ Stevie Smith, TS of *The Holiday*, Series 2, Box 2, Folders 15-17, Stevie Smith papers, University of Tulsa.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁶ Dorothy L Sayers, *Gaudy Night* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1970), 390-1.

Quotation – and specifically, in *The Holiday*, proverb – is made useless but enjoyable. The lines exchanged are toys to be played with and then left, their use-value reduced to strengthening friendships and temporarily winning tiny amounts of power. Celia's proverb-swapping performs a reclamative function because it makes the individual proverb just one in a network of proverbs, which may, as proverbs do, contradict or disrupt each other. It is a way of disempowering the proverb, instituting instead significance of a different sort, to do with what is immediately visible rather than what is euphemistically implied.

Editing the manuscript line 'I'll cap that with my favourite' to the less-competitive, pleasure-oriented 'I like best' reduces that minimal power struggle still further, foregrounding instead an enjoyment of sound and semantic absurdity. Smith emphasises how this game allows its constituent lines to be unnecessary in any practical sense. Instead, it opens them up to desertion: before the game between Celia and Caz has fairly got going, they 'fell asleep in the sun'. The proverbs die away, unused. All they have done is to lull the characters to sleep, like a story before bed.

Smith continues to position proverb as a space for pleasure in her selections for *The Batsford Book of Children's Verse* (1970). In this anthology, alongside poems by Byron, Edward Thomas, Shakespeare and herself, she presents two separate passages from Proverbs in the Bible. She evidently values this genre, despite Celia's ambivalence in *The Holiday*. However, her choice of passages prompts her readers to shift their focus: from seeing the proverb as guide to action, to seeing it as a much less determined form:

There be three *things which* are too wonderful for me, yea, four which I know not:

The way of an eagle in the air; the way of a serpent upon a rock; the way of a ship in the midst of the sea; and the way of a man with a maid.⁴⁹⁷ [Proverbs 30:18-19]

There be four *things which are* little upon the earth, but they *are* exceeding wise: The ants *are* a people not strong, yet they prepare their meat in the summer; The conies *are but* a feeble folk, yet make they their houses in the rocks; The locusts have no king, yet go they forth all of them by bands; The spider taketh hold with her hands, and is in kings' palaces.⁴⁹⁸ [Proverbs 30:24- 28]

Each of these numerical proverbs is structured in terms of a riddle and its answer. The reader is implicitly challenged, in the second, to think up four animals which meet a particular set of miraculous or contradictory conditions.⁴⁹⁹ The pleasure and game-playing on show in the proverb, here and in *The Holiday*, demonstrate that Celia's remarks to Heber cannot be taken as Smith's wholesale rejection of the form. Smith signals the scale of her attraction to the proverb's poetics by including these selections in the *Batsford Book*. Importantly, however, she is attracted to the cryptic and the riddling; proverbs which hold open a space of doubt, which elicit play and intellectual experiment from their readers, rather than providing guides to action or use-value.

The Proverb as Fairytale Core

These riddling, playful proverbs reflect the structures of fairytale: another form which centres its narrative patterns on verbal and numerical formulas of threes, and which

⁴⁹⁷ Stevie Smith, ed., *The Batsford Book of Children's Verse* (London: Batsford, 1970), 31.

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁴⁹⁹ On the debate surrounding the historical relationship between riddle and biblical proverb, R. B. Y. Scott, *The Way of Wisdom in the Old Testament* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1971), 71; Philip Johannes Nel, *The Structure and Ethos of the Wisdom Admonitions in Proverbs* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1982), 11; and Wolfgang Roth, *Numerical Sayings in the Old Testament: A Form-Critical Study* (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 96.

survives in a manner which resists utility.⁵⁰⁰ Both fairytales and proverbs are shaped by the collective: passed down between generations, their origins lost, changing slightly in each set of hands until, as Mieder notes, a generally-accepted wording is hit upon.⁵⁰¹ In ‘The Storyteller’, Walter Benjamin calls a proverb ‘an ideogram of a story’, comparing it to ‘a ruin which stands on the site of an old story in which a moral twines about a happening like ivy around a wall’.⁵⁰² We are reminded of Derrida’s description of an aphorism as ‘ruin and monument’, discussed in Chapter One. Though time strips away superfluous or culturally-specific content from both, proverb appears as a reduced or pared-down version of fairytale (Benjamin associates storytelling specifically with the teller of fairytales).⁵⁰³ Fairytale is already worn down to archetypal, self-sufficient essentials: proverb, in this model, is then the bone of fairytale.

This sense of fairytale as surviving primarily in hard, memorable cores characterises Stevie Smith’s response to the genre. Smith’s enjoyment of the fairytale hinges on key, haunting images, which bear repetition. In ‘The Ironing Board of Widow Twanky’, an essay about stage adaptations of fairytales, she dwells with clear enjoyment on iconic moments in the stories:

I like the poems in the fairy stories...(as an editor said once, “Yes, by all means put some poems in your article, it will help to break the text up”).

I should like to see our fairy-play text broken up by such verses as the Cinderella one, after the Ugly Sister has cut her toe off so as to get the shoe on and is riding away with the prince, and the grass cries out, “Look behind, look behind, there’s blood upon the shoe. The shoe’s too small, the one behind, is not the bride for

⁵⁰⁰ See, for instance, Lüthi, *The European Folktale*, 32-33, on the structural function of pairs and triads in the fairytale. See also Andrew Teverson, *Fairy Tale* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 24, on how fairytale operates through the repetition of verbal formulae.

⁵⁰¹ Mieder, *American Proverbs*, 23.

⁵⁰² Walter Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller,’ in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), 107.

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.*, 101.

you.”...Or the Talking Head story, where the dead horse’s head hangs on the wall, and passing underneath the goose-girl princess cries: “Fallada, Fallada, there thou art, hanging”, so the horse replies: “Child, child, there thou art ganging. Alas, alas, if thy mother knew it, Sadly, sadly, her heart would rue it.”⁵⁰⁴

Ostensibly Smith is giving clear examples to support her point. In practice, however, the level of detail in these examples implies that these episodes represent the emotional centres of the tales: the striking moments which linger in Smith’s mind, more than the stories’ endings, narrative strategies or individual characters.⁵⁰⁵ The songs – repetitive when presented in this format – are given in full, a rhythmic space in which Smith can fully inhabit the fairytale in her retelling.

This shifted focus, away from narrative detail of cause and effect on to individual, core moments, manifests in Smith’s manuscript revisions of *Novel on Yellow Paper*. She describes her German holiday, where the child of her hosts is constantly being punished for small misdemeanours, and then consoled with a fairy story.

...and all the time it was just the one fairy story that I got nearly by heart. Reader, it was The Wolf and the Seven Little Kids, and when it ended up *Der Wolf ist tot Der Wolf ist Tot*. Hurra, hurra, hurra, the blood lust and ferocity on the infant face of the infant neurotic was something more than I could stand. And there was another one she would allow sometimes to be told. It is the one about Snowdrop and her cruel stepmother...by and by of course the little Snowdrop grows right up and marries her prince. And the wicked stepmother? Ah well, this is what happens to her. She falls in with the happy wedding-party and they take her by force and make her dance in red hot shoes until she is dead...⁵⁰⁶

⁵⁰⁴ Stevie Smith, ‘The Ironing-Board of Widow Twanky,’ *Queen*, December 20, 1961, 11.

⁵⁰⁵ On the adult tendency to remember only single, striking images from fairytales, see Max Lüthi, *Once Upon A Time: On the Nature of Fairy Tales*, trans. Lee Chadeayne and Paul Gottwald (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1970), 67.

⁵⁰⁶ Stevie Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper* (London: Virago, 2015), 74-5.

Smith's language here emphasises the predictability of fairytale: in phrases like 'of course', and in the satisfyingly bloody endings for which Trudi listens out avidly. Narrative, plot and causality are shrunk right down in her summary, so that what stands out is the image of the stepmother dancing in red hot shoes. The experience of fairytale, with its vivid core moments, is one which Trudi wishes to have again and again: one which cannot be spent or fulfilled in a single rendition. This is, as Chapter One suggested, the rhythm of aphorism, where the sealed inaccessibility of the textual nugget incites a desire for a repeated experience. Pompey disapproves of Trudi's bloodthirsty love of gory images; that she recounts the tale in the same terms, however, indicates a similar line of interest.

Strikingly, Stevie Smith chooses a different fairy story in her manuscript version of *Novel on Yellow Paper*: a botched and confused version of 'The Goose Girl', referred to also in 'The Ironing Board of Widow Twanky'. Instead of 'Snow White':

...it was the one about the princess that is going to the court of a neighbouring king to get fixed up with the King {,} and she goes along with her maid{. N}ow the maid is a strapping big girl{,} and presently she makes the princess take her place and be the servant{,} and she is the princess{. W}ell what they did about the clothes{,} ~~like~~ how they certainly wouldnt fit that strapping big girl, I dont just remember{,} but it was all o.k. and no questions asked until by and by it all came out ~~how I forget~~ and the wicked girl was made to dance in red hot shoes until she was dead: {Da musste sie in die rotglühenden Schuhe treten und so lange tanzen, bis sie tot zur Erde fiel.}⁵⁰⁷

⁵⁰⁷ Stevie Smith, annotated typescript of *Novel on Yellow Paper*, U DP-156-1, 56, Stevie Smith Papers 1935-1969, Hull History Centre. Braces indicate sections which have been added to the typescript by hand; parts scored out have been crossed out in the typescript by hand.

Here, the ending is emphasised – but it is the wrong ending, imported, as we see above, from Snow White.⁵⁰⁸ Someone, Smith or Pompey or perhaps the German storyteller, has forgotten quite how the story goes. Pompey has certainly forgotten how the story proceeds from the initial premise to the ending; she tacks it on, abruptly. She slides quickly over inconvenient details, like the fit of the clothes and the mechanics of the eventual revelation, dismissing the fact that she cannot remember them, and declaring instead ‘it was all o.k. and no questions asked.’ In stripping the fairytale of shape and narrative linkage, Smith flattens the fairytale’s passage from crime to solution to punishment, foregrounding instead the key images of clothes being swapped and dancing in red hot shoes. These images survive not only in the retelling; they survive into other stories, where they do not belong. Snow White’s ending lasts into ‘The Goose Girl’: it haunts and repeats.

When we turn, then, to the question of *The Holiday*’s interaction with the fairytale mode, one of the major ways it echoes the genre (or at least that aspect of it which drew Smith) is in its repetition of key images beyond its own textual boundaries. Though *The Holiday* was not published until 1949, Smith published a short story ‘Is There Life Beyond The Gravy?’ in 1947, with Celia, Cas (here with an ‘s’, short for Casivalaunus) and Tiny still going to visit their uncle Heber.⁵⁰⁹ Ten years after *The Holiday* was published, moreover, Smith would repurpose portions of the text directly in her radio play ‘A Turn Outside’ (1959):

⁵⁰⁸ The Grimms’ first edition of ‘The Goose Girl’ punishes the servant by rolling her in a barrel full of internal spikes.

⁵⁰⁹ Stevie Smith, ‘Is There Life Beyond The Gravy?’ in *Me Again*, 60-73.

S.S.:...The flowers that you will not let me pick. 'Do you want to raise the devil?' you say.

INTERLOCUTOR: I would not let you pick the flowers?

S.S.: No, *then*, on that occasion, you would not. ('A Turn Outside')⁵¹⁰

This is just one example of an occasion in this play which recycles passages from 'Is There Life Beyond The Gravy?' (1947) and *The Holiday* (1949):

'Don't pick the flowers, Celia,' said Cas. Do you want to raise the devil?' ('Is There Life Beyond The Gravy?')⁵¹¹

... the soft grass on top of the cliff is speckled with flowers, the flowers that my cousin will not let me pick.

Do you want to raise the devil? he says. (*The Holiday*, 149)

Like the fairytale, these scenarios and snatches of language are repeatable, passing through a series of retellings and being subtly shaped in the process. This is not even a crucial narrative moment (nor is the singing horse's head in 'The Goose Girl'), but it becomes the core which survives, passing from one text into another. This image (like those remembered in 'Twanky') has the fairytale motif's resistance to explanation. In all the texts, the moment comes from nowhere and leads to nothing: no devil is ever raised. The image is haunting precisely because of its excess. It is superfluous to each of Smith's narratives. Because it remains undigested – resistant to interpretation and assimilation – it lasts and lasts across her writing.

Tatar comments on the 'notorious flatness' of fairytale characters, which discourages critics from analysing their motivations even as the 'boldness of their deeds demands

⁵¹⁰ Stevie Smith, 'A Turn Outside,' in *Me Again*, 352.

⁵¹¹ Smith, 'Is There Life Beyond The Gravy?', 71.

careful scrutiny'.⁵¹² Fairytale refuses to answer our questions (like aphorism) even as it makes it clear that there are many questions to be asked. Its frugality of description, which Teverson describes, compounds this effect: not only are fairytale characters presented with minimal psychological depth, but landscapes are barely described, and in fact description in general is basic.⁵¹³ Elements arise only as required by the action of the story, against a near-blank background: they appear, as Lüthi notes, from darkness, and then vanish again.⁵¹⁴ Like the proverb, the fairytale image presents itself without explanation, justification or apology. The impossible (for instance, the horse-head speaking in 'The Goose-Girl') occurs with absolute nonchalance. Unable to interpret, we simply pass it on.

A Lion Is In The Street

...with my sin of sloth there runs also the sin of fear; the sluggard saith: There is a lion in the way, a lion is in the street. It is fear and mistrust, fear of action and so inaction. I could never marry because of fear, I should like to have one-third of a man, to be the third wife, perhaps, with her own house...but to be the one wife, that is the dear one and the comfort, to be the dear one and the comfort of one man, that I admire, that I could not dare to be, I should be afraid there was a lion in the street.⁵¹⁵

Just before Celia criticises proverbs to Uncle Heber in the garden, she uses Proverbs 26:13 to explain why she resists marriage. This arresting proverb describes a sluggard's protest that he cannot go out because a lion is in the street. The image is sensational: the wild erupts into the urban space, escaping concretisable explanation. It would slide

⁵¹² Maria Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 56.

⁵¹³ Teverson, *Fairy Tale*, 33.

⁵¹⁴ Lüthi, *The European Folktale*, 17.

⁵¹⁵ Smith, *Holiday*, 142.

straight into one of Hilaire Belloc's comic situations, or a Grimms' fairytale. And yet, appearing in the Bible as part of a sequence about sloth and foolishness, the sluggard's extraordinary claim vanishes under the weight of the moral message.

In this passage in *The Holiday*, Smith reverses the dynamic of the sluggard and lion. The Book of Proverbs steers us to focus on the sluggard, whose behaviour we should avoid. Yet it is the lion which survives into Smith's text. She chooses to focus on the sensational image rather than the moral purpose: that inexplicable lion in the street, clear and disconnected as the speaking horse-head in 'The Goose Girl'.

Here, the refusal of fairytale to explain or justify its narrative vagaries becomes central to Smith's use of this proverb.⁵¹⁶ She allows the figure of the lion in the street to survive, as an emblem of the absurd. The lion in the street is paralysing because it cannot be understood or properly reacted to: it becomes a symbol of excessive, unusable knowledge.

In Smith's hands, the proverbial lion embodies both interpretative and ethical paralysis. Celia associates intimacy with a nameless fear which is too close and prevents action. Marriage is imagined as bringing one right up against an apocalyptic conception of reality: a perception of events no less horrifying for being objectively absurd, barely understood. No one else sees the lion which the sluggard claims is in the street. The Bible urges us to conclude that there is no lion there, no reason not to act, and that the sluggard is making excuses. Celia raises the unsettling question: what if there is a lion

⁵¹⁶ Lüthi, *The European Folktale*, 84.

there, a real reason not to act, which only I can sense, but cannot explain or justify? In the Bible, this proverb urges action by minimising its own rhetorical power. Stevie Smith reactivates its poetics, reconfiguring the line as a space between action and inaction by allowing its central image to stand free of interpretative baggage.

Smith establishes the unusability of this image, later in the novel, as its main point of interest by re-versioning it: by allowing Celia and Caz, indirectly, to meet the lion in the street:

In the middle of the white road that crosses the esplanade there is a baby crawling fiercely. How reckless the creature is, I pick him up, he is very heavy, his hair is bleached white by the sun, his romper suit bulges over his fat back. He begins to roar and stiffen. As he cries out a tall thin pale girl comes running out of the shelter. 'Oh, he is so naughty,' she says, 'I can never leave him for a moment, I must have fallen asleep.' Well, there is not much traffic about, I said, looking at the empty miles before us and behind. How swiftly he crawls, he is bold and forceful. The mother sighs and takes him from me. The child has sucked the strength quite out of her, she is pale and shadowy, he is a lion in the road.⁵¹⁷

Smith presents the baby starkly: our central focus, positioned in a white road, empty of distractions. The reader is cued to receive him as significant: partly because he echoes Celia's earlier 'lion in the street' monologue, and partly because he recalls a particular baby image in *Novel on Yellow Paper*:

There is a vast flooded prairie, a rushing mud-yellow foam-curded rain-lashed torrent, as if all the dams in the world were burst...not Christian at all, but just the old element at its savagery...And riding...on top of that brown flood was A little child shall ride it, in a cradle with a cat on top.⁵¹⁸

⁵¹⁷ Smith, *Holiday*, 166-7.

⁵¹⁸ Smith, *Novel*, 11-12.

Are we to read this as the same baby who resurfaces in *The Holiday*? Did the baby leave the cat riding over the sea, for later on in *The Holiday* Celia and Caz encounter a cat floating on a spar? No interpretative clarity is possible here. The baby's 'romper suit bulges', and we are inclined to feel that he is bulging with meaning. Yet this is meaning which can never be activated. The baby is dense with an oversignification which he cannot carry and which we cannot begin to mine. It is impossible to engage with him, literally or interpretatively ('I pick him up...He begins to roar and stiffen.'). He is a 'lion in the road' precisely because of his paralysing resistance to interpretative utility. The only option available, to Smith or to us as readers, is to pass him by: to allow him simply to vanish:

Where is the girl and her baby? I said, for the tide was now flowing swiftly over the flat beach.
We sat on the empty terrace beneath a bright torn awning. There was no sign of them...⁵¹⁹

Both the cat, floating on its spar, and the baby escape. They escape Celia and Caz, and they escape any attempt at interpretation or use. When Caz and Celia try to rescue the cat, to 'get it in', it tears Caz's hand open, and the spar sails 'far away upon the current'.⁵²⁰ The two sense the consolatory possibilities of this escape. Celia remarks, 'it does not wish to be rescued'.⁵²¹ The two then clap and dance, celebrating this freedom.

It would be easy to read this performance of exuberance as a celebration of strictures escaped: the confining proverb as wiped away or subverted. The novel does detail a resistance of the Biblical proverb's command to act, in the characters' unproductive

⁵¹⁹ Smith, *Holiday*, 171.

⁵²⁰ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁵²¹ *Ibid.*, 170.

dancing. Yet Smith's use of the Biblical proverb is not subversive, partly because granting the proverb its own different use-value fulfils its demands by another road, but more because she does not deploy anything which was not clearly already available for attention in the proverb. She simply hinges her usage on the arresting central image – which is already fundamental to how fairytale and proverb work and survive – rather than the moral lesson the Biblical framing demands that we glean from it. If we witness an escape from the proverb, it is an escape which occurs within the proverb space and according to its own poetic rules. The lion in the street persists: Smith simply recasts it. Instead of a moral guiding us towards action, it becomes a symbol of suspended action: the product of fear, bewilderment and self-distrust. What Smith's shifted focus enables, in fact, is a contemplation of the experience of possessing knowledge which one does not know how to use: didactic meaning, embedded metaphorically, which she overlooks in favour of the compelling surface image.

Three and Four

Returning to Smith's selections of proverbs in *The Batsford Book*, it is clear that this sense of problematised or unusable knowledge is intrinsic to the Book of Proverbs, rather than a subversion of it. We are called on to find an interpretative path through conflicting sets of information.

There be three *things which* are too wonderful for me, yea, four which I know not:
The way of an eagle in the air; the way of a serpent upon a rock; the way of a ship in the midst of the sea; and the way of a man with a maid.⁵²² [Proverbs 30:18-19]

⁵²² Smith, *Batsford Book*, 31.

The list format promises knowledge which, as Roth argues, is clearly delineated and hierarchised.⁵²³ However, it delivers no neat model of clearly usable knowledge. The reader's overt challenge is to discover what connects the movement of an eagle, a serpent and a ship, and a man's treatment of a maid: any answer can only be provisional.⁵²⁴ Even more perplexing, however, is the intellectual dilemma implicit in this proverb's numerical slippage. An announcement of three things is quickly replaced by an announcement, and listing, of four: 'There be three *things*...yea, four which I know not'.⁵²⁵ The distinction between three and four is significant, and yet the proverb carries us rhetorically across this split, with the indifference to strangeness which Lüthi sees as characteristic of fairytale.⁵²⁶ We are not allowed to perceive a difference between three and four.

The technique is not unique to Proverbs. "Graded numerical sayings" recur, as Roth notes, across books including Psalms, Amos, Job and the apocrypha.⁵²⁷ Smith's quoted sentence, however, most closely mirrors other structures in Proverbs 30:

There are three things that are never satisfied, yea, four things say not, It is enough...[Proverbs 30:15]

⁵²³ Roth, *Numerical Sayings in the Old Testament*, 100.

⁵²⁴ For a summary of possible connections between these items, see Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10-31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 870-1.

⁵²⁵ For arguments that the Biblical three and four signify vague quantities rather than precise numbers, see Fox, *Proverbs 10-31: A New Translation*, 863; and W. O. E. Oesterley, *The Book of Proverbs: With Introduction and Notes* (London: Methuen, 1929), 272). However, Smith would have encountered the graded numerical proverb in a particular, minimally-glossed translation (King James): she would have taken it 'whole', with form emphasised over content.

⁵²⁶ Lüthi, *The European Folktale*, 6.

⁵²⁷ Wolfgang M. W. Roth, 'The Numerical Sequence $x/x + 1$ in the Old Testament,' *Vetus Testamentum* 12 (1962): 302-3.

For three things the earth is disquieted, and for four which it cannot bear...
[Proverbs 30:21]

These proverbs navigate the experience and fear of unnecessary excess: the earth which crumbles under the weight, the things which should (but do not) cry out 'It is enough'.⁵²⁸ Their use of three and four lines up with this focus: D. H. Lawrence's interpretation of the Book of Revelation, *Apocalypse* (1931), presents three as the number of the divine (the Trinity) and four as the number of creation (the four-cornered Earth).⁵²⁹ Both are motifs of wholeness and perfection: of boundaries precisely defined and inhabited.

So in this proverb, the perfect is established (three), and then compromised (four). Excess is added. And yet, crucially, this extra addition is accommodated. Four replaces three without acknowledgement; a new model of perfection seamlessly replaces the old. The reader's capacity to register and protest against the overflow (to cry out, perhaps, 'It is enough') is sabotaged. These proverbs showcase the process in which perfection is compromised by excess, *and yet* in which that experience of overflow is contained. Boundaries are breached and redefined in a single gesture. They lose their power to exclude: to identify and declare what is unnecessary.

⁵²⁸This is not universal across graded numerical sayings in the Bible, but it is common: the graded numerical sayings in Amos suggest the magnitude of the punishment which will be visited for transgressions. However, this negotiation with excess witnessed in the quotations above is particularly appropriate to Proverbs: one feeds enemies who have not deserved it, one withdraws from the houses of one's friends. Enemies are given more than they have deserved, and friends are granted less than they have earned.

⁵²⁹D. H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1931), 104. Stevie Smith read *Apocalypse* early in her career; she transcribes a passage (8) into her reading journals (Series 5, Box 1, Folder 6, Stevie Smith papers, University of Tulsa), and incorporates the same text, modified, into *Novel on Yellow Paper* (172).

The publication history of *The Holiday* reinforced just such a poker-faced elision of temporal boundaries, and explores the experience of that elision. Delays meant that though the novel was written during the Second World War, it was not published until 1949. Undaunted, Smith simply changed all instances of ‘war’ in the manuscript to ‘post-war’ without acknowledgement.⁵³⁰ Like the graded numerical proverb, in which an already-complete three tips over into an impossibly equally-perfect four, this is a text which exceeds its own temporal borderlines; which is positioned, in a sense, after itself. This dynamic, and the phenomenon described in the proverb above, underpins Celia’s repeated cry in the novel: ‘Now it is over, now it will soon be over’.⁵³¹ The borders crumble between past and future; the perfected is collapsed into the contingent. Proverbs, as Celia points out, are best known for telling their listeners to tread a line which holds short of excess: ‘Don’t waste time talking to fools, don’t chatter, don’t go after strange women’.⁵³² They reject superfluity, presenting themselves (ready-known, ready-formulated wisdom) as all that is needed.

Selected and deployed by Smith, the proverbial mode preaches a frugality – of thought, of engagement, of behaviour – which does not bear out into moral action. In the vegetable garden, Celia confesses to Heber that she could be the third wife but not the ‘one wife’. She needs a contingent position, one from which she can always extract herself or avoid the spotlight of scrutiny and intimacy. The remark echoes Smith’s own comment to Kay Dick, that she loved life precisely because she always kept herself ‘on

⁵³⁰ Stevie Smith, TS of *The Holiday*, Series 2, Box 2, Folders 15-17, Stevie Smith papers, University of Tulsa.

⁵³¹ Smith, *Holiday*, 35, 118.

⁵³² *Ibid.*, 142.

the edge'.⁵³³ One remains poised on the margins, ready to leave before friendship or love can warp into resentment; before one has had enough.

The Holiday ends, in fact, on a departure. The characters have been fighting and crying throughout, but suddenly decide to lie down and sleep:

When Caz came back we spread the blankets on the hearthrug and lay down together.
God bless you, Celia, said our uncle, and you too Caz, and my son Tom, God bless him.
God bless us all, sir, said Caz, and took my hand in his.
Amen, I said, and fell asleep.⁵³⁴

Exchanging affectionate platitudes, the characters go to sleep abruptly, like good children, with nothing solved or answered. Pious set-phrases lull the characters to sleep. What saves this ending from easy obeisance to the proverbial mode is the fact that Smith's proverbial world, as we have discussed, hinges not on the contemptible laziness of sluggards but on lions in the street; not on the possibility of moral action, but on the crisis-point in which the paralysing absurdity of action, the failure of vivid apprehension to have a real-world impact, bears in upon one. In refraining from action, the characters enter a proverbial space of reticence, uniting into a collective where surprise becomes impossible. Prudently refraining from excess, withdrawing from the situation, the characters are in fact obedient to the proverbial – albeit a particularly Smithian version.

Proverb, for Smith, is valuable only via a fairytale reading. The fairytale both is and is not its proverbial moral; its images survive independent of any moral content. What

⁵³³ Kay Dick, *Ivy and Stevie* (London: Allison & Busby, 1983), 70.

⁵³⁴ Smith, *Holiday*, 202.

remains in the ending to *The Holiday* is a tableau of submission to the proverbial, an aestheticised response which play-acts at obedience. Celia protested to Heber that the proverb is ‘not the whole of wisdom, it is not, only a part.’ Proverbs enjoin us to be obedient, call us to act appropriately. But when Smith uses the proverb, she sabotages that tendency, by refusing to attend to the part of it which we expect. Its moral message remains in peripheral vision: haunting the foregrounded image, but restrained from coming fully into view and, more importantly, use.

For Smith’s proverbs, that moral message is a false promise: a kind of depth which is palpable but unnecessary, a red herring beside the paramount image. Her use of the proverb strips it of power. She does not use proverb ‘appropriately’, according to the demands of the social. In her hands, it becomes a too-literal form, stickling to letter rather than spirit; it adheres to its own imagery too closely to be a successful call for appropriate conduct. And in this shift in focus, she interrogates, as the next chapter will suggest, what it means to be, and to behave in ways that are, appropriate.

Chapter Five: Captions and the ‘Appropriate’

On 4 January 1955, Mervyn Horder wrote to Stevie Smith, regretfully declining to publish her poems. He had another suggestion, however: ‘I don’t see why you can’t fit some of those drawings with little captions and send them in to Punch’.⁵³⁵ Three years later, Smith did ‘fit’ some of her drawings with ‘little captions’ for publication. Frances Spalding describes how, invited to compile a collection of her drawings, Smith spent a day selecting and arranging pictures and writing captions, ‘[laughing] a great deal as she did so.’⁵³⁶ The Gabberbochus Press published the result as *Some Are More Human Than Others* (1958).

Smith’s archives show that preparing the book took much longer than Spalding’s account suggests. Far from being tossed off in a day, the texts went through several drafts: more drafts, in fact, than many of her poems seem to have received. Smith, we know, loved the one-liner, the compactly witty or enigmatic sentence. Her archive contains at least three lists entitled ‘Beyond Words’, composed entirely of one- or two-line mini-texts.⁵³⁷ The one-liners cross over between lists, changing slightly in the process, drafted and redrafted. ‘Beyond Words’, and the care its mini-texts receive, demonstrates Smith’s pleasure, as I have argued, in the punchy aphoristic unit.

And these lists certainly served, even if they were not designed, as preliminary work for *Some Are More Human Than Others*. Smith eventually selected a great many of these

⁵³⁵ Mervyn Horder to Stevie Smith, Series 1, Box 3, Folder 2, Stevie Smith papers, 1924-1970. Coll. No. 1976.012. McFarlin Library. Department of Special Collections and University Archives. The University of Tulsa.

⁵³⁶ Frances Spalding, *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 227.

⁵³⁷ Stevie Smith, ‘Beyond Words,’ Series 2, Box 1, Folder 7, Stevie Smith papers, University of Tulsa.

lines, and married them to meticulously-selected drawings. In the process, the self-contained aphoristic line shifts identity slightly: it becomes a caption. Captions are never wholly independent of the texts they occupy. Whereas the aphorism trades on its self-sufficient air of absolute truth, a caption depends for its success on context: its relationship to the image it accompanies. The funny captioned picture stands or falls on that interaction between text and image: the question of whether they are socially suited, appropriate to each other.

Presented in isolation, on a page, the aphorism creates its own imagined context in which it might be quipped or retorted; existing only *in potentia*, its wit is maximised. Put to practical use, however, quoted or thrown off in response to a social situation, the aphorism's worth depends entirely on its appropriateness to the situation which called it forth. The captioned drawing represents just such a social environment: the aphorism in practice, applied to a context. What we witness in the captioned drawing, therefore, is the aphorism under social trial. The image itself is the situation; the caption is the quipped aphorism, framing what has happened and casting it into humour. Or perhaps, if the caption-aphorism is not appropriate enough, failing to do so, and falling flat.

This chapter investigates Smith's aphorisms as they socialise with images in the role of captions. Coming through a wider tradition of captioned images which revolve around social behaviour – where the caption either instructs the reader in how to behave properly, or pretends to gloss over improper behaviour which is still clearly visible in the image – Smith's captioned pictures feel out the potential on both sides of this social spectrum. Either Smith's captions seem not to match at all, or, more often, they match

too exactly. They are too appropriate. And in this they are inappropriate, because our reading strategies fail: we laugh because we are confused, not charmed, unsure of how to react. When caption and picture fit exactly, both vanish from view: they resist reading and critical intervention. Where Stevie Smith's caption-drawing dyads are particularly difficult and compelling, I argue, is where they sabotage the rules of their social intercourse.

Smith's Drawings

Stevie Smith's texts are in constant dialogue with the appropriate: appropriate behaviour, appropriate rhymes and language, the questions of propriety which circle the institution of small talk. Often she satirises social platitudes, the gestures designed to smooth over horrors and neuroses and maintain harmony at any cost. 'Everything is Swimming' and 'The Persian', for instance, skewer gossipy, judgemental voices which undermine vulnerable women:

She said everything was swimming in a wonderful wisdom
Silly ass
What a silly woman
Perhaps she is drunk...⁵³⁸

Now Agnes, pull yourself together.
You and your friends. ('The Persian', CP, 499)

At other times, however, Smith's relationship to propriety and the 'appropriate' is less clearly subversive. 'Dear Little Sirmio' sees Smith translate Catullus with a chatty

⁵³⁸ Stevie Smith, *The Collected Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith*, ed. Will May (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), 498. All further references to this edition are indicated parenthetically in the text, with *Collected Poems* abbreviated to CP.

society diction: ‘Dear little Sirmio / Of all capes and islands / Wherever Neptune rides the coastal waters and the open sea / You really are the nicest’ (CP, 400). ‘The nicest’: Smith keeps up this warm prattling tone so perfectly, without a moment of cessation, that she does not quite allow the poem’s satirical point to sharpen. Ultimately, Sirmio’s socially-appropriate praise stands as valid.

Adding her often-jarring images into the mix compounds these questions of the appropriate. Smith’s drawings, published alongside her poems at her insistence, have attracted substantial critical work. Jack Barbera notes that the drawings were mobile: Smith would find drawings to illustrate the poems after she had collected enough to make a book. Equally, though, asked to illustrate ‘The Celts’ by *Punch*, she did fifty drawings and invited the editors to choose which they liked best.⁵³⁹ Barbera remarks, moreover, that she revised the placement of her poems,⁵⁴⁰ even though we know she thought of the poems and drawings as units because she often described accompanying drawings in the performance introductions to the poems.⁵⁴¹ Despite their mobility, Kristen Marangoni reminds us that Smith did not view the drawings as optional or frivolous. Even when in financial straits, she would not publish her poems without the drawings.⁵⁴²

Smith’s sense of responsibility towards the drawings, refusing to exclude them from their partnerships with the poems, echoes W. S. Gilbert’s approach in his ‘Bab’ Ballads.

⁵³⁹ Jack Barbera, ‘The Relevance of Stevie Smith’s Drawings,’ *Journal of Modern Languages* 12 (1985): 223.

⁵⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁵⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 224.

⁵⁴² Kristen Marangoni, ‘“Not Waving”: Miscommunication between Stevie Smith’s Poems and Drawings,’ in *Picturing the Language of Images*, ed. Nancy Pedri and Laurence Petit (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 164.

In the preface to the fifth edition, he explained his decision to include illustrations alongside the poems:

I have ventured to publish the illustrations with them because, while they are certainly quite as bad as the Ballads, I suppose they are not much worse. If, therefore, the Ballads are worthy of publication in a collected form, the little pictures would have a right to complain if they were omitted.⁵⁴³

Pictures and text become a social milieu in absurd miniature: if the texts are invited to the publication party, the pictures will expect to be invited too, and it will be a faux pas, Gilbert signals, to omit them from the gathering.⁵⁴⁴ Gilbert's language positions ballads and illustrations as matching or equivalent: they are 'quite as bad' as each other, birds of a feather which therefore flock together. So he underlines the intrinsic social relationship between his texts and his images in order to appease his readers, who do tend to expect a clear connection between the words and the pictures in a book. For the same reason, studies of Smith's art have focused primarily on how (or whether) the doodles accompanying the poems in her published volumes illustrate or illuminate the poems. Marsha Bryant describes convincingly how Smith's *mise-en-page* echoes that of children's illustrators like Edward Ardizzone, and that her placement of drawings in corners and alongside poems encourages us to read them, wisely or otherwise, as illustrations.⁵⁴⁵ Nevertheless, Laura Severin finds that the poems and drawings are most often 'decidedly out of sync'.⁵⁴⁶ She positions Smith's art as 'emblematic', mysterious

⁵⁴³ W. S. Gilbert, 'Preface,' in *The Bab Ballads: Much Sound and Little Sense*, 5th ed. (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1898), vii.

⁵⁴⁴ On etiquette's role in regulating the 'frequent, parodistic violence' of the 'Bab' Ballads into laughter, see Jane W. Stedman, *W. S. Gilbert: A Classic Victorian and his Theatre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 26.

⁵⁴⁵ Marsha Bryant, *Women's Poetry and Popular Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 68.

⁵⁴⁶ Laura Severin, *Stevie Smith's Resistant Antics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 51.

and resisting recognition.⁵⁴⁷ Severin also sees the awkwardness of Smith's drawings as contrasting with the polished, romantic depictions of femininity in women's magazines.⁵⁴⁸ Kristen Marangoni wisely suggests that we move away from seeing the doodles as 'illustrations' as they frequently do not illustrate (i.e. clarify or prove) her texts.⁵⁴⁹ Through a close reading of 'Not Waving But Drowning', she suggests that the deliberate confusion surrounding the mismatching picture underlines the poem's point about failed communication.⁵⁵⁰ 'Her best communication', Marangoni proposes, '[perhaps] arises through her purposeful incongruities'.⁵⁵¹

Unsurprisingly, then, destabilisation and subversion arise as common critical tropes in studies of Smith's art. Kristin Bluemel argues that Smith uses drawings deliberately to disrupt gendered perspectives.⁵⁵² Will May argues similarly for intentionality, suggesting that Smith's famously-disjunctive illustration to 'Not Waving But Drowning', of a smiling woman, waist-deep in the sea, was part of a deliberate attempt to resist definitive readings.⁵⁵³ Steward focuses on the disruptive aspect of Smith's drawings, suggesting that her 'defiant' figures help Smith punctuate her difference from her predecessors.⁵⁵⁴ Her readings of 'The Castle' and 'All Things Pass' suggest that the drawings add a potential new dimension to the poems. The female figure in the

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid., 50.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid., 53.

⁵⁴⁹ Marangoni, 'Not Waving,' 164.

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid., 168.

⁵⁵¹ Ibid., 173.

⁵⁵² Kristin Bluemel, 'The dangers of eccentricity: Stevie Smith's doodles and poetry,' *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 31, no. 3 (1998): 113.

⁵⁵³ Will May, 'Verbal and visual art in twentieth-century British women's poetry,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century British and Irish Women's Poetry*, ed. Jane Dowson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 49-51.

⁵⁵⁴ Julie Sims Steward, 'Pandora's Playbox: Stevie Smith and the Construction of Gender,' *South Central Review* 15, no. 2 (1998): 76.

illustration to 'The Castle' is camouflaged from domesticity by nature;⁵⁵⁵ the claustrophobic picture accompanying 'All Things Pass', where figures embrace in a lavishly, fussily furnished room, suggests that love's transitoriness may be unexpectedly welcome.⁵⁵⁶ Romana Huk reinforces this idea, suggesting that they represent a 'mute or alternative view struggling into expression'.⁵⁵⁷ Like Huk, who finds that Smith's sketches do not clarify but destabilise,⁵⁵⁸ Jack Barbera notes the capacity of the poem-drawing juxtapositions to generate 'a possible irony',⁵⁵⁹ arguing that decorating her text was a 'subversive act' in a context, post-T. S. Eliot, where good poetry was thought to be impersonal.⁵⁶⁰

More recently, James Najarian centres his argument on this critical sense of Smith as a deployer of masks or blinds. He sees Smith's seemingly-innocent doodles as a way of concealing her 'romantic assertions of poetic authority'; he suggests that their apparent insignificance or frivolity acts as a blind to hide the grand gestures she is making.⁵⁶¹ Linda Anderson emphasises the energy of Smith's drawings. She remarks that they suggest a continuity between literature and the playfulness of doodling, the 'desire to inscribe rudimentary or unintegrated energy or meaning in a transitional space'.⁵⁶² The sense here is of loosening boundaries, making discrete units into a continuity with mutual flow. Richard Nemesvari's essay echoes this idea through a comparison with

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid., 82.

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid., 84.

⁵⁵⁷ Romana Huk, *Stevie Smith: Between the Lines* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 19.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid., 20.

⁵⁵⁹ Barbera, 'The Relevance of Stevie Smith's Drawings,' 229.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid., 236.

⁵⁶¹ James Najarian, 'Contributions to Almighty Truth: Stevie Smith's Seditious Romanticism,' *Twentieth Century Literature* 49, no. 4 (2003): 472.

⁵⁶² Linda Anderson, 'Gender, feminism, poetry: Stevie Smith, Sylvia Plath, Jo Shapcott,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry*, ed. Neil Corcoran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 173.

Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, suggesting that by using two different forms of discourse (forms which are mutually antagonistic), Smith demonstrates that meaning is generated only through difference and discontinuity.⁵⁶³

Given that Smith's pictures often led to comparisons with Edward Lear, Will May interrogates the relationship between the artists. He finds that some of Smith's particularly arresting images bear close resemblance to Lear's style,⁵⁶⁴ observing the matching parasols of Lear's *Young Lady of Ryde* and Smith's refined *Englishwoman*.⁵⁶⁵ May argues that Smith sat uneasily in this association with Lear, and that the illustrative capacity of her poems altered across her career. Though her illustrations in *A Good Time Was Had By All* uncomplicatedly reflect their poems, he argues, by *Not Waving But Drowning* the pictures became 'designed to second-guess and query our response.'⁵⁶⁶

Work on Smith's drawings, then, has centred primarily on their uneasy correspondence with the poems that they illustrate, very often seeing the disjunction as subversive. Additionally, critics have shown some interest in the resulting energy or generation of unpredictable meaning. Both approaches still originate from the assumption that readers will view the images as illustrations: when an image accompanies a longer text, its reader tends to try to match up elements of the text and elements of the image. From that angle, Smith's images come to be seen as mischievous or unruly illustrations, or

⁵⁶³ Richard Nemesvari, 'Work It Out For Yourself: Language and Fictional Form in Stevie Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper*,' *Dalhousie Review* 71, no. 1 (1991): 27.

⁵⁶⁴ Will May, 'Drawing Away from Lear: Stevie Smith's Deceitful Echo,' in *Edward Lear and the Play of Poetry*, ed. Matthew Bevis and James Williams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 329.

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 331.

⁵⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 332.

illustrations which turn out (eventually) not to be illustrations. They claim a certain decorum through their posited genre as illustrations, which back up the text, underlining its achievement, but are all the while quietly undoing the work which the text has done.

What critics have not yet discussed extensively, however, are Smith's captions. Smith created and enjoyed captions within her published work (aside from her caption-books, *The Frog Prince* (1966) contains three drawings with captions) as well as beyond it, such as the captioned picture (discussed in the Introduction) which she stuck into Hamish Miles's copy of *A Good Time Was Had By All*. In a 1961 interview with Peter Orr, she describes her pleasure in writing what she calls 'underline[s]' for pictures. A drawing of a child with 'a terrible look on its face', for instance, 'does not have a poem. I just wrote as an underline for it: 'Eighteen months old and already odious''.⁵⁶⁷

In these instances, pictures come first and suggest poems, or perhaps just captions. In a letter to Helen Fowler, Smith laments the tendency of the drawings to outstrip her writing: 'I love drawing and am nearly off my head with all the new drawings and nothing to put to them.'⁵⁶⁸ Smith, as matchmaker between drawing and text, pretends to be driven to distraction by a proliferation of lonely singletons calling out for partners. We know, however, that the relationship of her images to captions was sometimes reversed. Spalding describes how, in January 1942, Smith wrote to Hayward asking for his opinion on a list of one-liners to accompany illustrations not yet drawn. These included 'my left arm turned blue', 'I dreamed I was dressed in cellophane; was I to

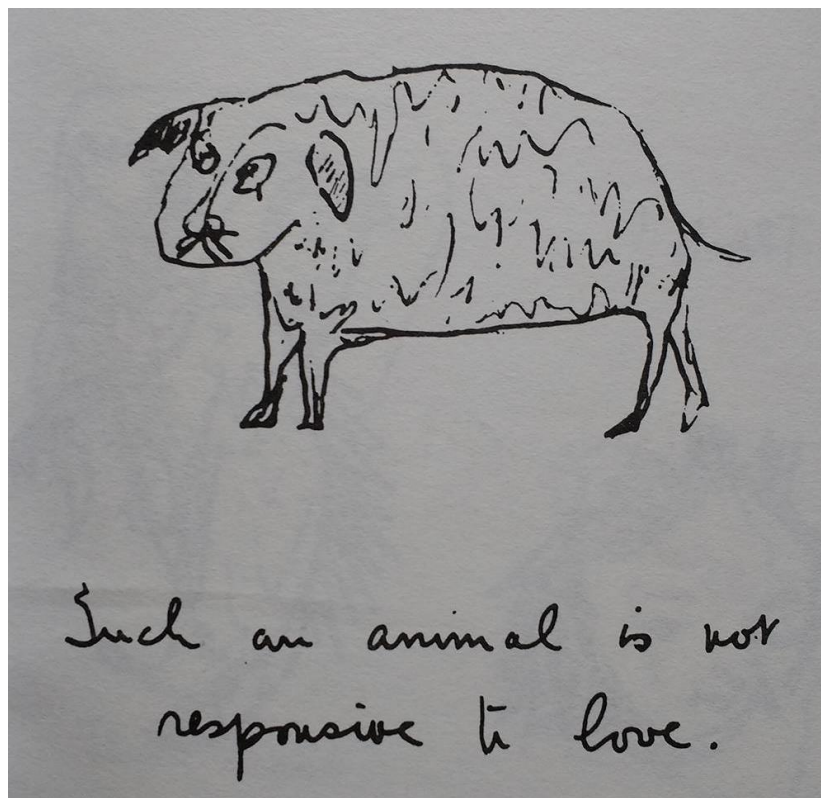
⁵⁶⁷ Peter Orr, 'Stevie Smith,' in *In Search of Stevie Smith*, ed. Sanford Sternlicht (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 36.

⁵⁶⁸ Letter to Helen Fowler, May 30, 1952, Series 1, Box 3, Folder 7, Stevie Smith papers, University of Tulsa.

blame?’ ‘Think it Over’ and ‘From the maniac life of Blessed Mary Agatha’.⁵⁶⁹ Smith’s approach suggests that her captions are aphoristically detachable.

Appropriately Inappropriate

In *Some Are More Human Than Others*, however, Smith finds one-liner partners for many of her images. She adds humorous or enigmatic captions to her pen-and-ink sketches of dogs, cats, bulls and humans. A fat, cross-eyed canine, for instance, is captioned ‘Such an animal is not responsive to love’.⁵⁷⁰



Stevie Smith, *Some Are More Human Than Others* (London: Peter Owen, 1990), n. pag.

⁵⁶⁹ Spalding, 161.

⁵⁷⁰ Stevie Smith, *Some Are More Human Than Others* (London: Peter Owen, 1990), n. pag.

This caption turns on ideas of the appropriate. In its stern put-down, we sense a bid for control over what constitutes acceptable behaviour: the dog is given a disciplinary frame by the brief line. The dog is scolded for not being ‘responsive’, for not returning love obligingly for the love offered to him. In her introduction to *Cats in Colour* (1959), her second caption-book which appended remarks to photographs of prize-winning cats, Smith underlines our love-demands as a vital reason why we choose to caption animals:

How nice...to turn to the indifferent cat who can be made to mean so many things – and think them – being as it were a blank page on which to scrawl the hieroglyphics of our own grievance, bad temper and unhappiness, and scrawl also, of course, the desired sweet responses to these uncomfortable feelings.⁵⁷¹

Here, captions are part of an economy of love and emotion. Images of cats are inscrutable: the captioner can project their own emotions on to the animals, and experience them returned in a sweeter, more manageable form. In the case of the dog, however, he is perceived as disrupting this call and response. He is not, we infer, behaving appropriately.

The caption, then, performs a parodic bid to make this animal appropriate. If, in *Cats in Colour*, it reframes ‘uncomfortable’ or inappropriate emotions into something ‘sweet’, here we sense a sterner act of dialing-down, of controlling. The speaker’s repressive language puts the dog firmly in his place: it reframes a not-very-objectionable-looking animal to foreground one particular viewpoint. As readers, we laugh at that severity, but laughter, as Henri Bergson knew, is itself a disciplinary act, shaming its subjects into

⁵⁷¹ Stevie Smith, *Cats in Colour* (London: Batsford, 1959), 11.

restraining their eccentricity and behaving in socially appropriate ways.⁵⁷² Both captioner and reader are enmeshed in a pattern of interpretative and social control, a reinscribing of the ‘appropriate’.

Ideas of the ‘appropriate’ haunt reviews of captioned books at this time. Praise of *Cats in Colour* in a *Times Literary Supplement* review describes Smith’s captions as ‘appropriate remarks’.⁵⁷³ John Betjeman’s review of *Some Are More Human Than Others* discusses a number of illustrated, captioned albums as well as Smith’s; one, he finds, has ‘careful old-fashioned drawings’, another has ‘singularly appropriate and meticulous drawings’⁵⁷⁴. It is striking that the captioned cartoon, a genre associated with humour – often, with the slapstick or surreal – should be praised in these finicky terms of the ‘careful’ and ‘appropriate’. Another reviewer in the *Spectator* noted, in the same vein, that *Some Are More Human Than Others* was ‘fastidiously presented’.⁵⁷⁵ This is approving establishment language, used to praise a genre which often seems subversive.

From this perspective, Horder’s advice to Smith to ‘fit some of those drawings with little captions’ participates in the same trope of disciplinary management. Horder’s language implies a scaling-down, from full-length poems to ‘little captions’. The idea of captions which ‘fit’ the drawings, slotting neatly and tidily in, bolsters this sense of the ‘fitting’, the appropriate or correct thing to say.

⁵⁷² Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (London: Macmillan, 1911), 20.

⁵⁷³ ‘Cats,’ *Times Literary Supplement*, September 18, 1959.

⁵⁷⁴ John Betjeman, ‘Something Funny,’ *Daily Telegraph and Morning Post*, December 12, 1958.

⁵⁷⁵ ‘Picture Books,’ *Spectator*, November 21, 1958.

Smith published both *Some Are More Human Than Others* and *Cats in Colour* at a time when these social norms of the caption-cartoon were well-defined: towards the end of the heyday of magazine cartooning.⁵⁷⁶ The *Esquire Cartoon Album*, published in the same year as *Some Are More Human Than Others* and also reviewed by Betjeman, notes as a point of pride that its captions use as little text as possible.⁵⁷⁷ Humour and value, it is suggested, issue from brevity: a frugal, snappy understanding of when to stop and let the picture speak instead. This strategy deliberately maximises the interplay between words and pictures. Starved of textual information – given only a contained nugget of a captioning phrase or sentence – the reader scours the picture for details which would fill in the gaps and help them decode the ‘message’ of the piece.

We are trained, therefore, to treat the contemporary caption as a route, a treasure-map, into the picture. In comics like these, we might see, in the terms of Robert C. Harvey’s essay on the caption-cartoon, that in the best examples of the genre, words and pictures blend to achieve a meaning; neither achieves it without the other.⁵⁷⁸ Charles Hatfield sees comic art as characterised by tension between word and image:⁵⁷⁹ our different associations with words and images cause us to see them as different kinds of signs, whose implications can be played against each other. They may gloss or illustrate; they may complicate or ironize. Comics work to complicate the distinction between words and images, but we keep seeing them as separate: this is where the tension lies.⁵⁸⁰

Roland Barthes suggests in ‘The Photographic Message’ that ‘the text loads the image,

⁵⁷⁶ Robert C. Harvey locates this ‘golden age’ from the mid-1930s to the 1960s. Robert C. Harvey, ‘How Comics Came to Be,’ in *A Comics Studies Reader*, ed. Jeer Heer and Kent Worcester (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 34.

⁵⁷⁷ Arnold Gingrich, introduction to *The Esquire Cartoon Book* (London: Heinemann, 1958), n. pag.

⁵⁷⁸ Harvey, 25.

⁵⁷⁹ Charles Hatfield, ‘An Art of Tensions,’ in Heer and Worcester, *A Comics Studies Reader*, 132.

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 133.

burdening it with a culture, a moral, an imagination.’⁵⁸¹ It assigns an interpretative scheme, demands that the reader view it on a certain level of understanding: ‘the text directs the reader through the signifieds of the image, causing him to avoid some and receive others’ (‘Rhetoric of the Image’).⁵⁸² Norman Bryson describes how we rely on captions and titles as ‘a handle on an image’, seeking interpretative instruction from them.⁵⁸³ As David Novitz finds, titles tell an audience what to look for in a picture, and direct their gaze to certain of its visual attributes.⁵⁸⁴ Ruth Bernard Yeazell describes how the title of a painting is our first key to interpreting; it typically stands alone, unlike the title of a poem, which is followed by other words.⁵⁸⁵

These approaches to the interaction between text and image all find that, in one way or another, the brief caption prescribes our reading framework. There is much in the picture, therefore, that we do not see: that we are headed off from seeing. Smith plays, in *Some Are More Human Than Others* and *Cats in Colour*, with the capacity of the caption to steer the interpretative encounter. A kitten with its eyes shut is cast as a pompous snob:

‘I think this tabby cat is a Perfectly Common Thing. So I shall shut my eyes. Do you like my white waistcoat? I give a good deal of thought to it.’⁵⁸⁶

⁵⁸¹ Roland Barthes, ‘The Photographic Message,’ in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 26.

⁵⁸² Roland Barthes, ‘Rhetoric of the Image,’ in *Image Music Text*, 40.

⁵⁸³ Norman Bryson, *Word and Image: French painting of the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 5.

⁵⁸⁴ David Novitz, *Pictures and their Use in Communication: A Philosophical Essay* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977), 49.

⁵⁸⁵ Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *How and Why Western Paintings Acquired Their Names* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015), 81, 9.

⁵⁸⁶ Smith, *Cats in Colour*, 46.

We are encouraged to see, and therefore read, the cats in a particular way: to reframe a white kitten tummy as central to the point of the picture, as a pernickety point of pride. The kitten ignores the tabby and foregrounds his waistcoat; in doing so, he mirrors the work of the caption, which guides us through the social situation represented by our encounter with the image.

Smith's caption in *Cats in Colour* plays with the two sides of etiquette that we see acted out between her kittens in the caption above: the rules about what not to notice, and what to acknowledge, which underpin socially tactful behaviour. During the time that Smith worked for Pearson's, the publisher produced numerous magazines and books which issued specific, strict instructions to women about how they ought to behave. *Etiquette for Women* (1928) lays down clear rules about who to notice and whom not to notice:

Greet your hostess before you pay any attention to anybody else, and then your host.

[when leaving a party] there is no need to shake hands with any of the guests, or to give more than a bow and smile to those nearest you.⁵⁸⁷

Refrain...from rushing across the lobby to greet your host when he does arrive.

...never linger at your escort's elbow while he settles a bill, takes theatre tickets, and so on.⁵⁸⁸

⁵⁸⁷ Irene Davison, *Etiquette for Women: A Book of Modern Manners and Customs* (London: C. Arthur Pearson Ltd, 1928), 46-8.

⁵⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 73.

According to this how-to guide, success can be achieved by attention to what is necessary, and studious inattention to what must be ignored. Like the caption-cartoon, a social situation can thus be navigated quickly and efficiently.

This association of the caption with the etiquette guide was more than metaphorical. French maxims, such as La Rochefoucauld's, offered (or seemed to offer) striking and concise guides to moral and social behaviour:

The glory of great men should always be measured against the means they used to acquire it.

...

It is not enough to have great merits; you must also know how to employ them.⁵⁸⁹

If one were to add an image to these epigrammatic guides to correct behaviour, they would become – startlingly – caption-cartoons. While Smith was working for Pearson's, their magazine *Home Notes* included a series called 'How To Be Happy', offering slangy but earnest advice on how to behave in various situations, and accompanied with captioned cartoons which illustrated particular points in the article. The installment in the issue of July 12 1930 focused on how to behave 'when you're in love'. A cartoon of a crying woman and a grave-looking man is captioned 'Don't quarrel just for the niceness of making up – or you'll do it once too often!' A caption to a cartoon of a man looking at his watch, as a woman hurries towards him, tuts, 'She's always late for appointments and makes neither excuse nor apology...'⁵⁹⁰ The caption-cartoon, in the

⁵⁸⁹François de la Rochefoucauld, *Collected Maxims and Other Reflections*, trans. E. H. and A. M. Blackmore and Francine Giguère (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 45.

⁵⁹⁰'How to Be Happy,' *Home Notes*, July 12, 1930.

magazines published by Smith's own employer, becomes a cautionary tale about the consequences of slack etiquette.

This capacity in the caption to steer appropriate behaviour lay wide open to satire. Dorothy Parker, a fan of La Rochefoucauld's combination of pithy observation and wryness, collaborated with George Chappell and Frank Crownshield to produce a tongue-in-cheek captioning to proper etiquette: *High Society* (1920), a large book of captioned illustrations which claimed to offer 'Advice as to Social Campaigning and Hints on the Management of Dowagers, Dinners, Debutantes, Dances...' Parker's book offers a satirical shorthand to allow (she promises, straight-faced) her readers to navigate through the social minefield of high society: once they can recognise the 'Seven Deadly Temperaments' of women and the 'Six Brands of Week-End Hostesses' (lavishly illustrated, with pointed captions), readers can respond to the exigencies of society not with awe but with cynical knowingness.⁵⁹¹

Such an established focus on the caption-cartoon's relationship to social life – its capacity to manage it, to demonstrate the unsound consequences of poor etiquette – underpins Betjeman's review of *Some Are More Human Than Others* and other picture books, which praises texts and images for being 'appropriate' with all the word's weight of social approval and acceptance. He ends by celebrating 'those few, those happy few, where drawing and text are well matched.'⁵⁹² The happy couple of image and caption

⁵⁹¹ Dorothy Parker, George S. Chappell and Frank Crownshield, *High Society: Advice as to Social Campaigning and Hints on the Management of Dowagers, Dinners, Debutantes, Dances, and the Thousand and One Diversions of Persons of Quality* (New York and London: The Knickerbocker Press, 1920), 34, 36.

⁵⁹² Betjeman, 'Something Funny.'

have, after careful consideration, been successfully paired by their friends and benefactors.

Euphemism

For Horder and Betjeman, the comedy which captions offer is not anarchic but social: the right interjection, the remark which the situation demands. We recall that the word ‘etiquette’, etymologically, implies a tag or label.⁵⁹³ This same sense of courtesy animates the labelling caption. Faced with an image of a person or an animal, or a pen-and-ink tableau, the captioner must respond in a way that lifts the mood, that lightens the tension, and allows (to quote the title of Smith’s first poetry collection) a good time to be had by all. This is the territory of the *bon mot*, the witty aphoristic rejoinder. Wilde puts one-liners into his characters’ mouths to allow them to gloss a ridiculous social situation – to annotate it, pointing out its absurdity – and simultaneously to gloss over it, to provoke the laughter which permits the evening to go with a swing. The caption, similarly, is a one-liner elicited in response to visual absurdity – we recall Smith laughing as she wrote captions to her drawings – which both highlights and validates a social idiosyncrasy. It bandies with the appropriate, managing to be socially conservative even as it points out that the emperor has no clothes.

Our cultural and historical expectations of the caption dictate that it “should” be appropriate to the picture in often a clear and well-defined way. Fulfilling that requirement, in fact, demands a big splash of the inappropriate, operating just under the

⁵⁹³ ‘etiquette, n,’ OED Online, June 2017, Oxford University Press, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/64853?redirectedFrom=etiquette> (accessed September 27, 2017)

surface, visible to view but unacknowledged by the caption, which very often glosses over an unruly social situation (in other words, renders it socially appropriate once more). To be ‘appropriate’ or fitting therefore involves being anarchic or unfitting, but only to a particular, culturally legible extent. The captioner must know when to go on – when to push the envelope a little bit further, be a little wilder – and when to stop, before the social moment turns sour. Any more unfitting and the caption becomes inappropriate; it ceases to fit the image it accompanies. We still have expectations of propriety, a certain defined kind of behaviour, from this rebellious art form.

These socially-sanctioned (indeed, demanded) mild transgressions identify, therefore, expectations of the caption-cartoon at this time. Contemporary cartoons both portray social transgressions, and enact them, in the failure of captions to be entirely appropriate to their image. In Sheila Dunn’s 1957 cartoon, the year before *Some Are More Human Than Others* was published, guests have gathered in the living room, where the host suavely observes that his new roof garden ‘was perhaps a mistake.’⁵⁹⁴ A glance up at the image throws the understatement of the remark into relief: the plants’ roots are poking through the ceiling. Juxtaposing a caption with an image allows the artist to reveal the chaos which underlies the pleasantest of society remarks. The cartoon depicts a measured attempt to calibrate a bizarre situation, absurdly, against a known standard of propriety, and smooth the moment over. Yet the image-caption dyad allows the cartoonist to say something without saying it. Bizarre, troubling reality bursts through the smooth surface, like roots poking through the paint: euphemism has managed this trauma, but it is still clearly visible.

⁵⁹⁴ Helen Walasek, *The Best of Punch Cartoons* (London: Prion, 2008), 323.

Captions from the 1950s very often work like this: a social platitude, undercut by the accompanying visual. The dyad works around tact and understatement: more is meant than is said, and we are trusted to pick up on the subtext without being cued. Brockbank's *Manifold Pressures*, about the adventures of a hapless and violent driver, functions through captions which are euphemistic. Brockbank subsumes the appalling road behaviour depicted in the images under text such as 'Courteous to Womankind – and other Road Users – '.⁵⁹⁵ Truth can only be reached, then, when the captioner withdraws (as he quickly does) and the reader is left to 'judge for himself' from the images. This is a model where the caption glosses over and the picture illustrates what is "really" happening or true: the impropriety that flows beneath the flaunting of the proper. In the *Dog's Ear Book*, captions parrot over-fond owners ('He's just like one of the family', 'He understands every word we say') while the pictures reveal the truth about the hostile or uncomprehending hound in question.⁵⁹⁶

The caption therefore exists in two states at once. On one hand, it is an etiquette guide: filtering the picture in front of us, advising us about what aspects it is suitable or acceptable to notice. On the other hand, however, the cartoon caption's functioning depends, on another level, on our ignoring it. For the joke to work, we must allow the picture to cast the caption into doubt. We must invariably take the caption with a pinch of salt: look to the picture for confirmation and, often, complication. By its nature the image exceeds the caption within the caption-cartoon. And this means that the very act of reading a cartoon is socially transgressive: it embodies a performance of disbelief in

⁵⁹⁵ Brockbank, *Manifold Pressures: Motoring Misadventures of Major Upsett* (London: Temple Press, 1958), n. pag.

⁵⁹⁶ Geoffrey Willans and Ronald Searle, *The Dog's Ear Book* (London: Max Parrish, 1958), 37, 82.

the euphemism, the social smoothing-over, which the caption almost always offers up to us. We put the euphemism to one side, and seek for more.

Nevertheless, this misbehaviour by image and by reader represents only a very limited transgression, contained within a socially-accepted dynamic. Even a cartoon where the image vastly exceeds the text can be seen as ‘appropriate’ to it. Revelation is achieved, it elicits a laugh, and the viewer moves on. The result, if a cartoon works well – if it achieves the correct balance of the appropriate and inappropriate – is the reader-response which E. H. Gombrich describes in his work on the caption-cartoon:

most readers, including myself, will let their eyes rest on it for a few seconds, take it in and say to themselves, ‘Clever, that’s how it is’, and turn to the book reviews, the sports reports, or the financial page.⁵⁹⁷

Gombrich’s remarks could equally have been applied to the aphorism: one takes it in, agrees that it is true and clever, and passes on. Both the heavy and profound aphorism, and the lightweight caption of a cartoon, induce the same pattern of behaviour in a reader. The aphorism is a general remark whose suitability to a situation must be thought through; the caption’s interaction with the image should be just opaque enough to demand a small portion of consideration from the reader. Achieved, one mentally moves on.

So both the cartoon caption and the catalogue caption participate in this sense of the ‘appropriate’, a word which is both emphatic and understated. For something to be appropriate, it is barely worth remarking on: you are basically remarking that it needs

⁵⁹⁷ E. H. Gombrich, ‘The Cartoonist’s Armoury,’ in *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and Other Essays on the Theory of Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1963), 131.

no further remark. The appropriate statement assumes the right size for a situation, taking up the right amount of space. The caption – brief, potted, all-summarising – becomes a signal that the viewer has permission to move on, just as, in Wilde’s plays, his charming, witty aphorisms are immediately abandoned as the story continues.

It is in meeting these contemporary expectations so well, ironically, that Frances Spalding considered *Cats in Colour* one of Smith’s weakest productions. She describes the ‘arch chatty captions, inferring human intent from the cat’s look or pose’ in audibly critical terms.⁵⁹⁸ The sense is of meagre scope and attenuated ambition. Here, we are to understand, the captions are throwaway remarks, pointing out a basic, mildly surprising similarity which is amusing but ultimately forgettable. Smith’s language, in framing these images, is filled with false jeopardy and exaggerated concern:

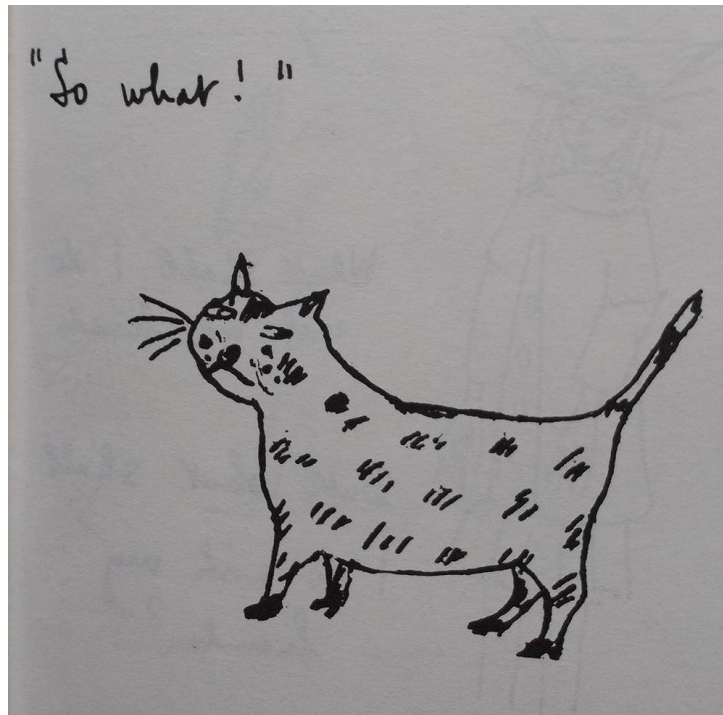
This little deb cat left her key behind and has ‘broken in’ to a very peculiar part of Daddy’s grand house. Shall she try soft smiles on the butler who has come to see what the noise is about? Or promise him a bribe tomorrow? O lord, what shall she do?⁵⁹⁹

The point is of course that there is no social crisis: the cat looks far more anxious than its pampered life should require it to. *Some Are More Human Than Others* offers, often, the same familiar and unchallenging experience. Certain of its captioned-images echo other contemporary books of cartoons. A haughty cat announcing, ‘So what!’, for instance, evokes a number of cartoon-books published in the same year. For instance, Scatty’s drawings of cats literalise their captions, with words like ‘catnap’ acted out by

⁵⁹⁸ Spalding, 251.

⁵⁹⁹ Smith, *Cats in Colour*, 30.

solemn looking cats sitting in human chairs, books unheeded, having a rest.⁶⁰⁰ *Dog's Best Friend* by Lorient illustrates its premise that dogs keep humans rather than vice versa,⁶⁰¹ while *The Dog's Ear Book* presents itself as a deadpan guide to life with dogs, which the pictures undercut and subvert.⁶⁰²



Stevie Smith, *Some Are More Human Than Others* (London: Peter Owen, 1990), n. pag.

Within this broader context, Smith's disdainful cat is amusing but not unusual. The cartoon is appropriate to the rules of its genre, anthropomorphising an animal in a way whose gentle humour is immediately and widely acceptable. Against Smith's tendency to produce disconcerting or misleading images as accompaniments to her poetry, these captioned images seem extremely conventional. There is nothing more to discover, we feel: the joke is immediately visible and instantly digested. We experience the same

⁶⁰⁰ Siné, *Scatty: British Cats, French Cats and Cosmopolitan Cats* (London: Max Reinhardt, 1958), n. pag.

⁶⁰¹ Lorient, *Dog's Best Friend* (London: Hammond Hammond, 1958), n. pag.

⁶⁰² Willans and Searle, *Dog's Ear Book*.

sensation as when, in another of the book's captioned drawings, a cat snuggles confidingly up to a dog. The caption below reads, 'I will tell you everything'. Everything necessary for interpretation has been supplied; the reader can relax into their jaunt through this comedic middlebrow experience.

The Caption's Social Life

Yet it is precisely in these terms of the social that Smith's less digestible captions come into focus. The frequently-made comparison of Smith to James Thurber (1894-1961), who contributed drawings and stories to the *New Yorker* from 1930 to 1950, helps to bring out the fact that Smith's captions are best understood in terms of an exploration of social-textual propriety. A 1970 review of Smith's collection *The Best Beast* noted her 'Thurberish drawings';⁶⁰³ this represents, incidentally, a promotion from John Gross's 1966 assessment of the 'sub-Thurberish drawings which festoon her pages'.⁶⁰⁴ Not only is Smith a version of Thurber, in these assessments, but she is a pale or derivative version: Thurberish or sub-Thurberish. Smith herself resented these comparisons: she thought that Thurber's humour was only 'the blunt fun of the comic picture postcard, slightly upgraded'.⁶⁰⁵

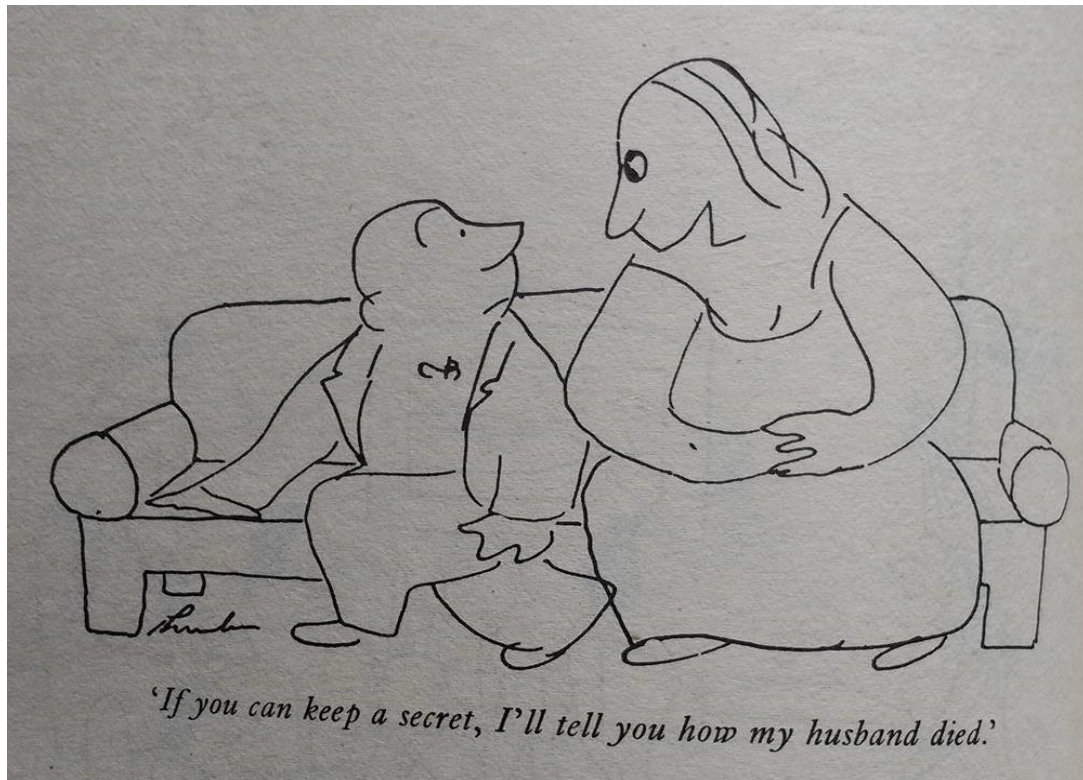
Smith's tart dismissal of Thurber nevertheless highlights his role as a social cartoonist, interested in the comedy of situations. The encounters in his captioned cartoons, usually between timid men and vast, monstrous women, take place in living rooms, bedrooms, pubs and parties. Furniture clearly defines geographical settings, and there are almost

⁶⁰³ Daniel Hoffman, 'Two Cases of Double Vision,' *New York Times Book Review*, December 6, 1970.

⁶⁰⁴ John Gross, 'Ruthless rhymes,' *Observer*, December 11, 1966.

⁶⁰⁵ Stevie Smith, 'Party Views,' *Listener* 77, May 25, 1967.

inevitably two or more figures in play. Here the viewer is voyeur, peering into a social space whose rules they have to deduce (but without much difficulty). In the cartoons, the viewer receives in that moment – from a single captioning line – an unsettling snapshot of these figures’ interaction.



James Thurber, *Vintage Thurber: Volume I* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), 288.

This significance of the social is, in fact, the basis on which Spalding defends Smith against the charge of similarity to Thurber. Not only does ‘the anarchy of her humour [run] deep’ (deeper than Thurber, Spalding argues),⁶⁰⁶ but ‘Where Thurber deals with social comedy and situations...[Smith] pinpoints states of mind.’⁶⁰⁷ And in fact, for every well-located scene by Smith which captures social dynamics (in, for instance, her illustration to ‘The Castle’), there are numerous single figures: awkwardly posed in a

⁶⁰⁶ Spalding, 167.

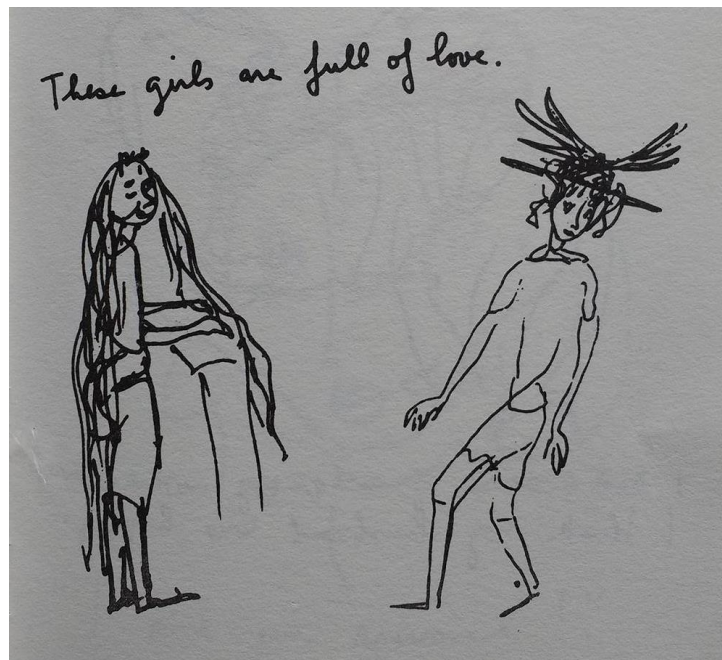
⁶⁰⁷ Ibid., 227.

sea of white space, relating to no one and nobody. Thurber's characters are always doing something, holding themselves in dynamic curved lines, rather than Smith's stiff, static angles; Smith's drawn characters might answer, when asked what they are doing – like the little girls in one poem – that they are 'not looking for [or doing] anything at all' (CP, 314). Unlike Thurber's fleshed-out social scenes, only three of Smith's drawings in *Some Are More Human Than Others* have a physical background: chairs, gardens, living rooms.⁶⁰⁸

While Thurber's cartoons revolve around social humour and the bizarre undertone of seemingly-affable exchanges, the vast majority of the images in *Some Are More Human Than Others* do not depict social situations. Solitary animals or people pronounce, or are pronounced upon. And even when Smith does couple her creatures, they contrast with the social lives depicted in Thurber's work. Bizarre as their details may be, Thurber's social worlds obey the laws of physics. His characters may be mad, but we are in no doubt that they are occupying the same physical spaces. In contrast, Smith's social situations (such as they are) are flagrantly contingent. Even when they are drawn on the same page, her characters never seem to be inhabiting the same mutual world. So in the image captioned 'These girls are full of love', the girls tilt at odd angles, smiling to themselves, inclining away from one another.⁶⁰⁹ This is a social situation which failed wholly to happen: its players passed each other in the night, without quite connecting.

⁶⁰⁸ 'Athalie and Hypatia wished to be lost', 'This does not break down any barriers' and 'Wag, wag!' Smith, *Some Are More Human*, n.pag.

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid.



Stevie Smith, *Some Are More Human Than Others* (London: Peter Owen, 1990), n. pag

‘Think!’ – where the creatures look past each other, their eyes never meeting – has this same sense of a missed or ghostly social opportunity.⁶¹⁰ While Thurber is sociable, Smith’s sketchbook is full of characters retreating from life – ‘The Countess of Egremont does not wish for visitors’ – or failing to carry off a social situation.⁶¹¹ It is a parody of social interaction, a puppeteered illusion in which no communication is possible.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹¹ Ibid.

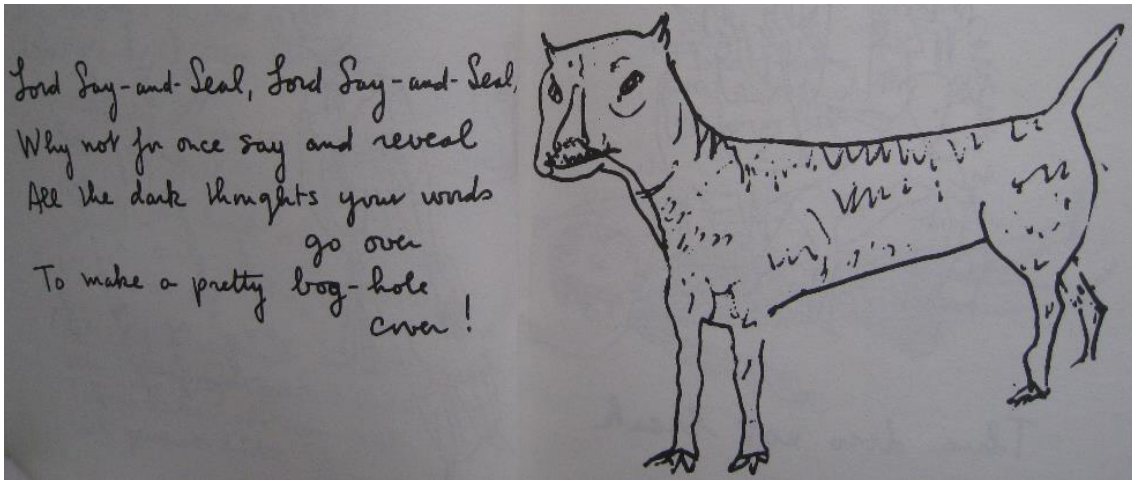


Stevie Smith, *Some Are More Human Than Others* (London: Peter Owen, 1990), n. pag

Some Are More Human Than Others overflows with creatures yearning to speak who never quite manage to ‘tell [us] everything’. Marangoni has written well on how the disjunction between image and text in Smith’s poem ‘Not Waving But Drowning’ is highly appropriate (to use this word again) in the context of a poem which is itself about miscommunication.⁶¹² In *Some Are More Human Than Others*, failed communication becomes a central theme. Smith’s sketchbook opens with a picture of an angry-looking human-headed dog, and the caption ‘Someone should speak’. We tend to assume that the dog is the speaker here, becoming impatient at a prolonged silence. But as the book goes on, we are unsure that anyone is speaking at all. Smith repurposes her poem ‘Lord

⁶¹²Marangoni, ‘Not Waving,’ 167.

Say-and-Seal', another epigrammatic injunction to speak or initiate revelation, as caption to an image of an animal.



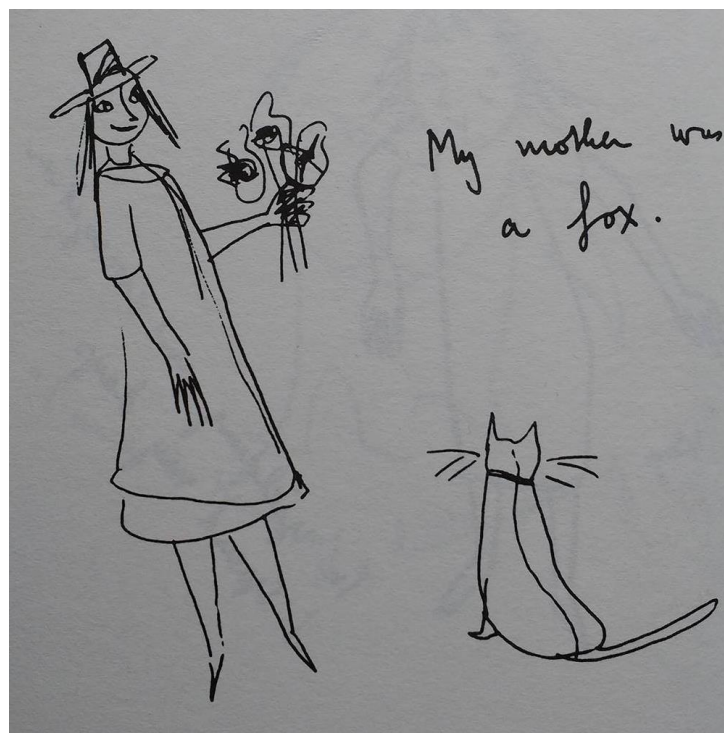
Stevie Smith, *Some Are More Human Than Others* (London: Peter Owen, 1990), n. pag

The poem urges its addressee to 'speak and reveal' his thoughts; here, appended to a picture of an animal, we feel that if Lord Say-and-Seal is a cat then the poem's mission is futile.

More broadly, however, speech is impossible to locate in this book. The belatedness of Smith's captioning (the drawings came first and then the text) means that voices exist in vexed relation to the creatures which are portrayed. This social white noise or interference intensifies when we realise that we do not know how to attribute the captions attached to Smith's pictures. We can hear them, like disembodied voices, but do not know where they come from. Thurber's captions are single lines, which follow convention scrupulously. They are almost always spoken by one character in the drawings to another; we know which character is speaking because their mouth is drawn as clearly open. Thurber steers us, in other words, through the image: we know what we are looking at, and who is speaking, and by moving between the text and the image we

can work out the joke. It may not be the only part of the picture worth noticing and contemplating – Dorothy Parker declares that one could ‘while away eternity’ by pondering the tiny details in his cartoons – but it at least comprises a single, cogent reading, which Thurber encourages us to reach.⁶¹³

In contrast, Smith does not support her reader’s interpretative strategies in *Some Are More Human Than Others* at all. It is almost always unclear who is speaking: whether it is the animal or person depicted, or an external narrative voice. The cat in ‘My mother was a fox’ sits turned away from the viewer, and the girl’s smiling mouth is shut.



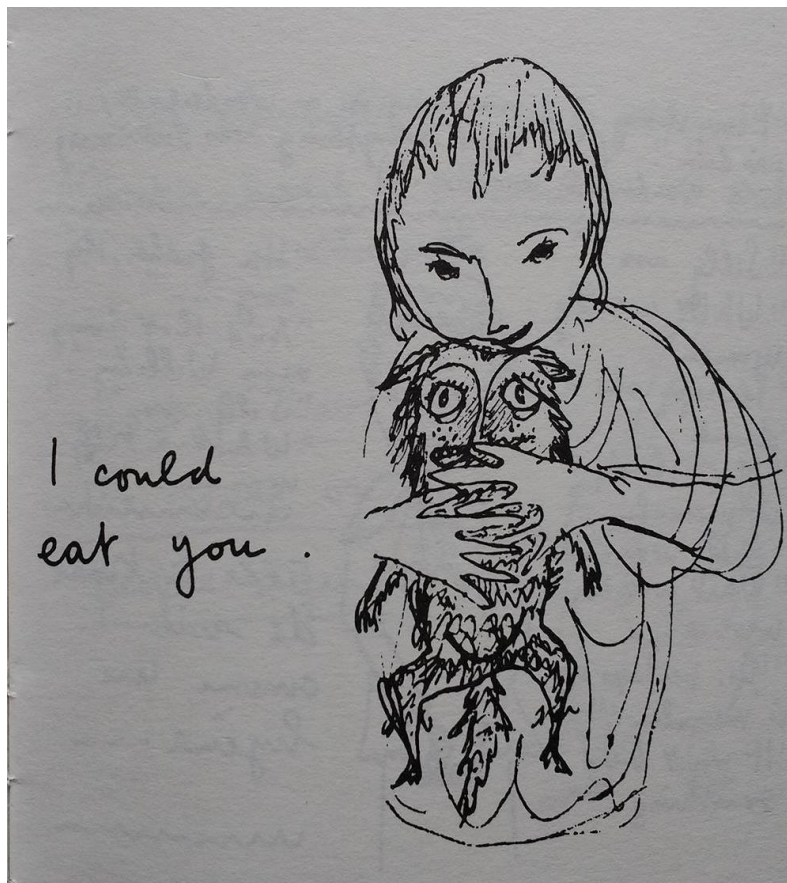
Stevie Smith, *Some Are More Human Than Others* (London: Peter Owen, 1990), n. pag

Where two or more creatures are depicted, we have no way of knowing who is speaking.

The source of speech is hinted at but seldom confirmed: Smith’s captions float in the

⁶¹³ Dorothy Parker, ‘Preface [to *Men, Women and Dogs*],’ in James Thurber, *Vintage Thurber: Volume I* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), 245.

space between reader, writer and character. No one fully takes responsibility, or commits posturally (with clearly-open mouth) to the statements which they seem to have made. Vocalisation does not line up with speaker: the word is out, but no one will confess it was them. The speaker has withdrawn from the situation before they can be identified.



Stevie Smith, *Some Are More Human Than Others* (London: Peter Owen, 1990), n. pag

Yet a review in the *Spectator* confidently paraphrased some of the images in the book in phrasing which elides this ambiguity:

‘I could eat you,’ says a girl, hugging a spread-eagled owl to her bosom.
‘I am not without friends in high places,’ says an immensely supercilious cat.

‘I love and am loved,’ says some sort of gargoyle, crouching.⁶¹⁴

Focusing on the first example: we cannot know who is speaking here. It might indeed be the girl – but it could be the pug, fantasising about devouring his tormentor. If there is a joke or a punchline here, if the image was indeed paraphrasable, it might revolve around the fact that we do not and cannot know who could eat whom.

In *Some Are More Human Than Others*, then, we do not understand our social role, or what is being said and why. Often, the captions are entirely inappropriate to the images they accompany, bearing little relation to what is seen. Returning to ‘My mother was a fox’ – how do we parse that caption? Whose mother is a fox? It does not seem likely to be either girl or cat. More disconcerting still is the picture’s near-miss: the girl appears to be bringing flowers to the cat (and if the cat was somehow her mother we could perhaps accept this as a credible social scenario) but the animal sitting on the ground is clearly a cat, not a fox, with no apparent interest in the girl. The girl herself stares into the distance, a sinister smile on her face, tilting back at an impossible angle. The sense is of a wider story which cannot be accessed – perhaps even three stories, for fox, girl and cat – and absolutely resists easy decoding. The idea of a mother-fox is unsettling enough; coupled with the internally incomprehensible and eerie illustrations, the result is very uncomfortable. This caption is troublesomely inappropriate to its image.

Resisting the images they accompany, these captions call upon us to react – to laugh, to agree – without the information or detail we need to formulate a complete response. For all Thurber’s surreality, he does guide us through his social situations. His cartoons

⁶¹⁴ ‘Picture Books,’ *Spectator*, November 21, 1958.

follow a similar pattern: the speaking character (usually) transgresses appropriate standards of behaviour (apparently unaware that they are doing so) and the other characters' horror or confusion cues us in to how we should respond. As a result, Thurber's cartoons offer the sense of community which Bergson identifies as essential to successful humour.⁶¹⁵ like the etiquette cartoons in *Home Notes*, they reinscribe the norms of a social situation in portraying their transgression. In Smith, however, there are often no other characters visible to react to the speaker. Instead of behaving as voyeurs, safely watching characters communicating with each other, we find that the speaker is addressing us. We become participants, stimulated and amused by our complete lack of understanding of how to participate.

If captions are, as Smith hints elsewhere, an etiquette guide for reading, these captions promise a clarity of exposition which they largely withhold. The deictic quality of the caption breaks down; it loses both its origin and target. The line floats ambiguously, like an aphorism gnominically stated, leaving it to us to hypothesise how it might be applied. With no guidance on how to receive it, we must pass on, uneasily.

Inappropriately Appropriate: Smith's Too-Appropriate Captions

Pivoting right round from this very visible transgression of cartoon standards in *Some Are More Human Than Others*, a brief return to *Cats in Colour* demonstrates that its text is less invisibly submissive to caption-norms than it initially appears. Alongside sickly anthropomorphic moments sit several instances of the performatively banal caption: the caption which displays information which is so redundant, so resistant to

⁶¹⁵ Bergson, 7.
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use or value, that it startles the inquiring reader into laughter. If ‘My mother was a fox’ was disconcertingly inappropriate, these captions are bewilderingly appropriate. They are both entirely right (appropriate to their subject) and essentially useless.

Oh how much I love this one! His wild dark beauty is made for movement. He has been caught in a flash and will be off before you can touch him. Oh how beautiful he is!⁶¹⁶

Nothing can be done with this “spontaneous” exclamation of pleasure. It derives from the image without providing us with the interpretative paradigm which we expect a caption to present. It is vacuous, banal, but also irrefutable. In another caption in the same book, Smith notes of a Siamese cat, ‘His eyes are blue’: a fact which would be difficult to overlook.

Why does Smith use these eerily empty captions, which state nothing which is not already clearly visible? Her essay ‘Art’ (1938), on visiting an art gallery and musing over the captions in the catalogue, offers some indications. In the catalogue caption, we have an analogue to the entirely ‘appropriate’ caption. It makes a claim to factual accuracy, promising to provide all the information which the gallery viewer needs to know. Its form and positioning present it as measured: simply describing what is necessary, precisely, without providing new information. These are exactly the functions which W. J. T. Mitchell lists for texts which exist in relation to images: they may ‘explain, narrate, describe, label, speak for (or to)’ the image.⁶¹⁷ These texts present themselves as entirely subordinate to the image: simply supporting it or translating it into textual form. They supply nothing new; they simply mark time.

⁶¹⁶ Smith, *Cats in Colour*, 52.

⁶¹⁷ W. J. T. Mitchell, ‘Beyond Comparison,’ in Heer and Worcester, *A Comics Studies Reader*, 117.

In 'Art', Smith's speaker relaxes, with a not-unironical pleasure, into the catalogue entries. Her remarks on the entry for Fra Filippo Lippi's 'Seven Saints', c. 1450-3 show her giving into the unhurried, untroubling curation which the catalogue offers:

Catalogues, as you see, have a language of their own, terse and evocative: "S. John, centre, facing right, wearing a lavender-grey dress. Left: S. Francis, profile right, S. Lawrence, in grey, with rose orange collar...All seated full-length on a marble seat...along the bottom of the picture a little hedge of herbs..."⁶¹⁸

Smith carefully selects an entry which focuses on absolute minutiae: the 'little hedge of herbs' being, in its miniature irrelevance, the climactic, humorous moment. The catalogue entry reads like a fashion show, the saints transformed into models whose clothing is their most salient feature. It draws a tactful veil over the question of religious interpretation, and draws our attention instead to the saints' sartorial choices. What is there to say about a rose orange collar and a little hedge of herbs? The catalogue caption in 'Art' shuts up further discussion, steers the viewer away from observing anything but the most banal details.

Smith is of course laughing at these fashion-focused catalogue-captions. They do not merely recount fact: describing a saint's clothing as 'lavender-grey' or 'rose-orange' implies a level of aesthetic observation and judgment. A decision has been made to filter the viewer's perception only in these trivial, rather camp terms. Observing poker-faced how fortunate she is to have access to captions which are not over ten years old (and indeed she lifts this entry verbatim from the 1929 National Gallery catalogue, nine

⁶¹⁸ Stevie Smith, 'Art,' in *London Guyed*, ed. William Kimber (London: Hutchinson, 1938), 159.
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years old when the essay was written in 1938),⁶¹⁹ Smith flags up her recognition of how dated this descriptive approach is. Yet she is not precisely critical of her catalogue. Being dated may be an advantage. She enjoys the ‘terse’ weeding out of the assumed-irrelevant: the detail which is precisely the point of the painting (who are these figures? What is their religious significance?), but which can be omitted because the viewer is expected to know already. Predicated on the assumption that its viewer is religiously literate, the catalogue-caption can therefore restrict itself, contentedly, to pointing out rose orange collars and hedges of herbs. This caption’s banality is an act of limitation of the reader’s perception, but it also graciously makes space for something: something taken-for-granted, over which it can have no control. Smith laughs because the caption’s shifted focus is audacious, but it also curates a generous, merciful space – one which is ‘evocative’ – in or beyond the burdensomely numinous. This is etiquette: making no trouble, not being obtrusive, taking up no more physical or mental space than has been allotted to you. It is about gracefully ending an interaction as much as perpetuating it.

Smith is often seen as a transgressor of etiquette (buying a hat from a jumble sale to wear when she received her Gold Medal for Poetry, being rude at dinner-parties),⁶²⁰ but etiquette fascinated her. The Lion Aunt as ‘shining gold’,⁶²¹ salt-of-the-earth figurehead is part of this stylised enjoyment of etiquette. And in her essay ‘Art’, she fetishizes it. Susan Sontag points out that a visit to a museum or gallery is primarily ‘a social situation, riddled with distractions, in the course of which art is seen and commented

⁶¹⁹ *National Gallery Trafalgar Square Catalogue*, 86th edn. (London, 1929), 194.

⁶²⁰ Jack Barbera and William McBrien, *Stevie: A Biography of Stevie Smith* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 3-5.

⁶²¹ Stevie Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper* (London: Virago, 2015), 174.

on.’⁶²² A gallery-space and its inhabitants train a visitor, subtly, in proper social behaviour: how to look, how to stand, how to experience and demonstrate good taste. The gallery’s architecture encourages each visitor to take pleasure in art without evincing inappropriately intense attachment to any one piece: they must murmur approvingly, and move on. In her emphasis on the gallery’s social function and distractions from the business of art itself, Sontag could have been summarising Smith’s ‘Art’. Seeing a nun leading a school party around the National Gallery, Smith’s speaker follows them secretly, listening with agonised ardency. The nun groups the children and hurries them along; she wishes her charges to behave appropriately, to be socially cooperative. Smith has ‘some quarrel’ with this approach; she does not think this is the right way to look at pictures.⁶²³ In part because of this, however, she is also undeniably fascinated by the hurry and scolding which she hopes will overlay the experience:

I followed the nun, on a lazy familiar impulse. Almost again I expected to hear: ‘Don’t loiter; tie up your shoe-lace; your hair-ribbon is undone... And all of this would be followed, I thought, by the special *bon mot* of one of my own forgotten schoolmistresses: “You are too slow to catch a cold.”’⁶²⁴

There is an erotic charge in this fantasy of prosaic schoolday philistinism, this hoped-for performance of empty society language and etiquette training which is, like the catalogue, beginning to date. Smith’s speaker is tantalised by expectation, on tenterhooks to receive ‘the special *bon mot*’, the climax of this nostalgic experience. She chases after the particular sensuous pleasure of cliché, of banal language which, importantly, fails to hit the fundamental issues in question here. ‘How do people see pictures?’, she asks at the beginning of the essay.

⁶²² Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2003), 108.

⁶²³ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁶²⁴ Smith, ‘Art,’ 154-5.

And this relish of the banal, of the caption or *bon mot* which aims to pinpoint the essence of the picture or situation but misses the point entirely, comes through when Smith turns to her catalogue. Although Smith mocks the catalogue caption, she also enjoys it. Not only is the language ‘terse and evocative’, but ‘From this precision comes a charm’. This is the charm of etiquette, with its limitations and blind spots, but treading delicately and precisely through contested social territory. When she cites an entry, she is relishing rather than simply mocking it, participating theatrically in the catalogue’s ethos. She is drawn, her other work would suggest, by the catalogue’s combination of the mundanely precise – ‘centre, facing right’ – and the not-entirely-successfully poetic – ‘a lavender-grey dress’, ‘rose-orange collar’. Smith is attracted to this finicky account of facts, carefully presented, but ultimately adding up to nothing at all.

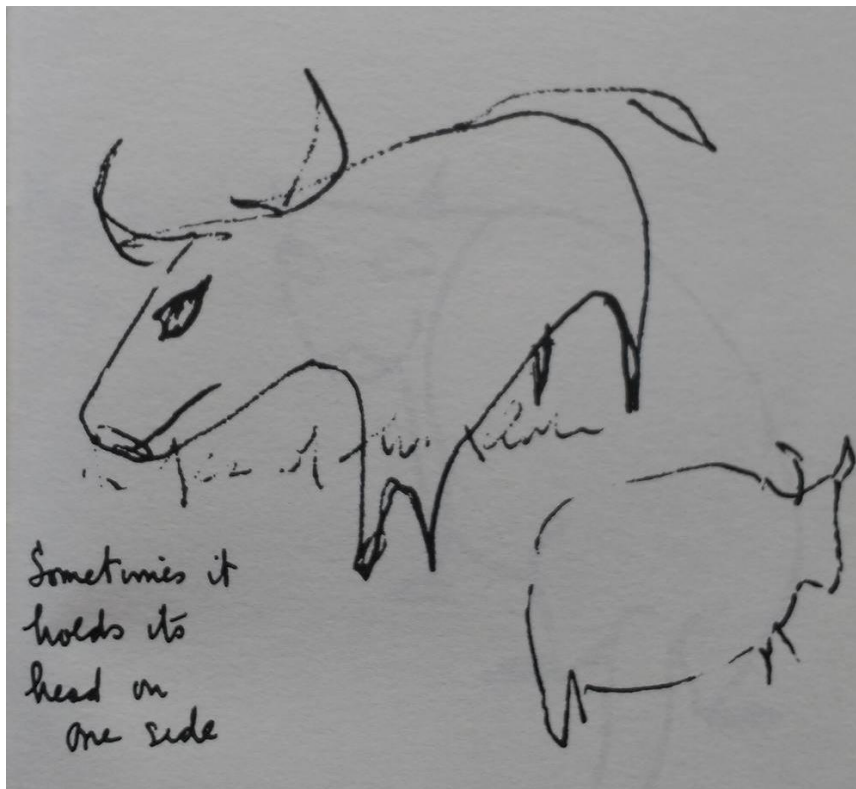
We recognise this taxonomic fashion language from Pompey’s description of Leonie in *Novel on Yellow Paper*: ‘She has a yellow pullover and fawn jodhpurs and a fawn felt hat. And who cares.’⁶²⁵ That final ‘And’ is telling. Indeed, in the typescript, the phrase is not set off in a separate sentence: it reads ‘She has a yellow pullover and fawn jodhpurs and a fawn felt hat and who cares’.⁶²⁶ A full-stop, and a capital ‘A’ in ‘And’, are added in blue pen. In original, then, Pompey’s indifference to Leonie’s curated outfit becomes one of the parts of the list, one of the items in the outfit. Pompey does not follow her description of Leonie’s stylish outfit with ‘But who cares’, a formulation which would dismiss everything that had come before. What is crucial, in this phrase, is the sense that the banal can be simultaneously attended-to and found lacking.

⁶²⁵ Smith, *Novel*, 2.

⁶²⁶ Stevie Smith, typescript of *Novel on Yellow Paper*, U DP-156-1, 2, Stevie Smith Papers 1935-1969, Hull History Centre.

Indifference to the banal detail can coexist with a model of description which embraces it.

This confusingly exact descriptive relationship between image and appended-description is, I have suggested, particularly characteristic of *Cats in Colour*. However, Smith compounds the complexity of *Some Are More Human Than Others* by alternating her strikingly-inappropriate captions with ones which are too appropriate in the same way. Some of her captions obligingly match their accompanying image with exact precision – and, in fact, it is in this that they become illegible. Captions like ‘Sometimes it holds its head on one side’ are excessively appropriate to their image.



Stevie Smith, *Some Are More Human Than Others* (London: Peter Owen, 1990), n. pag

With its captioned images alternating between clearly inappropriate and excessively appropriate, contemporary reviewers (of which there were not many) often professed

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themselves flummoxed by *Some Are More Human Than Others*. One writes, mock-gossippingly, ‘I looked and looked at these pictures and most of them didn’t make much sense to traditional old me.’⁶²⁷ These evocations of ‘traditional’ standards underline the fact that readers do not expect cartoons to stymie them. They are to be interpretable, image and text following established dynamics of similarity and divergence, not demanding more than a few seconds of our attention. Another reviewer declares, ‘Frankly, although I always have been able to appreciate the odd, most of these little cartoons...fail to get through to me.’⁶²⁸

The images in *Some Are More Human Than Others* resist critical responses because they do not walk the balance of appropriate inappropriateness which their reviewers sought: of being just inappropriate enough to elicit a satisfying laugh. Their captions are either overly fitting – such as that of the bull with its head on one side, which simply describes the image – or alienatingly unfitting, as in ‘My mother is a fox’. These images are social faux pas: the gauche little girl in the art-gallery who stutters out something self-evident, or else blurts out something which shocks the company completely.

No one can win in this situation. Smith’s captions veer between the too-appropriate and the too-inappropriate. Even when they are judged to be “just right”, that rightness entails a kind of invisibility, a quick look and nod before being passed by, and lukewarm responses. Faced with this reception, we may sense a draining away of effort in Smith’s caption-books: a rendition of the inanely-factual in place of anything more exciting, because energy has lapsed, or because the project is suddenly no longer felt to

⁶²⁷ Clive Cullerne-Browne, ‘Letter from Anywhere,’ *Hampstead and Highgate Express*, November 14, 1958.

⁶²⁸ F. M., ‘Among the New Books,’ *Natal Witness Saturday Magazine*, April 25, 1959.

be of value. Often, therefore, Smith's captions flag up their own arbitrariness: reveal themselves to be a choice which can be suspended or terminated. *Some Are More Human Than Others* brings together incompatible figures, randomly, from her sketches; Smith makes no effort to position the characters to make them look as though they belong together, and the resulting sense is that they can at any moment be uncoupled, from each other and from the caption. So a caption to *Cats in Colour* shows the writer performing her own loss of interest, her withdrawal from the interpretative enterprise:

‘Someone has put us in a basket!’ Yes, but you look quite pretty, you know. It’s a shame? Very well, it’s a shame.⁶²⁹

The captioner becomes passive, pliable in the face of the kittens’ protest. She allows the meaninglessness of the whole affair – of remarking on situations, acknowledging emotion, expressing solidarity – to show through, and peacefully concedes that the situation is, indeed, ‘a shame’. Other *In Colour* books take themselves far more seriously than *Cats in Colour*. Though it allows itself an occasional facetious aside, Barbara Woodhouse’s *Dogs in Colour* (1960) quickly subordinates these to outlining the economic and social role of the dog in grave factual captions:

‘Alas, no carriage waits for me!’ In Victorian days to be really smart at least two Dalmations should have accompanied their owner’s carriage. Today these dogs have no real work to do, although with training they are ideal companions for an active owner.⁶³⁰

⁶²⁹ Smith, *Cats in Colour*, 42.

⁶³⁰ Barbara Woodhouse, *Dogs in Colour* (London: Batsford, 1960), 38.

Horses in Colour's captions are longer and even more factual.⁶³¹ Images of the animals offer these authors a springboard for sharing appropriate facts, which place the picture in a broader context of knowledge. *Cats in Colour*, in contrast, flags up the absurdity of the project. It holds its captions at an indifferent angle; it shows its awareness that *Cats in Colour* is a coffee table book, used to mark time while waiting for something to happen, having no real consequence in itself. Captions trail off with a dismissive 'etcetera':

Angela has passed out. I said Angela has passed out.' 'Somebody will have to tell Lady Catte-Beer.' 'Lady Catte-Beer. Ha ha. Pity Angela doesn't stick to the family brew. I said, Pity Angela doesn't stick...' (et cetera.)⁶³²

The sense is that whatever they're discussing has no import: it doesn't matter. The subject is missing. This is phatic conversation; the idea of intense, important interaction is what matters here, rather than any particular content. Smith flags up, here, just the nominal idea of a social situation, offering a selection of verbal gestures without fleshing them out.

Captions become, then, a means by which time is marked. Comment is passed perfunctorily, for the sake of it. Caption books were (and are) not necessarily done out of a sense of an artistic calling. Dashed off quickly, often for financial reasons, these books need only be 'appropriate', a word which demands the most minimal level of readerly engagement and analysis before the viewer passes on to the next. With their associations with cartoons, with the assumption that they perform practical and not

⁶³¹ Dorian Williams, *Horses in Colour* (London: Batsford, 1959).

⁶³² Smith, *Cats in Colour*, 66.

aesthetic purposes, captions are already highly dismissible; when they are generated for financial gain, they lose another layer of literary credibility.

This is the caption as social platitude, as unignorably ‘etcetera’: social life operating at degree zero, knowing and displaying its failure or refusal to do any more than this. It is superfluous; like Smith’s early poem ‘Spanky Wanky’, it is ‘unnecessary’. Smith signals that she knows this is the case. She writes excess which knows that it is excess; her captions flag up their own redundancy, their own refusal to lift into literary value. They either flatly restate what is already obvious in the picture, or – in their refusal to adjudicate meaningfully on the picture they accompany – they flatly decline to acknowledge their lack of fittingness. And this mode of writing the unnecessary, having to go on producing text even when everything necessary has already been said, forms the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter Six: Fragments ‘Going On’

To her brief poem ‘Flounder’, Stevie Smith adds two paratexts, in the form of title and subtitle, which seem wholly inappropriate to the text:

Flounder

(Part of an Acrostic)

Rather a fishy thing to do –
And yet this is not wholly true.⁶³³

Insisting that the couplet is ‘part of an acrostic’, the subtitle presents it as a fragment: a piece which is or will become part of a larger whole. But if, as the title hints, this acrostic spells out FLOUNDER, why do these two lines begin with R and A? The situation immediately seems fishy: even Smith’s occasionally-wobbly spelling would not have fished out a floundra. If the couplet comes from an acrostic, we cannot identify the key to this larger text.

The two initial letters point to what Elizabeth Wanning Harries calls ‘[t]he fragmentary “method”’: ‘a strategy for indicating [the whole’s] location, its boundaries, and its incalculable dimensions’. Yet, as Harries notes, this flourish towards a totality does not mean that the totality exists or ever has existed.⁶³⁴ Readers cannot locate the acrostic on which ‘Flounder’ is supposedly dependent. ‘Flounder’ may in fact be complete in itself, despite the claims of its paratexts. Its tight little rhyme seals the poem off into a single unit, and, in publishing it, Smith offers up the poem with apparent airy confidence that

⁶³³ Stevie Smith, *The Collected Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith*, ed. Will May (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), 671. All further references are to this edition, and indicated in the text by CP.

⁶³⁴ Elizabeth Wanning Harries, *The Unfinished Manner: Essays on the Fragment in the Later Eighteenth Century* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 163.

this scrap of writing is valuable, and ready for public appraisal. Yet, ending on the ambivalent note of ‘this is not wholly true’, and with its title claiming that it is only a part of something larger, the text claims an identity as fragment.

This may, as so often in Smith’s writing, be a case of mistaken identity. Smith warns us, here, to be suspicious of what we assume (‘this is not wholly true’), and indeed her poetry continually promises one poetic mode before instituting another. ‘The Bereaved Swan’ transitions imperceptibly from comedy to tragedy (CP, 35), opening with the flippant comparison of a swan to a ‘cake of soap’, and ending with the bird longing for death; ‘In Canaan’s Happy Land’, designed after the pattern of a joyous hymn, reveals itself to be a cheerful meditation on mass murder (CP, 135). The same indeterminacy governs the length of her texts: single lines turn into poems, poems turn into punchlines. ‘Advice to Young Children’, quoted in the Introduction, leads a double life as a full-length poem and as a single couplet, and, as Chapter Five described, Smith often excerpted lines from her poems to use as captions for her drawings.

Faced with a slew of titles such as ‘From the French’, ‘From the Coptic’, and ‘From the Italian’, as well as ‘From the Greek’, discussed in Chapter Three, Smith’s readers may wonder if they are mistaking the short, self-contained poem for a fragment, or indeed vice versa:

From the French (2)

‘We shall never be one mummy only
Beneath the antique deserts and the happy palms.’(CP, 463)

From the Italian

an old superstition

A woolly dog,
A red-haired man,
Better dead
Than to have met 'em. (CP, 465)

The 'From the' construction in 'From the French', 'From the Coptic' and 'From the Italian' indicates, strictly, only that the poems have been translated. Their brevity and resistance to interpretation, however, activates 'from' into an act of excerpting or lifting: the sense in which extracts in an anthology might announce that they are 'from' longer works. These texts self-present as completed acts of translation; simultaneously, however, they cast themselves as enigmatic scraps pulled out of their indecipherable foreign contexts. As this chapter will argue, Smith's poetic project involves precisely this constantly staged misrecognition of an aphorism (a short text which is complete and self-sufficient, refusing to elaborate or answer questions) as a fragment (a short text or scrap ghosted, in some way, by a longer whole: offering the possibility of its own past or future continuation).

Smith was explicit about the potential tension, in her poems, between these pressures of stopping conclusively, and of going on. She describes, in an interview with Kay Dick, how she thought her poem 'The Stroke' was finished, but ended up writing two more verses.⁶³⁵ The final poem was not the shape and size she originally thought it would be: it grew, unexpectedly, far beyond its original length, into something wholly new. A poem like 'Yes, I know' (1966) offers conflicting guidance about whether to view it as

⁶³⁵ Kay Dick, *Ivy and Stevie* (London: Allison & Busby, 1983), 76.

stable and finished, or as a text which might suddenly grow further, go on past its original ending:

The pale face stretches across the centuries
It is so subtle and yielding; yet innocent,
Her name is Lucretia Borgia.

Yes, I know. I knew her brother Cesare
Once. But only for a short time. (CP, 531)

The short, assertive sentences which make up the second stanza signal that the conversation is over; 'Once', at the start of the line, positions the acquaintance between the speaker and Cesare firmly in the past, and the speaker audibly draws a line under this relationship ('But only for a short time'). Yet so many questions remain unanswered. What happened between the speaker and Cesare? Grief or pain is audible, but barely: the brief text manages these emotions expertly, squirrelling them away from further enquiry. The poem reads like the beginning of a story, inviting the continuation which the fragment might allow, and yet also displays the rebuffing stoppage and withdrawal occasioned by the aphorism, as Chapter One described. Aphorism may refuse to risk diluting itself by going on. To overexplain, to justify and elaborate on itself, is embarrassing: it suggests an inability to recognise the right moment to withdraw. Texts which present themselves as fragments may turn out to be surprisingly self-contained and complete, pointing in fact to no larger original whole: the writer departs, with aphoristic social grace, although more seemed to remain to be said.

For Christopher Ricks, working on Keats, embarrassment derives from witnessing an abandonment to sleep or passion: a too-complete emotional departure from the other

person through unselfconscious slumber, or an excessive or too-prolonged emotional presence in the other person's space.⁶³⁶ So Smith's writing experiments with excess by testing out different responses to embarrassment. Her texts may terminate before they have fleshed themselves out (withdrawing, embarrassed), cutting themselves pithily short. Alternatively, they may grow far longer than expected, embarrassing their reader or listener. Contrasting Smith with Auden helps to illustrate this variation. In the 1965 recording of Smith and Auden, singing in the pub, Auden seems extremely embarrassed by the situation. As Smith waves her arms and carols 'Amen', Auden buries himself in his glass.⁶³⁷ Smith later reflected that she didn't think Auden liked her poems very much, adding as explanation: 'he's very Anglican'.⁶³⁸ More tangible, in Auden's body language, is a sense that Smith was overdoing things (drawing the note out too long, singing too enthusiastically) in a way that he found excessive and embarrassing. Even in his long poems, Auden keeps his form tight, resisting excess. With its short last lines of each stanza, 'Under Which Lyre' has a biting and disconcerting humour:

Among bewildering appliances
 For mastering the arts and sciences
 They stroll or run,
 And nerves that steeled themselves to slaughter
 Are shot to pieces by the shorter
 Poems of Donne.⁶³⁹

Like many of Smith's brief, witty poems, Auden here imagines short poems as compact, destructive bullets. The final lines of Auden's stanzas hold themselves, accordingly,

⁶³⁶ Christopher Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 9, 13.

⁶³⁷ BBC Arts, 'WH Auden and Stevie Smith in the pub in 1965,' BBC.co.uk, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p034md2x> (accessed November 20, 2017).

⁶³⁸ Jack Barbera and William McBrien, *Stevie: A Biography of Stevie Smith* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 252.

⁶³⁹ W. H. Auden, 'Under Which Lyre,' in *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), 335.

short; their prosodic weight, here and through the text, gathers forcefully at the end of the line. In contrast, while Smith's poems are often short and compact, they also often accommodate overlong line endings:

O happy dogs of England
Bark well as well you may
If you lived anywhere else
You would not be so gay.

O happy dogs of England
Bark well at errand boys
If you lived anywhere else
You would not be allowed to make such an infernal noise. (CP, 100)

Instead of cutting the last line short, Smith lets it run startlingly long. Auden strikes with an economic force which cancels the possibility of embarrassment; Smith's short, humorous poem spends itself before it can strike home. Deryn Rees-Jones writes that Smith's drawing accompanying her poem 'The Songster' (part of which is reproduced on the cover of this thesis) 'embarrass[es] us', showcasing as it does Miss Pouncefort's 'excessive femininity' and enthusiasm for her own performance.⁶⁴⁰ If Auden's poetics avoid embarrassment, Stevie Smith's centre around eliciting embarrassment as part of a consideration of how it might be managed.

Chapter One explored the weightiness and lightness of the aphorism: a text both more and less weighty than it appears at face value. This chapter focuses on not weight but length. It investigates what happens to the aphoristic poem when 'more' is demanded of it: when aphorism's flat impenetrability occasions a demand for some kind of repetition or prolonging, a 'going on'. This may take the form of more texts on the page, as in an

⁶⁴⁰ Deryn Rees-Jones, *Consorting with Angels: Essays on Modern Women Poets* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2005), 76.

aphoristic collection. When Smith gathers fragments into collections, in *Novel on Yellow Paper*, she treats them like aphorisms: sealed objects, for display. Their partial status only shores up their gnomic tone. Alternatively, ‘more’ may involve more of the poem itself, as it is (literally or imaginatively) lengthened on the page, going on past the point at which it might originally have stopped. As I will suggest, longer poems like ‘Thoughts about the Person from Porlock’ hinge on the effects of failing to recognise when a text has reached its own end: they stretch aphoristic nuggets past the point of their natural closure. A short poem continues out of guilt and a sense of duty: a desire to hold up one’s social end, and depart when one has said enough (but not too much). The aphorism-turned fragment goes on when it would rather have ‘gone away’.

Fragment and Aphorism

The question of how to differentiate fragment and aphorism runs beyond length, though the debate carries most meaning when it focuses on briefer texts. The Jena Romantics described their pithy, self-contained lines as ‘fragments’ even though they had access to the term ‘aphorism’.⁶⁴¹ Indeed, fragments like Friedrich Schlegel’s bear the rhetorical marks of completion, while many aphorisms (such as Nietzsche’s) are fragmentary and provisional:

Wit is an explosion of confined spirit.⁶⁴² [Schlegel]

⁶⁴¹ Ben Grant, *The Aphorism and Other Short Forms* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 22.

⁶⁴² Friedrich Schlegel, *Lucinde and the Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), 153.

Seriousness in play. At sunset in Genoa, I heard from a tower a long chiming of bells: it kept on and on, and over the noise of the backstreets, as if insatiable for itself, it rang out into the evening sky and the sea air, so terrible and so childish at the same time, so melancholy. Then I thought of Plato's words and felt them suddenly in my heart: *all in all, nothing human is worth taking very seriously; nevertheless ...*⁶⁴³ [Nietzsche]

Schlegel underscores this conflation in his definition of the fragment: 'A fragment, like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a porcupine'.⁶⁴⁴ Schlegel could be describing the aphorism in Beverly Coyle's terms, as described in Chapter One: sealed, self-sufficient, complete, prickly in its insistence on isolation.

Often this question of relationship with the other, with other texts or contexts, comes to underpin differentiations of aphorism and fragment. Christopher A. Strathman focuses on the sociability of the two forms: while the aphorism is isolated and static – avoiding, as Chapter Five suggested, the possibility of fully fitting, and merging, into a social situation – Strathman identifies the fragment by its mobility and exposure to otherness.⁶⁴⁵ Paul van Tongeren distinguishes between aphorism and fragment on the basis of meaning: the fragment remains from a whole which could theoretically be reconstructed, making the fragment's original context and signification available, while the aphorism was taken from no whole, 'and thus there never is a definite meaning'.⁶⁴⁶ Brian Dillon positions fragment and aphorism on a temporal continuum, calling the fragment a 'ruined aphorism': one that has decayed in an inhospitable environment,

⁶⁴³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. Marion Faber and Stephen Lehmann (London: Penguin, 1984), 260.

⁶⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁶⁴⁵ Christopher A. Strathman, *Romantic Poetry and the Fragmentary Imperative: Schlegel, Byron, Joyce, Blanchot* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 164.

⁶⁴⁶ Paul J. M. van Tongeren, *Reinterpreting Modern Culture: An Introduction to Friedrich Nietzsche's Philosophy* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2000), 65.

perhaps, or been sabotaged by an iconoclast.⁶⁴⁷ Either way, it has been interfered with. Ben Grant's definition hinges on how the text is produced, defining a fragment as 'cut short' by 'an interruption from outside'.⁶⁴⁸

Straddling these varied origin-stories (a remnant of something lost, a seed of a larger text which never fully materialised, a blueprint for a whole which could be reconstructed), the fragment manages a contradictory demand to be at once sealed and open: to a past whole, to future continuation. Often, a particular fragment juggles several origin-myths at once. Helen Maria Williams, for instance, writes her 1786 poem 'Part of an Irregular Fragment, Found in a Dark Passage of the Tower' in the guise of a fragment recovered in remnant form, like many others of this period. Her poem halts midway through a sentence, implying that part of the text was lost as it mouldered in the Tower, decaying into asterisks:

Again! their vengeful look — and now a speechless —
* * * * *⁶⁴⁹

Though the title posits the fragmentation of decay and recovery, the 'Advertisement' to the poem claims another kind. Here, Williams imagines a youth fired with inspiration on encountering a long-locked door in the Tower of London, who pictures all the ghosts of people executed in the Tower gathering in that out-of-bounds apartment. His inspiration fires her in turn:

⁶⁴⁷ Brian Dillon, 'The Pleasure of Aphorisms,' *Frieze* 74 (2003), online, n. pag.

⁶⁴⁸ Grant, 21.

⁶⁴⁹ Helen Maria Williams, *Poems* (London: Thomas Cadell, 1786), 2:43.

The gloomy wildness of these images struck my imagination so forcibly, that endeavouring to catch the fire of the youth's pencil, this Fragment was produced.⁶⁵⁰

The paratext around Williams's poem pulls it between two fragmentary imaginaries: as a decayed, recovered object from the past, and as a partial (though necessarily inadequate) response to a moment of staggering inspiration. To these models, S. T. Coleridge's poetry adds a sense of the fragment as a text resistant to completion. He never finished his poem 'Christabel' (published in 1816), for example, despite insisting that he had several further parts planned;⁶⁵¹ in the 'Preface' to the poem, he promised 'three parts yet to come, in the course of the present year.'⁶⁵² Similarly, his paratextual 'Preface', appended to 'Kubla Khan' in the 1816 edition, excused him from completing the poem with the claim that a Person from Porlock had interrupted him and dispelled his inspiration:

On awaking he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his pen, ink, and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved. At this moment he was unfortunately called out by a person from business from Porlock, and detained by him above an hour, and on his return to his room, found to his no small surprise and mortification, that...with the exception of eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away...⁶⁵³

The paratexts hovering around these Romantic fragments establish and justify their adrift status. The preface to 'Kubla Khan' insists on the text's fragmentary nature, as in

⁶⁵⁰ Williams, *Poems*, n. pag.

⁶⁵¹ See, for instance, Coleridge to Lord Byron, October 22, 1815: 'the plan of the whole poem was formed and the first Book and half of the second were finished [in 1797]...It is not yet a Whole: and as it will be 5 books, I meant to publish it by itself...' Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Volume IV, 1815-1819*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 601.

⁶⁵² Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Christabel; Kubla Khan: a Vision; The Pains of Sleep* (London: John Murray, 1816), vi.

⁶⁵³ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Poetical Works I: Poems (Reading Text): Part I*, ed. J. C. C. Mays (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 512.

fact does the subtitle to Smith's 'Flounder'. Fragmentariness derives, then, from context: in which titles, subtitles and prefaces inscribe the text as fragmentary, or alternatively outline a past or future continuation into which the text might open up. Without these paratexts, readers might not conceive of the poems as fragments.

Modernist fragments similarly depend on context for their generic status. David Bennett argues that the Modernist fragment was produced 'for and by' its context, 'the little magazine'.⁶⁵⁴ He notes that modernism's key texts – *The Waste Land*, *Ulysses*, *Finnegans Wake*, much of the *Cantos* – first appeared in little magazines, and usually 'in or as fragments'.⁶⁵⁵ *Finnegans Wake* in particular, Bennett reminds us, was 'published as fragments of a "Work in Progress" across a range of little magazines on two continents over a decade and a half.'⁶⁵⁶ In his review of Stevie Smith's *A Good Time Was Had By All*, G. W. Stonier positioned Smith's novels in a similar way: her first poetry book, he suggested, was 'a delightful interlude before the next instalment of her odd *Work in Progress*.'⁶⁵⁷

Significantly, however, the portions of Joyce's 'Work in Progress' published in *transition* very seldom present themselves as fragments. The extract published in the April-May issue of 1938 is certainly entitled 'Fragment from 'Work in Progress'', but that is the exception rather than the rule.⁶⁵⁸ Far more often, it is titled 'Continuation of a

⁶⁵⁴ David Bennett, 'Periodical Fragments and Organic Culture: Modernism, the Avant-Garde, and the Little Magazine,' *Contemporary Literature* 30, no. 4 (1989): 480-1.

⁶⁵⁵ Bennett, 480.

⁶⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 480.

⁶⁵⁷ G. W. Stonier, 'The Music Goes Round and Round,' *New Statesman* 13, April 17, 1937.

⁶⁵⁸ James Joyce, 'Fragment from 'Work in Progress,' *transition* 27 (April-May 1938): 59-78.

Work in Progress'.⁶⁵⁹ The majority of instalments, then, minimise their status as parts or excerpts; they imply instead that they go on seamlessly from earlier parts, and, in the moment of publication, fuse with their predecessors to become a larger whole. This is of course misleading: the instalments of 'Work in Progress' were not published in the order they would finally assume in *Finnegans Wake*. In line with the titles' not-altogether-sincere (and not-altogether-merited) faith that the fragments would add up, the language which surrounded 'Work in Progress', in the essays in *Our Exagmination Round His Factification For Incamination Of Work In Progress* (1929), mirrored, despite and alongside a tongue-in-cheek reverence, that same faith that every published part of Joyce's text was slotting into a larger whole. Marcel Brion compares the experience of 'Work in Progress' to being 'present at the birth of a world',⁶⁶⁰ and Robert Sage argues that 'Joyce's writings, from *Dubliners* to the present book ['Work in Progress'], form an indivisible whole.'⁶⁶¹ Although Victor Llona does refer to the pieces as 'fragments', he ends by looking forward to the completion of the Work, with a religious fervour whose precise relationship to humour is difficult to parse: 'I feel that with the last fragments shall come the revelation'.⁶⁶²

If, as Bennett suggests, the little magazine produces the Modernist fragment, these remarks suggest that it also creates the environment for the (future) completion of those fragments. Fragmentariness is not an absolute, unchangeable status, but evolves into completion as the text continues. In their taken-for-granted relationship to a larger

⁶⁵⁹ See, for instance, *transition* 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 13, 22, 23 (in the last, entitled 'Continuation of Work in Progress', without the 'a').

⁶⁶⁰ Marcel Brion, 'The Idea of Time in the Work of James Joyce,' in *Our Exagmination Round His Factification For Incamination Of Work In Progress*, ed. Samuel Beckett (London: Faber and Faber, 1929), 29.

⁶⁶¹ Robert Sage, 'Before Ulysses – And After,' in *Our Exagmination*, 149.

⁶⁶² Victor Llona, 'I Don't Know What To Call It But It's Mighty Unlike Prose,' in *Our Exagmination*, 96, 102.

whole, the “fragments” of *Finnegans Wake* draw their significance not from their fragmentary status, but from their capacity to join up with other parts, and the interest attendant on what is thus produced.

Instead of the permanent loss of a whole, then, envisaged by ‘Part of an Irregular Fragment’ and ‘Kubla Khan’, the fragmentary instalments of *Finnegans Wake* (like Coleridge’s ‘Christabel’) most visibly associate themselves with an upcoming, emergent whole. A fragment whose significance is firmly located in the past, within a lost whole which can only be imaginatively reconstructed if at all, differs from one with an afterlife – stretching towards a future where it will be completed.

Continuation raises its own problems, however. Assembled together on the page, Schlegel’s fragments and Nietzsche’s aphorisms move uneasily between isolation and unification. Is each short text a continuation of the last: a space in which it can go on? Or is each text a new beginning, intended to be read independently of what comes before and after? Jacques Derrida announces, in ‘Fifty-two Aphorisms for a Foreword’, ‘An authentic aphorism must never refer to another. It is sufficient unto itself, a world or monad.’⁶⁶³ Three pages later, he contradicts himself: ‘...aphorisms can only multiply or be put in a series if they either confirm or contradict one another.’⁶⁶⁴ Presented in sequences or collections, short texts find themselves caught between continuity and singularity: their finality of diction exerts one pressure, their arrangement on the page another. Seamus Perry describes the Coleridgean dilemma of the relationship between

⁶⁶³ Jacques Derrida, ‘Fifty-two Aphorisms for a Foreword,’ in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg, trans. Andrew Benjamin (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 2:121.

⁶⁶⁴Ibid., 2:124.

parts and a larger whole: a collection of aggregated units is undesirable, but a larger whole should not simply take precedence over its parts.⁶⁶⁵ Coleridge's uneasy commentary on Pope in his *Biographia Literaria* pins down this contested relationship between wholes and parts:

I saw, that the excellence of this kind consisted...in the logic of wit, conveyed in smooth and strong epigrammatic couplets, as its *form*. Even when the subject was addressed to the fancy, or the intellect...still a *point* was looked for at the end of each line, and the whole was as it were...a *conjunction disjunctive* of epigrams.⁶⁶⁶

Pope makes a whole out of self-sufficient parts: 'smooth and strong' units, which repudiate the possibility of integrative overtures towards one another. Coleridge cannot quite approve this 'conjunction' of units which remain 'disjunctive', turning not on any intrinsic interrelation, but on the individual 'point' which seals each epigram into itself. The model of a whole composed of parts which cannot be made to cohere is familiar from a Modernist engagement with the fragmentary which often orients around a collage technique, as Eliot does in *The Waste Land* (1922) and Hope Mirrlees does in *Paris* (1919), positioning modern, urban life as a series of fragmented impressions. Frank Kermode stresses that the early Modernists 'worshipped wholes...wanted to hold more and more disparate material in a single thought or form':⁶⁶⁷ the act of gathering fragments together into a single text both confronts the prospect of achieving wholeness of a sort, and explodes the possibility of reconstructing any originary unity. Camelia

⁶⁶⁵ Seamus Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 194.

⁶⁶⁶ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, or, Biographical Sketches of my Literary Life and Opinions I*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 18-19.

⁶⁶⁷ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 142. Balachandra Rajan echoes this image of the Modernist fragment as part of the performance of striving for wholeness, describing T. S. Eliot's writing as in 'sustained pursuit of a wholeness which gives meaning to experience' (Balachandra Rajan, *The Form of the Unfinished: English Poetics from Spenser to Pound* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 17).

Elias's taxonomy of the modernist fragment emphasises its use of juxtaposition,⁶⁶⁸ such as the chorus of disconnected voices in Eliot's poem, but this twentieth-century approach to the fragment has its origins, Perry suggests, in Coleridge's 'mosaic technique' in his *Biographia Literaria*.⁶⁶⁹

As a result, Romantic and Modernist fragments resist easy differentiation; their modes overlap. Although Stevie Smith is writing just after the fragmentary work of the high Modernists, her use of excerpting and aggregation may therefore derive as much from Williams and Coleridge, as from T. S. Eliot and Mirrlees. In a 1961 interview with Peter Orr, she describes writing a poem as a careless, playful act, with the kind of reversibility between completeness and openness that underpins Schlegel's fragments:

one sort of throws it away and goes and digs it up and tosses it into the air and finishes it off or doesn't finish it. Anyhow, I love doing it.⁶⁷⁰

Smith's grammar effectively equates these two opposing possibilities, finished and unfinished; the unfinished can be offered up as functionally finished, like Schlegel's aphorism-fragments. This reflects Smith's practice in her editing of *The Batsford Book of Children's Verse* (1970). More than a third of the "poems" she includes in this anthology (thirty-two out of eighty-six) are in fact excerpts from longer texts.⁶⁷¹ The act of excerpting something, Smith hints, makes it enough in itself: a complete text. In this light, 'From the French' and 'Flounder' distinguish themselves from the Modernist

⁶⁶⁸ Camelia Elias, 'Clowns of Potentiality: Repetition and Resolution in Gertrude Stein and Emil Cioran,' *Cercles* 14 (2005), 41.

⁶⁶⁹ Seamus Perry, 'Coleridge's Literary Influence,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Frederick Burwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 668.

⁶⁷⁰ Peter Orr, 'Stevie Smith' in Sanford Sternlicht, ed. *In Search of Stevie Smith* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 31.

⁶⁷¹ Stevie Smith, ed. *The Batsford Book of Children's Verse* (London: Batsford, 1970), 5-7.

fragments of little magazines, which look forwards towards a whole, or stage a failed attempt to add up into a larger narrative. The act of excerpting or writing a fragment, for Smith, makes it self-sufficient: mummifies it into aphoristic solidity.

Collecting Fragments

Like Eliot in *The Waste Land* – like Joyce in his catty books of solecisms by contemporaries,⁶⁷² and like Flaubert’s collection of platitudes in his *Dictionary of Received Ideas*⁶⁷³ – Stevie Smith preserved scraps of language. Overhearing is important to her: it offers snatches of words, covertly recorded, stolen and reused. Smith’s archives show how she hoarded more and more quotations, on scraps of paper and in her journals:

Wild weather we’re having.
What!? Oh, I thought you said ‘mild’.⁶⁷⁴

Guard well her sleeping form!

“And her appropriate laughter”
This is what modern poems are written like.

Then spake the American lady, & she said:
“My name is Purrel, I am cast before swine.”

“when she entered anthropology”⁶⁷⁵

“A small niece of mine once wrote a little tale with the title “A Bqlir Chesterdroves” (a peculiar chest of drawers)⁶⁷⁶

⁶⁷² See Eloise Knowlton, *Joyce, Joyceans, and the Rhetoric of Citation* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 38.

⁶⁷³ Roger Shattuck, ‘The Alphabet and the Junkyard,’ in *The Innocent Eye: On Modern Literature and the Arts* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984), 33.

⁶⁷⁴ Pencilled note, Series 2, Box 1, Folder 1, Stevie Smith papers, 1924-1970. Coll. No. 1976.012. McFarlin Library. Department of Special Collections and University Archives. The University of Tulsa.

⁶⁷⁵ Stevie Smith, red notebook, Series 2, Box 2, Folder 9, Stevie Smith papers, University of Tulsa.

⁶⁷⁶ Stevie Smith, reading journal, Series 5, Box 1, Folder 6, Stevie Smith papers, University of Tulsa.

This becomes Smith's primary mode of writing: the scribbled witticism barely changed when it became her published poem 'Pearl', quoted in full in the introduction. The approach invades even her more formal work projects. Neat schoolgirlish notes in her reading journals give way, as time passes, to straight-up quotation from the texts under study. Even a careful, dignified account of an art exhibition, where the young Smith exerts herself to comment intelligently on the paintings, is disrupted by a sneakily recorded witticism. She draws a line at the bottom of the page and writes underneath: 'Pleistocene, so called because it was ~~muddy~~ sticky cf. Plastocene', creating a secret mischievous identity to run alongside the official version of herself as conscientious scholar.⁶⁷⁷

Unlike Eliot and Flaubert, however, Smith does not use her collected scraps of jokes, puns and pithy observation to project mingling, disarticulated voices or a sense of destruction, nor to testify to the linguistic failures of others. Her practice is closer to Joyce's, who, Sara Danius notes, 'reveled [sic]' in the middlebrow rhymes and phrases which he collected.⁶⁷⁸ In the same way, Smith carefully records jokes, snippets, anecdotes and portentous phrases as significant or interesting in their own right, most notably in her archive lists of quotations, phrases and aphorisms titled 'Beyond Words'.⁶⁷⁹ A number of these made their way into *Some Are More Human Than Others* (1958), her book of captioned drawings discussed in Chapter Five, and many of the lines jotted down in spare corners turn up in *Novel on Yellow Paper*:

⁶⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁷⁸ Sara Danius, 'Joyce's Scissors: Modernism and the Dissolution of the Event,' *New Literary History* 39, no. 4 (2008): 1006.

⁶⁷⁹ Stevie Smith, 'Beyond Words,' Series 2, Box 1, Folder 7, Stevie Smith papers, University of Tulsa.

So now you shall have some more nice little quotations for your scrap book. Or if you have no scrap book you can shoot them at your friends at your high-class parties...

Let everything that creeps console itself, for everything that is elevated dies...

The Dead Sea is very fortunately situated as compared with the German potash deposits inasmuch as its waters for practical purposes contain no sulphates. The sulphates though delightful from the theoretical point of view of the academic chemist have the habit of forming a large number of double salts, which would be the despair of many people.

Jessie: What is a love apple? A love apple is just another name for the tomato.⁶⁸⁰

Gathering lines from romances, geography books and the question-and-answer pages of magazines, and presenting them as equivalent, Smith performs the 'total aestheticization of use value' which Susan Stewart associates with the collection.⁶⁸¹ Stripped from their original context, these lines become neat and pretty ('nice'), ready for her reader's 'scrap book'. A scrap book, importantly, does not invite one to read it as a chaotic chorus of voices, like Mirrlees's *Paris*. It promises an orderly management of wisdom: neither claiming to fit its parts together into a single complete whole, nor implicitly lamenting (in the conflicts between the parts) the impossibility of that unitary whole. In other words, Smith presents these snippets from magazine columns and chemistry books with the grandeur of an aphoristic collection. They do not dissolve into Eliotic choruses, but act *as* aphorisms. They can fit into a scrap-book, or they can be inscribed with aphoristic solidity: shot at friends at parties, like small hard bullets. Smith chooses lines which are technically fragments, but whose rhetorical assertiveness and certainty allows them to deliver an aphoristic punch.

⁶⁸⁰ Stevie Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper* (London: Virago, 2015), 33-4.

⁶⁸¹ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 151.

How does the act of collection foster, rather than compromising, the self-sufficiency of short texts which originated as partial and fragmentary? Gary Saul Morson argues that it is the act of ‘citation in anthologies’ which allows a quotation to ‘[live] *as* an aphorism precisely in its cited form.’⁶⁸² A collection, in other words, is the site in which a line acquires its status as aphorism. Virginia Woolf’s short story ‘Solid Objects’ (1920), about the compulsions which underlie a collection of small objects, offers a twentieth-century language for the complex status of small fragments which claim solid, self-sufficient identities within a larger collection.⁶⁸³ Digging idly in the sand, John finds an alluring piece of sea-glass:

It pleased him; it puzzled him; it was so hard, so concentrated, so definite an object compared with the vague sea and the hazy shore.⁶⁸⁴

John’s first encounter with a ‘solid object’ (for him, pieces of glass, china and iron) captures the fascination and mystery of the aphoristic encounter. Ben Grant describes how ‘the smallness of the [aphoristic] form makes it a tactile object, something we can almost hold in our hand’,⁶⁸⁵ and Geoffrey Bennington notes that the ‘formal ‘hardness’ of the maxim frequently elicits ‘metaphors of jewellery and treasure’.⁶⁸⁶ Both aphorism and object are small and contained: ‘definite’, both in terms of being clearly defined, and in terms of the significance which they seem assertively to claim. Woolf’s language suggests the aphorism’s ‘hardness’ (resisting analytic penetration). And, like the

⁶⁸² Gary Saul Morson, ‘The Aphorism: Fragments from the Breakdown of Reason’ *New Literary History* 34, no. 3 (2003): 423.

⁶⁸³ On Woolf’s conception of short stories as themselves ‘solid objects’, see Laura Marcus, ‘The Short Fiction,’ in *A Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. Jessica Berman (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 139.

⁶⁸⁴ Virginia Woolf, ‘Solid Objects,’ in *A Haunted House: The Complete Shorter Fiction*, ed. Susan Dick (London: Vintage, 2003), 97.

⁶⁸⁵ Grant, 4.

⁶⁸⁶ Geoffrey Bennington, *Sententiousness and the Novel: Laying Down the Law in Eighteenth-Century French Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 56.

aphorism, the piece of glass refuses, in Jacques Derrida's terms, any explanatory 'demonstration': as John gazes at it, his questions about its provenance and significance 'remained unanswered'.⁶⁸⁷

Crucially, the early- to mid-twentieth century witnessed the association of the (literal or metaphorical) solid object with this combination of self-sufficiency and fluidity, concreteness and amorphousness. Walter Benjamin acknowledged, in *The Arcades Project*, 'the wholly irrational character of the object's mere presence at hand', suggesting a paradigm in which the object's obtrusive physicality becomes overwhelming or impossible to assimilate.⁶⁸⁸ The object, here, is too solid. It refuses to cohere in the viewer's mind, and therefore hovers on the edge of disintegration. In his essay on 'Solid Objects', Bill Brown quotes Leonard Woolf's observation that the industrial revolution led to an 'intense preoccupation with material things': globalisation and modernity saw the world being scoured for resources.⁶⁸⁹ Observing that during the First World War, the military searched the English countryside for scrap iron to use for bombs (just as John winkles a piece of iron out from under a furze bush in Virginia Woolf's short story), Brown argues that Woolf is exploring the social imperative at this time towards the reappropriation and transformation of waste, aesthetically and practically, into something new.⁶⁹⁰ For Brown, therefore, 'Solid Objects' is 'a story not about solidity, but about the fluidity of objects, about how they

⁶⁸⁷ Jacques Derrida, 'Fifty-two Aphorisms for a Foreword,' in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg, trans. Andrew Benjamin (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 2:124; Woolf, 'Solid Objects,' 99.

⁶⁸⁸ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 204-5.

⁶⁸⁹ Bill Brown, 'The Secret Life of Things (Virginia Woolf and the Matter of Modernism),' *Modernism/modernity* 6, no. 2 (April 1999): 17.

⁶⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

decompose and recompose themselves as the object of a new fascination.’⁶⁹¹ War’s scarcity troubled the solidity of objects’ and materials’ identities; so did new ways of thinking. Douglas Mao identifies the sense, in this period, that ‘the particular, the concrete, and the auratic were threatened as never before by habits of generalization and abstraction serving a newly triumphant science’.⁶⁹² In the early part of the century, then, the solid object seems to be losing its solidity. It slips, according to Jean Baudrillard, between existing as a ‘resistant material body...[and as] a mental realm’. To return to the terms of Chapter One, the object is both weighty and weightless.⁶⁹³

Perhaps as a result of this sense of objects’ instability, a ‘collecting aesthetic’ emerged, Jeremy Braddock finds, at the height of modernism in the 1920s. This manifested both in large art collections and in smaller contexts such as the anthology. While Braddock focuses on questions of ‘art’s institutional representation’, a collection is also a way of reasserting an object’s very existence as an object.⁶⁹⁴ Susan Pearce notes how the object only gains existence and meaning when collected and positioned in relation to other objects.⁶⁹⁵ Collecting, then, becomes an instinctive response to entities which both promise and withhold solidity and reliability – such as the aphorism.

Part of this sensation, as ‘Solid Objects’ depicts it, derives from the fact that John’s objects are technically fragments (like the quotations Stevie Smith repeats through her

⁶⁹¹ Ibid., 3.

⁶⁹² Douglas Mao, *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 6.

⁶⁹³ Jean Baudrillard, ‘The System of Collecting,’ in *The Cultures of Collecting*, ed. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), 7.

⁶⁹⁴ Jeremy Braddock, *Collecting as Modernist Practice* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2012), 2.

⁶⁹⁵ Susan M. Pearce, *On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1995), 14.

writing), but have been thoroughly, mysteriously formed into aphoristically contained entities. The aphorism's interpretative impenetrability is experienced as opaque, but also, from another angle, unreliable, dissolving and unpredictable. Collections are the aphorism's natural habitat – the place where, as in Smith's essay 'My Muse', they gather together – since there is, in Derrida's phrase, 'always more than one aphorism'.⁶⁹⁶ In this period, the collection of aphorisms is importantly distinct from T. S. Eliot's collection of fragments in *The Waste Land*. Eliot's collecting of fragments as fragments nods towards the creation of a singular whole, while performing the impossibility of that endeavour. Collecting aphorisms (or fragments as aphorisms), which insist formally on their own wholeness, is a process of repeatedly insisting on or reinscribing that promised wholeness, precisely because it does not materialise as we expect it to.

So John's reaction to his piece of sea-glass in 'Solid Objects' (the first object in what would become a collection) mirrors the reaction to the aphorism which oscillates in and out of wholeness. 'It pleased him, it puzzled him...' On one hand, John is 'pleased', or satisfied: a need has been fulfilled. On the other, he is 'puzzled': not fully satisfied, retaining the sense – like the publisher's reader 'E.B', struggling to get to grips with Smith's poems – that he is missing something, or that something is missing.

Solid but amorphous, the object reflects the way that the fragment moves in and out of an aphoristic identity: it may please or puzzle depending on the lens through which it is viewed. Preserving a fragment in a collection can give it the solid status of aphorism,

⁶⁹⁶ Derrida, 'Fifty-two Aphorisms', 125.
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framed as enough in itself without the promise of continuation. And yet, as John's experience hints, the aphorism draws its specific effects from the nod it makes to the fragmentary: the possibility, held in play, that this tiny enigmatic text might in fact have been left unfinished. Its brevity leaves its audience wanting more: John stares longer at his piece of glass than he or his friend can explain.

Aphorism: Going On

So, overwhelmingly, small texts spark the desire for more: either for more of the same text (a fragment which may be continued or lengthened), or for more texts like it. The rhythm of the collection, particularly the aphoristic collection, hinges not only on keeping the fascinating object in place, but by ensuring that there is something to divert us from it: in other words, offering more, an opportunity to go on. Collection also involves an act of passing on, from the already-collected object to a new source of interest. In her aphorisms in *X*, with which this thesis opened, Smith whisks the reader on from one aphorism to the next. Her aphorisms are devastating, resigned, callous. They cut the poet down to size, dismiss him or her as a person of no significance – but the text goes on, from aphorism to aphorism, before the reader has time to dwell on or react to these brutal revelations:

Poetry is very strong and never has any kindness at all. She is Thetis and Hermes, the Angel, the white horse and the landscape. All Poetry has to do is make a strong communication. All the poet has to do is listen. The poet is not an important fellow. There will always be another poet.⁶⁹⁷

⁶⁹⁷ Vernon Watkins, Patrick Kavanagh, Hugh MacDiarmid, Stevie Smith, 'Poets on Poetry,' in *An Anthology from X: A Quarterly Review of Literature and the Arts, 1959-1962*, ed. David Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 69.

In Woolf's 'Solid Objects', the object drives John, with the same brisk dispatch, to move on to the next collected thing, and the next. The piece of china he retrieves from behind the railings goes on the mantelpiece with the glass:

As his eyes passed from one to another, the determination to possess objects that even surpassed these tormented the young man.⁶⁹⁸

With two objects on the mantelpiece, his eyes can '[pass] from one to another'. But inherent in the capacity of the individual object (and now the newly formed collection) to sate John's need is a further dissatisfaction. John is 'tormented' by the urge to add to his collection, which signifies lack instead of completeness and solidity. He is filled, in Werner Muensterberger's terms, with 'a chronic restiveness that can be curbed only by more finds or yet another acquisition'.⁶⁹⁹

When Muensterberger associates collection with the 'need to achieve *allness*', he implicitly demonstrates the impossibility of any such endpoint.⁷⁰⁰ Sylvia Plath claimed that Stevie Smith's writing sparked the same insatiable compulsion, when she described herself in a letter to the older writer as 'a desperate Smith-addict'.⁷⁰¹ This language of addiction emerges in reviews of her *Selected Poems* (1962) as a way of accounting for her strangeness. A 1962 review in the TLS concludes that 'she is one of those who attract addicts, leaving many merely indifferent',⁷⁰² while *The Tablet* suggested that the addictive quality of Smith's poems derives from the fact that they 'are so odd, so

⁶⁹⁸ Woolf, 'Solid Objects,' 100.

⁶⁹⁹ Werner Muensterberger. *Collecting: An Unruly Passion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 3.

⁷⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁷⁰¹ Sylvia Plath to Stevie Smith, Series 1, Box 7, Folder 2, Stevie Smith papers, University of Tulsa.

⁷⁰² 'Light but not Slight,' *Times Literary Supplement*, December 28, 1962.

unnerving, so vehemently different...those who are addicted to them cannot see why everyone does not share their addiction, and those who do not like them cannot see why anyone should.⁷⁰³ The reviewer casts a taste for Smith's eccentric, undervalued works as something exclusive, closed off to the common run of people. Woolf's 'Solid Objects' similarly encourages the reader to sympathise with John: his capacity to see beauty and value in strange places, and to set himself against the world in fulfilling this desire, casts him as a misunderstood genius. Smith's addictive, pleasing-but-puzzling poems and John's solid objects both posit a reader-collector aroused by eccentricity, drawn to an oddness not everyone can appreciate, who cannot now be satiated – whose reading only sparks a craving for more.

Like the drug Plath implies, for those who have become hooked, Smith's wares induce not satisfaction but a need for more. Because they stall and confuse the reader – because the disconcerting simplicity of a poem like 'Croft' (CP, 218), discussed in Chapter One, resists any critical summation – they engender a perpetual sense that, in the next encounter, fulfilment will surely be reached. Plath and others read Smith's work in the same obsessive, passing-on spirit with which a collector amasses their artefacts. Smith's inclusion in John Gross's and Geoffrey Grigson's books of aphorisms and epigrams points to her collectability. Grigson, his blurb tells us, 'has been copying out epigrams since his undergraduate days. This new Faber Book is the result.'⁷⁰⁴ Smith becomes part of a personal as well as a public collection, part of a dedicated (even obsessive) life's collecting project.

⁷⁰³ 'Angle Shot,' *The Tablet*, June 15, 1963.

⁷⁰⁴ Geoffrey Grigson, ed. *The Faber Book of Epigrams and Epitaphs* (London: Faber & Faber, 1977).

The response to the aphorism's claim to totality, either by authors or by readers, seems therefore to be a counter-totalizing: collecting more aphorisms, in an instinctive attempt to gather all the truth possible. To meet this need, to be aphoristically collectable, Smith makes her small products abundantly available. Her early critics often focused on the numerousness of her poems. While the early reader 'E.B' lamented that her poems were 'so many',⁷⁰⁵ John Bayley wrote in the *Listener*: 'it is an excellent thing that there are so many poems in whose bizarre copiousness we can immerse ourselves...'⁷⁰⁶ Bayley's is a mixed compliment. The 'excellent thing' is not the poems themselves, but their 'bizarre copiousness' in which one can be 'immerse[d]': a word which suggests drowning or losing oneself, the oblivion of addiction.

Wanting 'more', however, carries a double valence. On one hand, the collector wants more of the same, which is why their collection goes on growing. On the other, the collector collects objects precisely in order to own them, to keep them in one place, so that they can be returned to and re-experienced. Smith constantly stages and re-stages her poems: not just literally, in her performances, but by studding her essays and novels with them, creating mini-anthologies in pieces such as 'Too Tired for Words' and 'Simply Living', which use selections of her poems to illustrate their points.⁷⁰⁷ Her long-form writing is itself a site of collection; it offers the reader a chance to return to a poem again and again. 'To an American Publisher' asks, wearily, if perhaps such repetition and return might allow her to dismount the writing treadmill for a while:

⁷⁰⁵ 'E.B', reader's report, Series 2, Box 4, Folder 17, Stevie Smith papers, University of Tulsa.

⁷⁰⁶ John Bayley, 'Obscure crucifixions,' *The Listener*, 25 September 25, 1975.

⁷⁰⁷ Stevie Smith, 'Too Tired for Words,' and 'Simply Living,' in *Me Again: The Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith*, ed. Jack Barbera and William McBrien (London: Virago, 1982), 111-117, 108-110.

You say I must write *another* book? But I've just written this one.
You liked it so much that's the reason? Read it again then. (CP, 310)

But you cannot read something again unless you have stopped reading it; returning to something necessitates that you have departed, even momentarily, and this ethic of loss or departure is part of the collection. To return to 'Solid Objects', Woolf positions the pleasure of the solid object in the fact that it can in fact be abandoned. John's piece of glass, like the aphorism, can be '[l]ooked at again and again'. To look at something 'again and again' involves regularly looking away. Its very self-sufficiency creates the urge to pass from it. And we witness this act of endlessly passing by in the way critics tend to engage with Smith. Arthur Rankin, author of the first book-length study of Smith, exemplifies a tendency in Smith criticism to echo the form of the aphorism collection: he resorts to serving up one poem after another to his readers, with minimal interrogation or analysis.⁷⁰⁸ In doing so, he highlights one aspect of her aphoristic aesthetic: the tension between feeling that the poem is enough in itself, that there is nothing more to add – and at the same time, feeling propelled onwards, to make another attempt at understanding and articulation.

I would contend, however, that Smith invites this particular mode of reading. In a 1942 letter to John Hayward, she describes her writing process in terms of overproduction, texts which pile up rather than each demanding sustained engagement: 'I was so inspired...that I wrote six more poems and did 24 new drawings, and now I am terribly tied up and my room looks like a paper chase.'⁷⁰⁹ This is abundant language as escapism. The sense is of Smith's language as enabling not communication, but an

⁷⁰⁸ Arthur C. Rankin, *The Poetry of Stevie Smith: 'Little Girl Lost'* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe Ltd, 1985).

⁷⁰⁹ Frances Spalding, *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 161.

effect achieved through sheer verbal volume: to use her most famous line, not waving but drowning. Passing from one poem to another becomes a mode of taking refuge, seeking repeated solace in language which is too 'bizarre' to be penetrable for meaning – on whose flatly compelling surface we remain – but which soothes in its tonal authority.

Quoted lines appear, therefore, at moments of high emotion in Smith's novels, in order to flatten them out, or at junctions where the protagonist expresses a fear that her reader may be losing interest. After several pages of her views on imperialism, Pompey in *Over the Frontier* (1938) offers a long extract from a military memoir 'to make a nice break and a 'change' for you, dear Reader.'⁷¹⁰ Acts of anthologisation have a calming, refreshing effect, like the excursion or day-trip which Pompey's phrasing suggests; they manage and contain situations which threaten to become too intense. After describing the exquisite agony of spraining her knee, Pompey offers her reader liniment in the form of four poems on the Crucifixion:

At random there are these poems:

the hill is all bald stone
And now and then the hangers gave a groan
Up in the dark, three shapes with arms outspread ...

...Then there is also this:

Large throne of Love! Royally spread
With purple of too rich a red ...

...and this:

The third hour's deafen'd with the cry

⁷¹⁰ Stevie Smith, *Over the Frontier* (London: Virago, 1980), 101.

Of ‘Crucify Him, crucify’...

...and this:

Drop, drop, slow tears,
And bathe those beauteous feet...[ellipses mine]⁷¹¹

Presenting poem after poem without annotation, strung together thinly with the repeated ‘and this’, Pompey offers more than was needed: the ‘unnecessary’, to echo Chapter One, the surplus to requirements which nevertheless compels.

The burgeoning of a collection of small objects – the desire of the reader to have more and more units, felt also and fulfilled by the writer who goes on offering them up – reflects a relationship between the fragmentary and the whole. Collecting these broken bits (fragments) turns them into something solid (aphorisms). But in aggregate, presented together, their juxtaposition fuels (as well as fulfils) a rhythm of going-on between them. As we move paratactically from one aphorism to the next in a collection, in the flat motion described in Chapter Two, we both do and do not read the units as sequential to each other.

And this brings us to the other kind of ‘more’, the type of going-on which Smith’s longer poems in particular offer: a lengthening of a short text, your own or belonging to others, beyond its original bounds. Smith does not just gather scraps from other writers, but incorporates them into her writing, as a prompt to kickstart a poem. She installs fragments of Coleridge’s (itself-fragmentary) poem ‘Christabel’ (1816) into her poem ‘Eulenspiegel’:

⁷¹¹ Smith, *Over the Frontier*, 69.

The Mastiff old did not awake,
Yet she an angry moan did make.
And what can ail the Mastiff Bitch?
Never till now she utter'd Yell
Beneath the eye of Christabel.
Perhaps, it is the Owlet's Scritch:
For what can ail the Mastiff Bitch? (S. T. Coleridge, 'Christabel')⁷¹²

Oh what can ail the gravid bitch
That howls upon the midnight stroke? ('Eulenspiegel', CP, 105)

Smith's practice of collecting fragments which might one day be lengthened or repurposed in her own poems echoes James Joyce's strategy with his 'epiphanies'. Gathering overheard fragments or personal meditations between 1901-2 and 1904,⁷¹³ he constructed them into an overarching if unsustainable aesthetic,⁷¹⁴ outlined in *Stephen Hero* (1904-6):

He [Stephen] was passing through Eccles' St one evening, one misty evening, with all these thoughts dancing the dance of unrest in his brain when a trivial incident set him composing some ardent verses which he entitled a 'Vilanelle of the Temptress'. A young lady was standing on the steps of one of those brown brick houses which seem the very incarnation of Irish paralysis. A young gentleman was leaning on the rusty railings of the area. Stephen as he passed on his quest heard the following fragment of colloquy out of which he received an impression keen enough to afflict his sensitiveness very severely.
The Young Lady – (drawling discreetly)...O, yes...I was...at the...cha... pel....
The Young Gentleman – (inaudibly)...I...(again inaudibly)...I...
The Young Lady – (softly)...I...but you're...ve...ry...wick...ed....
This triviality made him think of collecting many such moments together in a book of epiphanies.⁷¹⁵

⁷¹² Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Poetical Works I: Poems (Reading Text): Part I*, ed. J. C. C. Mays (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 488.

⁷¹³ A. Walton Litz, 'Introduction,' in James Joyce, *Poems and Shorter Writings*, ed. Richard Ellman, A. Walton Litz and John Whittier-Ferguson (London: Faber & Faber, 1991), 157.

⁷¹⁴ See Michael Sayeau, *Against the Event: The Everyday and the Evolution of Modernist Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 44: the epiphanies 'represent the fulfilment of Conrad's intimation of a literature put out of work, moving busily but to no end, simulating the received eventual structure but without actually offering the development or revelation that is supposed to come with it.'

⁷¹⁵ James Joyce, *Stephen Hero*, ed. Theodore Spencer (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975), 216.

Stephen imagines this moment as complete in itself: a unitary epiphany, to be collected in a book with others like it. But this fragment also ‘set [Stephen] composing’: a small incident, recorded and made textual as a fragment, without context, past or future, is or may be the seed from which outgrowth might occur.⁷¹⁶ This contested relationship between units of text – where something was felt to be finished but went on nevertheless, was succeeded by further units – models the particular relationship between the opening stanzas of many of Smith’s poems, and the rest of these texts. In this poetic structure, the opening tends towards an aphorism which reluctantly allows itself to be misidentified as a fragment (something which could and therefore does go on, as the poem continues) but retains its aphoristic resistance to interrogation.

Many of Stevie Smith’s poems carry this same sense that they were finished after the first verse, but reluctantly continued. ‘Our Bog is Dood’ similarly continues itself beyond the play on ‘our dog is dead’ (or, possibly, according to J. Edward Mallot, ‘our god is good’)⁷¹⁷ by asking pedantically probing questions which know that they can never be answered to anyone’s satisfaction.

Our Bog is dood, our Bog is dood,
They lisped in accents mild,
But when I asked them to explain
They grew a little wild.
How do you know your Bog is dood
My darling little child? (CP, 302)

⁷¹⁶In A. Walton Litz’s account, however, these ‘epiphanies’ do not so much generate more writing as find homes in longer fictions: ‘The epiphanies are like an artist’s *trouvailles*: their significance lies in the writer’s recognition of their potentialities, his faith that a revealing context will eventually be found.’ A. Walton Litz, ‘Introduction’, 159.

⁷¹⁷J. Edward Mallot, ‘Not Drowning But Waving: Stevie Smith and the Language of the Lake,’ *Journal of Modern Literature* 27 no. 1/2 (2003): 187.

The children go wild because Smith's speaker is transgressing the rules of their form: a sealed declaration does not allow questions. The poem offers the same experience of satisfied dissatisfaction found when one passes between objects/aphorisms in a collection. Attempting to probe further into the phrase 'Our Bog is Dood', the poem's narrator finds herself up against another piece of suggestive but sealed language.

Then tell me, darling little ones,
What's dood, suppose Bog is?
Just what we think, the answer came,
Just what we think it is.
They bowed their heads. Our Bog is ours,
And we are wholly his. (CP, 302)

The sealed line 'Our Bog is dood, our Bog is dood' with which the poem opens provokes a desire for more. The 'more' the speaker gets is the 'more' of the aphoristic collection rather than the fragment: she moves from one version of the same to the next, rather than managing sequential development. In response, the poem's narrator stages an act of withdrawal: she leaves the children behind, and imagines them being drowned by a sudden surge of the sea. She enters, in other words, into the dynamic of the aphoristic collection. John's eyes rove between his items in 'Solid Objects': passing between them involves constantly alternating which one he departs from. Equally, passing from one aphorism to another is both an act of moving towards and of moving away. The repeated experience one wishes to have, as one moves through the collection of aphorisms, involves an act of departure, as well as a return to sameness.

Like 'Our Bog is Dood', 'Mr Over' raps out its punchline by the fourth line. The whole setup of that first stanza is directed towards this jokey payoff:

Mr Over is dead
He died fighting and true
And on his tombstone they wrote
Over to You. (CP, 299)

Yet the poem must limp on for several other stanzas, by which time the poem has turned into something completely different: a musing on death, faith and sin:

And who pray is this You
To whom Mr Over is gone?
Oh if we only knew that
We should not do wrong. (CP, 299)

Smith continues the poem by opening up the punchline, 'Over to You'. She interrogates the word 'You', lingers on it until the joke turns to despair. Throughout, one cannot forget the poem's beginnings in a punch of self-contained wordplay. That is its memorable section. Continued on, the poem becomes, in part, a text about the failure of levity to last; the impingement of dreary ongoing thought on something which might have withdrawn at its peak, but instead flattens into dolour. Unlike Mr Over himself, who died 'fighting and true', the poem is not allowed to depart on a high. Doggedly, it goes on.

Thoughts about the Person from Porlock

These questions of continuation against the possibility of departure accelerate in Smith's three-page poem, 'Thoughts about the Person from Porlock' (1962), a text

interested in this very question surrounding the aphorism: of when one gets to leave, to depart from a situation which has offered all it can, against social pressure to continue. Smith's poem springboards from Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan' (1816), as Smith cogitates over the merciful interruption offered to that earlier poet by the Person from Porlock, saving him from the charge that he ran out of inspiration and providing an excuse for leaving 'Kubla Khan' in a "fragmentary" state:

He was weeping and wailing, I am finished, finished,
I shall never write another word of it
When along comes the Person from Porlock
And takes the blame for it. (CP, 445)

Her poem deals with the pressure to write more when faced with writer's block; it describes a longing to be allowed to stop talking, to have someone 'bring my thoughts to an end'. She couches interruption of this sort as a gift: a withdrawal before one can overstay one's welcome, before others (and oneself) can grow weary. When Hans-Jost Frey describes conversation as interruption, he reveals how interruption humanely regulates the presence of the individual in the social space, allowing them to stop, justifiably, before they have embarrassed themselves by going on too long.⁷¹⁸

With no sign of her own person from Porlock, however, Smith's speaker has to go on, to extort more from a text which has already made its brief original point: that Coleridge had run out of inspiration for 'Kubla Khan' even before the Person from Porlock knocked. She finds ways to coax the narrative into continuation, fusing 'Person' and 'Porlock' to produce 'Porson'. 'Porlock' also provides a location ('He lived at the

⁷¹⁸ Hans-Jost Frey, *Interruptions*, trans. Georgia Albert (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), 6.

bottom of Porlock Hill'), and, through its rhyme, an occupation for the Person's grandmother ('a Warlock'). Wordplay can take the narrative a certain distance, spin it out a little bit longer. Quickly, however, the speaker begins to dry up:

And he lived at the bottom of the hill as I said
And he had a cat named Flo,
And he had a cat named Flo. (CP, 446)

The Muse has flown; the poem stalls into a prosaic repetition of randomly invented facts. By going on, the speaker tries to engender 'flo[w]', to persuade the poem to keep going. Smith's notebook drafts make this process very clear:

~~I think~~ he {certainly} knew, {for sure} come Person or not
He was finished with Kubla Khan.

~~Yes, He~~ {Yes, he knew he} was finished with Kubla Khan
He would never write another word of it

[another draft:]
As he knew ahem oh yes he knew
As already he knew⁷¹⁹

The jaunty, singalong repetitions, as the draft coughs and agrees with itself, fill the textual space, bulking out the line: one can hear Smith trying but not quite succeeding in catching on to a rhythm which would carry the text forward productively. Her speaker signals that she cannot simply stop or abandon the poem as a fragment. She must generate more, for if the poem were to get going, to fall into an inspired track, then perhaps it might create its own conditions in which a respectable, closing-off ending

⁷¹⁹ Stevie Smith, black notebook, Series 2, Box 9, Folder 1. Stevie Smith papers, University of Tulsa. Braces indicate sections which have been added to the typescript by hand; parts scored out have been crossed out in the typescript.

could take place. The speaker becomes increasingly desperate to enforce an end which would allow her to escape with dignity. But she tries first the Biblical line which might close prayer, 'For ever and ever amen', then an imperious apostrophising speech-act, 'O Person from Porlock', to no avail. This formal language of closure tends in other contexts to 'create...a sense of...finality and stability'.⁷²⁰ Yet these devices fail to bring the poem to a close. In spite of these pre-formed phrases which should clean up and tuck away anxiety, the poem dribbles on. Smith's repeated, failed kickstarts towards an ending offer the poem its eventual subject matter: what happens when nothing remains to be said, but one goes on anyway.

The constant continuations of 'Thoughts about the Person from Porlock' signal that it is marking time just a little bit longer. To an extent, this is an act of courtesy, a decision not to bolt the scene or go away before the narrative has "gone somewhere", to wait until the (or an) end. Courteously hanging around, from a particular angle, becomes a way of keeping up appearances, or keeping one's moral end up. In the same instance, however, Smith flags up her own over-extension: we can never forget that this continuation is excess, a refusal to give in to the fragmentary but unable to find the grooves of a successful whole. Lengthening a text ironically makes it more fragmentary: it abandons the brevity of the aphorism, but fails to become something complete.

'Thoughts about the Person from Porlock' explores what happens when closure becomes unavailable to the writer. Its nightmare-scape revolves around not being allowed to withdraw: to have to stay on, embarrassing yourself by going on too long,

⁷²⁰ Beverly Coyle, *A Thought to Be Rehearsed: Aphorism in Wallace Stevens's Poetry* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983), 2.

sharing more (and more intimately) than you intended. Rather than the tactful rhythm of burgeoning offered by the collection of solid, enclosed units like aphorisms – where one may come, and go, and return, and freely add more texts with a paratactic flexibility, since each is already finished in itself – this is the ‘more’ of the fragment: gaping open, eliciting an anxious obligation to lengthen and lengthen it until an appropriate ending is found.

Smith associated interruption – both from outside, like the Person from Porlock, and the self-interruption of the aphorism, boldly making a claim while stopping short – with completion. Frey underscores this approach when he writes, ‘What breaks off justifiably has ended. The discourse that is able to say why it breaks off is not fragmentary.’⁷²¹ Having an excuse for breaking off (like an interruption) preserves one from the charge of fragmentariness. Stopping before you are ready to end, before you have crossed into excess, you can go away with dignity. The fragment, conversely, cannot go away. Haunted by the shape of a larger whole, it lingers on. It has exhausted itself, so it cannot continue, and fails to blossom into a final completed whole. But neither can it depart while it hangs on to the faint hope of future conclusion.

Smith’s writing is fascinated by this fragmentary space, like that of ‘Porlock’: where the writer runs out of steam before reaching a point at which they can gracefully finish, and therefore has to helplessly generate more and more in the hope of finding an appropriate end. Smith herself was often terribly tired, having had very poor health as a child (although her friends suggested that she sometimes played up to this image as frail and

⁷²¹ Frey, 72.

fatigued in order to get what she wanted).⁷²² But the writer who becomes too tired to finish properly and neatly invites both her empathy and her contempt. She contextualises 'The Deserter' with an explanation that its speaker was 'a deserter to ill health', who took to his bed instead of dedicatedly pushing on. The speaker emphasises his helplessness:

The world has come upon me, I used to keep it a long way off,
But now I have been run over and I am in the hands of the hospital staff.
They say I have not been run over as a matter of fact it's imagination,
But they all agree I should be kept in bed under observation.
I must say it's very comfortable here, nursie has such nice hands,
And every morning the doctor comes and lances my tuberculous glands.
He says he does nothing of the sort, but I have my own feelings about that,
And what they are if you don't mind I shall continue to keep under my hat.
My friend, if you call it a friend, has left me he says I am a deserter to ill health,
And that the things I should think about have made off for ever, and so has my
wealth... (CP, 295)

This is the babbling we recognise from 'Porlock': a strained nervous system, afraid to pause or to dwell on the 'feelings' which must be kept 'under [his] hat' instead of confronted. The deserter has run out of steam, but is keeping up appearances by claiming he has 'been run over': interrupted, in other words, in the middle of his trajectory while walking. The person run over is a victim of circumstance, not at fault, rudely interrupted and therefore forgiven.

Granting the Deserter of her poem no such excuse, Smith criticises him in her essay 'Too Tired for Words':

...[tiredness] can provide an excuse for not writing at all. One hugs one's disabilities, one cultivates them, one becomes – like the wretch I have put in the

⁷²² See, for instance, Elisabeth Lutyens, *A Goldfish Bowl* (London: Cassell, 1972), 313.

next poem – a deserter to ill health. (The wretch was a writer but now he lies in his hospital bed – and let the Muse go hang).⁷²³

Smith claims she sees through the speaker's trick: he says he has been interrupted but really he has simply let the Muse 'hang' in purgatorial suspension. It is difficult to know how seriously to take Smith's criticism; there is an element we are meant to find absurd, I think, in the disjunction between the poem's message and that of its framing story. She begins the essay by suggesting that forcing oneself on to finish something might be creatively productive:

One forces oneself, gets a bit feverish (and much more tired) and eventually, out of the strain and exasperation, the words come headlong...the scene shifts wonderfully in the light of the words that are, by reason of the tiredness, just a bit off-beam.⁷²⁴

Forcing oneself onwards towards an appropriate moment for withdrawal, then, can be productive, Smith thinks. She laments, in an interview, that it was 'wicked' of Coleridge not to push on with 'Christabel' and try to reach a proper, dignified conclusion.⁷²⁵ Poor Coleridge seems to have felt it was wicked too. His letters show him making excuses, casting about for ideal circumstances in which to bring the poem to an end. 'By the Sea side I hope to finish my Christabel,' he writes to Thomas Boosey, of that very un-sea-sidey poem, in August 1816.⁷²⁶ But he never finished his Christabel, and even the text now extant took several years to write. Gaps elapsed between the writing of the first part (written 1798-9), the second part (1800), and the conclusion to the second part

⁷²³ Stevie Smith, 'Too Tired for Words,' in *Me Again*, 113-4.

⁷²⁴ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁷²⁵ Jonathan Williams, 'Much Further Out Than You Thought,' in Sternlicht, *In Search of Stevie Smith*, 42.

⁷²⁶ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Volume IV, 1815-1819*, ed. Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 663.

(1801).⁷²⁷ The conclusion to Part II, J. C. C. Mays notes, does not appear in any manuscript of the poem. Coleridge included it in a letter to Robert Southey on 6th May 1801, as a description of his son Hartley; it may not have joined 'Christabel' until as late as 1816, when the poem was published.⁷²⁸

This disjunctive, fragmented history hints that, even in its final form, 'Christabel' is a text internally marked by evidence of its own uncomfortable relationship with closure. Wordsworth felt that Coleridge should have stopped writing the poem after the first part: mood, tone and image shift significantly across the poem.⁷²⁹ Mays, editing Coleridge, echoes this view, suggesting that Part II was added 'to an essentially complete fragment'.⁷³⁰ But Coleridge overextended the poem, and trapped himself – like the speaker of 'Thoughts About the Person from Porlock' – in a situation where he needed to push on to a new end, but could not. Though in 1820, he was still insisting that he could 'no doubt' finish Christabel if only he could find himself 'easy in mind',⁷³¹ the text hangs open in the form of a fragment, unable quite to end: causing Coleridge guilt, annoying Wordsworth.

So, in a manuscript notebook, Stevie Smith made an abortive attempt to continue the poem for Coleridge:

Christabel has left the castle
Because of the snake-lady, she lost the battle

⁷²⁷ Coleridge, *Collected Works*, 478.

⁷²⁸ *Ibid.*, 503.

⁷²⁹ *Ibid.*, 476.

⁷³⁰ *Ibid.*, 479.

⁷³¹ Samuel Taylor Coleridge to Thomas Allsop, March 30, 1820, in *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Volume V, 1820-1825* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 31.

She hates snakes and has gone to the sea
But oh it is so wintry

There she has met an aged elf
Who say, Christabel be true to yourself
[...]

Take this stone, Princess
(For so you should be
A princess, in a far [illegible])
Look to the stone and look in it, see,
It will tell you when something threatens your heart⁷³²

Smith's attempt to finish 'Christabel' smacks, on one hand, of the benevolent busybody: keeping it going, hurrying it towards a tidy ending. Coleridge left his protagonist in Geraldine's thrall: when Smith takes up the narrative, Christabel has 'lost the battle', and abruptly 'has left the castle' (we do not learn how). Smith's version is breezy; it skips over tedious details surrounding Christabel's escape and gets her somewhere more exciting. Instead of completing the poem on its own terms, she uses the core images of fairytale to kickstart a new beginning: an entirely new generic direction. As in 'Thoughts about the Person from Porlock', Smith introduces chunks of familiar textual structures to induce continuation (elf, magic stone, princess, in the way that 'Porlock' used apostrophes and snatches of prayer). The poem's rhetorical similarity to 'Porlock', however, which revolves around the elusiveness of any ending, should warn us that this continuation of the poem has no intention of helping to end it. Drawing the text drastically away from the narrative direction that Coleridge set up, Smith establishes her continuation in a zone which is entirely tonally and narratively subsequent to 'Christabel's extant form. Christabel lost the battle; she left the castle; everything is over. In that flat space, Smith continues the poem.

⁷³² Stevie Smith, red notebook, Series 2, Box 2, Folder 1, Stevie Smith papers, University of Tulsa.

This narrative sabotage points to a less conscientious, ending-oriented aspect to her interest in continuing this fragment: Smith's artistic attraction towards staging the failure of texts when they are continued past the point at which they needed to stop. The short, complete text, terminating before it has said everything possible, and before it could begin to grate, finds it embarrassing to keep going. When Smith's poems continue past their self-determining point of termination, they perform their own resistance to this going-on by staging a withdrawal of effort. Her continuation of Coleridge's poem lazily stacks up ready-made textual blocks, and the poem 'Duty was his Lodestar' signals that it is phoning its plot in:

Duty was my Lobster, my Lobster was she,
And when I walked out with my lobster
I was happy.
But one day my Lobster and I fell out,
And we did nothing but
Rave and shout.

Rejoice, rejoice, Hallelujah, drink the flowing champagne,
For my darling Lobster and I
Are friends again.

Rejoice, rejoice, drink the flowing champagne cup,
My Lobster and I have made it up. (CP, 290)

Based on a mishearing of 'lobster' for 'lodestar', the poem describes someone befriending a lobster, falling out with it, and then reconciling within a few short stanzas (CP, 290). No reasons or explanations are offered. We are never allowed to forget that this tiny joke, based on a small mishearing, was initially enough in itself. Lengthened into a whole poem, the flimsiness of the narrative reads like an amused grumble against its own necessity. The small, finished joke should have been allowed to stay as it was: aphorism not fragment.

Overextended in this way, reader and writer find themselves working in a twilight zone, a flat space in which everything important has already happened. The main weight of the text has already been discharged in the very first stanza; everything subsequent is belated, existing only in the penumbra of that initial short text. Aphorism bows out graciously because it knows it has failed, or will fail, to be properly heeded. To go on elaborating, explaining and justifying seems to indicate an embarrassing (and vain) hope that the right, effective words might still, somehow, be found.

Conclusion: To Go On

I shall know when to stop, and I shall stop. And whatever I write then will be Volume Two.⁷³³ (Stevie Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper*)

46. The secret of remaining satisfied is to make it a rule to leave the table long before you have had enough. (Katherine Mansfield, 'Bites from the Apple'⁷³⁴)

Stevie Smith spends her poetic career, and her personal life, wrestling with the question of whether to go on, or whether to stop: to simply go away. Toying continually with the option of death, her poems may end early: 'I'll indicate tomorrow / Just why this path is not for you to follow' promises her poem 'From My Notes for a Series of Lectures on Murder', without ever delivering this explanation (CP, 68). Alternatively, like 'The Stroke', the poems may continue unexpectedly past their assumed ending (CP, 657). Yet, claiming towards the end of *Novel on Yellow Paper*, 'I shall know when to stop', Pompey Casmilus focuses in on an idealised point of termination: when the time has come to end, neither too late nor too early.

Knowing when to stop, in this first quotation, becomes a sign of an often feminised self-control: the moderation of knowing when to withdraw. Smith's self-portrayal as an eccentric outsider in *Novel on Yellow Paper*, through Pompey, comes via a tactical (and tactful) removal of herself: 'I wish only to be a visitor', she remarks.⁷³⁵

⁷³³ Stevie Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper* (London: Virago, 2014), 179.

⁷³⁴ Katherine Mansfield, 'Aphorisms' in *The Edinburgh Edition of the Collected Works of Katherine Mansfield, Volume 3: The Poetry and Critical Writings of Katherine Mansfield*, ed. Gerri Kimber and Angela Smith (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 420.

⁷³⁵ Smith, *Novel*, 182.

Pompey's way of being, and Smith's via Pompey, becomes inextricable from a performance of careful social manners. Not that Smith was well-behaved – she annoyed her friends and her aunt, behaved childishly and eccentrically, sang at inappropriate moments – but as Chapter Five suggests, manners fascinated her, especially when connected with prudence, frugality, and a genteel capacity to overlook or disregard. These are the manners which Katherine Mansfield plays on in aphorism 46 of 'Bites of the Apple' (c.1911), her unpublished collection of aphorisms. Like a young Victorian lady, urged to cultivate a delicate appetite, she imagines leaving the table (going away) before she is sated. Doing so, however, is the only way to guarantee that she remains satisfied. At the heart of this paradox is a play between 'remaining' and 'leav[ing]': going away, underserved, somehow allows one to go on, feeling fully served.

No coincidence, I suggest, that Mansfield wrote this wrestle with desire and satisfaction, leaving and staying, self-restraint and self-fulfilment, in the form of an aphorism. Reading Smith as aphoristic allows us to see that aphorism, too, has been concerned throughout its history with the same questions of want, fulfilment and termination. Chapter One teased out the implications of Karl Kraus's aphoristic statement that an aphorism is either half a truth or one-and-a-half truths: appearing either less than whole or more than whole, depending on the angle of view. The dilemma, both in Smith and in the aphoristic form with which she engages, is precisely this question of when to go on and when to stop and go away – and how, and if, both can somehow be achieved in the same gesture. In her nursing-home revelation, little Pompey in *Novel on Yellow Paper* realises that she can go on because she can go away any time she wants.⁷³⁶ Going on

⁷³⁶ Smith, *Novel*, 123.

becomes possible *because* one has choices, can move in any direction, not because one has no other choice.

So going on is always ghosted, for Smith, by its alternative: the departure which was invariably considered and which therefore didn't happen. Poems like 'She got up and went away' allow the going-away fantasy to take its fullest form:

She got up and went away
Should she not have? Not have what?
Got up and gone away.
Yes, I think she should have
Because it was getting darker.
Getting what? Darker. Well,
There was still some
Day left when she went away, well,
Enough to see the way. (CP, 726-7)

This is 'going away' as archetype: a pure strong gesture, stripped of context and plot. The whole poem feeds off – and issues from, with everything of importance already discharged in the first line – the image of a decisive but unidentified, unsituated, unexplained departure. A kind of disturbance, a fuzziness on the line in this poem, prevents even the frugal information on offer from being fully heard or understood. The speakers mishear and misunderstand each other: 'Not have what?' 'Getting what?' From the clear, definite, quiet but unapologetic first line, darkness closes in upon this poem. We are working in a post-apocalyptic landscape of remnants, the era of the 'too late' in which this thesis has so often positioned Smith's centre of gravity: dealing with the last traces of light, of day; on a fizzing radio which won't transmit properly; where

information is painfully limited, and incomprehensible even when it is heard. The staccato exchange gives way to something even less coherent, more garbled:

And it was the last time she would have been able . . .
Able? . . . to get up and go away.
It was the last time the very last time for
After that she could not
Have got up and gone away any more. (CP, 727)

In those last three lines, the iambic meter which funnelled in readerly attention in the third line – ‘Got up and gone away’, returned to again in the ninth line (‘Enough to see the way’) – breaks down completely. Punctuation, grammar and subject positions all vanish in this flattened, disjointed rhythm. Events become as indeterminate as landscape. ‘After that’, the speaker tells us. After what? Objects, events and places vanish from this poem. What is the event which would have stopped her going away? What, indeed, is she going away from?

In its purity of gesture – departure without destination, withdrawing firmly from the world – Smith’s speaker exemplifies perfectly Sitwell’s origin-story of eccentricity: ‘any dumb but pregnant comment on life, any criticism of the world’s arrangement, if expressed by only one gesture, and that of sufficient contortion, becomes eccentricity.’⁷³⁷ Smith’s figure makes a departure which is pure, extreme, contorted gesture, a leaving par excellence: a ‘dumb but pregnant comment’ on a place arranged so as to become intolerable, which cannot be lived in any longer.

⁷³⁷ Edith Sitwell, *English Eccentrics* (London: The Folio Society, 1954), 4.

The figure goes away, definitely and firmly. But the poem goes on. Its garbling and repetitions become ways to continue it, to keep (as Chapter Six explored) the poetic show on the road. Going on stands in for the going away which has already happened, has been described in the very first line, but which continues to be the substance of the whole poem. The poem itself is a remnant, something whose ‘going on’ marks an absence.

Stevie Smith did not publish this poem in her lifetime. In that sense, she excluded it from her writing – removed it from a territory in which it could mark something, be lucidly stated and available. But other poems which Smith did publish, some very early in her career, experiment with the capacity of ‘going’ to mark both presence and absence. The final stanza of ‘The Deathly Child’, for instance, makes this clear:

Over the café tables the talk is going to and fro,
And the people smile and they frown, but they do not know
That the deathly child walks. Ah who is it that must go?⁷³⁸

‘Going’, in the first line, inscribes ‘go’ with the solid substance of the present-continuous, reinscribing it insistently as the focus of that line. That final ‘go’, however, is the ‘go’ of death: the invitation to depart the mortal world, abruptly and in ways unspecified, with the deathly child. The same word does double service; the two kinds of going become muddled together. When in ‘Noble and Ethereal’ the protagonist ‘bravely turned away’ from the river-edge (CP, 140), his decision to continue with life appears more like a rejection of it, and the poem stops there.

⁷³⁸ Stevie Smith, *Two in One: Selected Poems and The Frog Prince and Other Poems* (London: Longman, 1971), 100. The reference is to this edition because the 2015 *Collected Poems* contains a typographical error in its reproduction of this stanza.

This thesis has been arguing for a way of reading Smith which finds a simultaneity in her ‘going on’ and ‘going away’: where they can be the same thing, or one discovered to be the other; where an assertion of presence can become concomitant with a final withdrawal. The aphorism, as a form, performs this particular work, which makes it key to Smith’s writing. I argued that the aphorism accommodates Smith’s unique twists between going away and going on, which I called, in my first chapter, weight and lightness. Smith’s choice, or that of her characters, seems to be that of the world (working, striving, having an effect, being important, having depth), or that of departure (lightness, insignificance, superficiality, uselessness, withdrawal from labour). Smith’s particular poetic, I argue, presents that choice as false. Weight and importance become resituated even in something flat, purposeless, useless and trivial: not in a camp, frivolous repurposing of waste for the approval of a social clique, but in a gesture which sabotages the possibility of social approval.

Aphorism engages with ending in multiple ways, as this thesis has argued. It may invite return, since it cannot be engaged with fully in one sitting; it may be continued on, past its natural end, and use that unsatisfactory situation to protest its continued existence. Aphorism engages uneasily with excess: though the aphorism seems a performance of neatness, there is also a model of the aphorism as an excessive form. It may overflow its bounds, like Smith’s overspilling final lines; it may alternatively be ‘unnecessary’, like Smith’s guerilla recordings of phrases and overheard snatches, and like Karl Kraus’s lists of aphorisms titled ‘Waste’. Aphorism’s brevity, coupled with its monumental truth-claims, means that it is always anticipating and guarding against its own

inappropriate excess, a snapshot of the social failure which might ensue if thunderous revelation was really to be heard and heeded. So aphorisms leave the scene with anti-social promptness, fearing that they've already said too much, embarrassed themselves.

Mansfield's aphorism reminds us – like Smith's flat poems, forestalling or pre-empting the risk of a fall – that the only way to stay satisfied is to manage one's own desires. Aphorism, as the twentieth-century aphorist and raconteur Quentin Crisp suggests in *Doing It With Style* (1981), is a way of not asking for anything: of disowning the possibility that you could be making a demand on your audience:

most people are profoundly indifferent to your pain and suffering...The only justification for introducing such subjects into a conversation is for purposes of entertainment, and then you must make it clear from the outset that your story is being offered for people's amusement and not for their sympathy. Even at that, the story should be condensed into a single anecdote or epigram.⁷³⁹

Doing It With Style is a guide to manners, and Crisp offers aphorism as a tool for the social management of pain: to clean it up at the edges, of the mess of human affect. Aphorism means that a sad story can be told without eliciting or demanding sadness from its hearers. It becomes a site in which one can claim, or perform the claiming of, something that will not be granted, in the knowledge that it is safe to make this claim because it will be refused. Aphorism is often about the impossibility of being granted what you would like (attention, sympathy, belief) for which you make a bid stripped of its affective capacity. Even Nietzsche's bloody, mountainous aphorisms display this control, this knowing acknowledgement that the aphorism brings no fulfilment:

⁷³⁹ Quentin Crisp and Donald Carroll, *Doing It With Style* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981), 51.

87.

Fettered Heart, Free Spirit. – When one firmly fetters one’s heart and keeps it prisoner, one can allow one’s spirit many liberties: I said this once before. But people do not believe it when I say so, unless they know it already.⁷⁴⁰

Nietzsche has had to make this observation (based again, we note, around the rhythms of restraint and release) twice. He has said it before, he tells us, to no effect, and now he says it again, with not much more hope that he will be heeded. This, I suggest, is another kind of aphoristic ‘going on’. Aphorism’s defusal of emotional and real-world impact means that it presents itself despite its (signalled) knowledge of its own redundancy, its inevitable failure to be heeded.

This is the gesture at work in Smith’s selection of ‘Voice from the Tomb’ poems. Brief, punchy and cross, their voices protest against their own marginalisation, but prevent us from taking them seriously or even sympathising. The subtitle in ‘Voice from the Tomb (5)’ witheringly dismisses its speaker’s potentially very valid grievance as absurd, but also frames it for presentation:

*a Soul earthbound by the grievance
of never having been important*

You never heard of me, I dare
Say. Well, I’m here. (CP, 536)

This model of the aphorism as a form for the marginalised, speaking in a way that does not elicit a hearing, identifies Ivy Compton-Burnett’s use of aphorism in her novels, largely published between the 1920s and the 1960s. Smith and Compton-Burnett have a long association: even before Kay Dick published *Ivy and Stevie* (1983), a short volume

⁷⁴⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Helen Zimmern (Edinburgh: Darien Press, 1907), 88.

of interviews with the two writers, reviewers picked out similarities between them. Writing in *Books of the Month*, Herbert Van Thal managed and normalised Smith's apparent eccentricity by remarking, 'doubtless one becomes as absorbed in her style, just as one acquires the taste for reading the works of Miss Compton-Bennett [sic] when once you have mastered her full reasonings.'⁷⁴¹ 'A review in the *Times Literary Supplement* of 1967 felt that the archaic social context which Smith evokes in her poetry 'almost recalls Miss Ivy Compton-Burnett'.⁷⁴² The critical language emerging here revolves around the acquired taste, the alien feminine, the skewed or out-of-time. *Harper's Bazaar* showed its working most clearly when, in 1964, it published the remark, 'Stevie Smith is one of those dear English ladies (Ivy Compton-Burnett is another) who invites the reader to tea, and who leads him, in a surprisingly short time, to wonder whether he is going to leave the house alive.'⁷⁴³ Compton-Burnett and Smith enter a tradition of sweet old ladies whose smiles are slightly too wide, who lure in the (young, male) reader in order to predate on him.

Despite her ambivalence to such ideas of association and literary lineage, Stevie Smith admired Ivy Compton-Burnett greatly. She reviewed two of her novels (*Two Worlds and Their Ways* (1949) and *Darkness and Day* (1951)) and praised, in her unpublished essay 'Modern English Literature', 'the incomparable, the fabulous Miss Ivy Compton-Burnett, whose exquisite dialogue carries everything with it of character plot and feeling [sic], whose children and servants are so especially superb, with all told and never a

⁷⁴¹ Herbert Van Thal, 'New Novels,' *Books of the Month*, September 1949.

⁷⁴² 'Waving And Drowning,' *Times Literary Supplement*, January 19, 1967.

⁷⁴³ Elrond, 'Book Bazaar,' *Harper's Bazaar*, September 1964.

word lost.’⁷⁴⁴ This sense of a frugal usage of language, with nothing wasted even as everything is openly admitted (‘all told’), foregrounds Compton-Burnett’s striking taste for the aphorism.⁷⁴⁵ Shaped around family life, the books follow similar patterns: tyrannical heads of household, who are pedantic about small details of conduct and expense, and subordinates who, as Penelope Lively notes, retaliate with ‘elegant and crushing verbal skills’.⁷⁴⁶ It is in this power hierarchy that the aphorism asserts itself. The powerless members of her families speak aphoristically, the powerful tyrants speak colloquially. The patriarchs meet the aphoristic remarks of their victims with jollity, a performance of an amiable inability to understand or respond to such threateningly gnomic sentiments. In *Manservant and Maidservant* (1947), for instance, the children of the tyrannical Horace remark, in front of him, on the ragged quality of the clothes which they had been forced to wear far past the point of respectability:

‘I don’t suppose people looked at us in them,’ said Marcus.
‘It may be proper to suppose they did not,’ said Sarah, ‘but it was not the truth.’
‘They look at us less in these,’ said Tamasin. ‘They seemed to prefer the sight that was less suitable for them.’
‘It is people’s disadvantages that people think about,’ said Sarah, ‘even children’s.’
‘What a pack of little cynics!’ said Horace.⁷⁴⁷

Sarah, the oldest child, is just thirteen, but her remarks are precisely constructed. They possess the aphorism’s quality of apparent generality but undeniable, pointed relevance to the situation at hand. The aphorism possesses plausible deniability: if it is challenged,

⁷⁴⁴ Stevie Smith, ‘Modern English Literature,’ 13, Series 2, Box 3, Folder 9, Stevie Smith papers, University of Tulsa.

⁷⁴⁵ On the response of contemporary critics to Compton-Burnett’s aphoristic style, see Elizabeth Sprigge, *The Life of Ivy Compton-Burnett* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1973), 43.

⁷⁴⁶ Penelope Lively, ‘Introduction,’ in *Manservant and Maidservant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), x.

⁷⁴⁷ Ivy Compton-Burnett, *Manservant and Maidservant* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1947), 112-3.

if its content is addressed head-on, it can maintain the excuse that it was a general statement and not a comment on the current situation. Aphorism allows Sarah to say something without really saying it.

Here, the aphorism marks a moment of disappointment. It protests against its own sidelining in terms and form so coded that we cannot respond or act on what it says. Rather than claiming authority, the 'aphorism' refers most, I think, to a kind of speech which performs a peculiar acrobatic: even as it states something authoritatively, it deletes the grounds on which authority might take effect. The aphorism sweeps up after itself. When it is done, it gets up and goes away.

The aphorism allows escape through virtuosity: a display of rhetorical skill which insists that its speaker or writer is not to be touched. Aphorism can make it impossible for someone to question you or to argue. It resists its reader's interpretative labour, insisting on remaining impenetrably flat. For that reason, even as it presents itself as an authoritative form, the use of aphorism can equally signal resignation. The powerful person's aphorism (especially in the case of proverb, as Chapter Four suggested) shuts down argument because he or she assumes the next step will be obedience. When the powerless use aphorisms, conversely, they do so because they are too tired to argue – they know they won't convince their listeners, not wholly, or rather will not be properly understood by their readers – and so they use a form which shuts down (or renders absurd) further argument. It is a form of speech which comes back to the speaker, rather than resting with the listener as something to be responded to. Using aphorism releases you from the responsibility of having to answer questions. It bespeaks an absolute faith

in your own declaration, even as you signal that you have no faith in the world to listen, understand, or act in response. Revelation, in Smith's 'Recognition not Enough', is inadequate to effect meaningful change:

Sin recognised – but that – may keep us humble,
But oh, it keeps us nasty. (CP, 450)

In this way, the aphorism limits its own power. It does not open up a dangerous space of threat for the listener, which might lead to aggression or violence. It is the rhetorical equivalent of having your say and then immediately leaving the room. It reduces itself to sass. Aphorism states itself (goes on) in the moment that it departs from view or use (goes away). The aphorism remains behind when the speaker has departed: it is a remnant, a scar or a tombstone, signalling the wound, or the disappointment, or the loss. Like a scar, or the navel in Elisabeth Bronfen's *The Knotted Subject*,⁷⁴⁸ it seems like a door but cannot be entered. Like such a scar, or such a tombstone, aphorism is hard to the touch.

This new conception of the aphorism lets us nuance moments where authors use aphorism in their work. Rather than signalling a superior didacticism, it may instead be a placeholder for pain, a way of saying something without really saying it, a way of abdicating responsibility for what you say, a way of saying something even though you have lost faith in its real-world power. More than a few aphorisms are in fact about that dilemma:

⁷⁴⁸ Elisabeth Bronfen, *The Knotted Subject: Hysteria and Its Discontents* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 37.

...All the good maxims exist in the world: we only fail to apply them.⁷⁴⁹

If it were true, what in the end would be gained? Nothing but another truth. Is this of such great advantage? We have enough old truths still to digest, and even these we would not be able to endure if we did not sometimes flavor them with lies.⁷⁵⁰

One uses aphorism when time is limited; when one is afraid that people will not stick around to listen to the full version. It is a form which accommodates femaleness, outsiderhood, unhearability. Aphorism signals embarrassment, and represents an attempt to be less embarrassing: to manage its own excess by being neat and amusing, to minimise the affective force of its inconvenient complaint. When that undertow of social exclusion and awkwardness becomes legible, aphorism itself becomes embarrassing. Auden grew embarrassed by the aphoristic final line of a stanza in 'September 1, 1939', 'we must love one another or die', omitting or altering it at various stages after its initial publication.⁷⁵¹ Far from indicating an increasingly autocratic attitude in Auden, which is Richard Badenhause's argument,⁷⁵² Auden's use of aphorism, like Lawrence's, may relate instead to a juggling of outsider status: an unease about whether to locate himself at the centre or in the margins.

The aphorism's accommodation of a speaker who is or feels fundamentally at odds with the basic structures of everyday, taken-for-granted life and ways of living with other people, in ways that it may be or have been physically or emotionally unsafe to reveal

⁷⁴⁹ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, ed. Anthony Levi, trans. Honor Levi (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1999), 114.

⁷⁵⁰ Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, *Georg Christoph Lichtenberg: Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Steven Tester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 67.

⁷⁵¹ Edward Mendelson, *Early Auden* (London and New York: Faber and Faber, 1999), 326.

⁷⁵² Richard Badenhause, 'Double Take: Auden in Collaboration', in *W. H. Auden in Context*, ed. Tony Sharpe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 357.

unmediated, dovetails with Stevie Smith's choice to remain 'on the edge' of life, of the world, so that she could get out, as she said to Kay Dick, easily if she needed to.⁷⁵³ The aphorism lingers on the edge of the community, the edge of conversation: the closing quip which shuts down proceedings, so that its speaker can gracefully (and perhaps gratefully) withdraw.

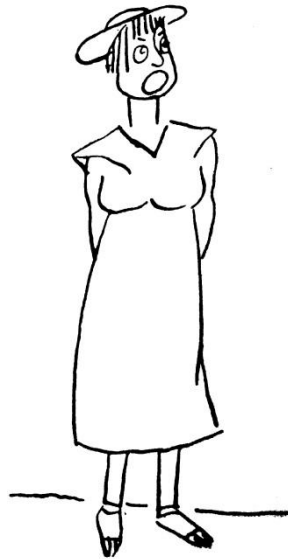
Smith's poems about hiding or sabotaging the written text, described in Chapter One, ring true in the light of these concerns about loss and outsiderhood. Poems like 'The Weak Monk' or texts which ask but do not answer 'What is she writing?', a topic discussed in Chapter One, raise again the question of textual function and legibility. The aphorism may not just be something which it is impossible to use, but perhaps even something which it is impossible even to hear. Smith's short poem 'The Songster' depicts the gestures, the performance of speech without substance, which remains unhearable and unreadable:

Miss Pouncefort sang at the top of her voice
(Sing tirry-lirry-lirry down the lane)
And nobody knew what she sang about
(Sing tirry-lirry-lirry all the same). (CP, 20)

We do not hear Miss Pouncefort singing, but we hear singing about her. The singing we hear in the second line may at first sight seem to be her own. By the time we reach the fourth line, it becomes clear that it is instead singing from elsewhere which she is lip syncing. The singing masquerades as hers, ultimately overrides her, urges us to sing along 'all the same' regardless of Miss Pouncefort, who may be suffering as her own

⁷⁵³ Kay Dick, *Ivy and Stevie* (London: Allison & Busby, 1983), 70.

voice remains unheard. Chapter Five discussed how, in Smith's sketchbooks, her figures do not seem to mouth the words which they are supposedly saying. Here, the situation reverses.



Stevie Smith, *The Collected Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith*, ed. Will May (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), 20.

The picture accompanying 'The Songster' shows Miss Pauncefort with mouth wide open, hands behind her back: a good, trained singing posture which without the singing looks ridiculous or parodic. There is comedy in doing the gestures without the result; there is also pathos, and valiance.

Miss Pauncefort's dilemma, read as an act of aphoristic statement-without-power, allows us to develop critical accounts of Smith's subversive capacity. Finding aphorism in Smith makes us aware of the particular kind of work she is doing. Once we recognise her aphoristic impulse in her shorter texts, once we attend to what aphorism can do in different hands, we are able to perceive what is happening even in her longer texts: a bold statement which is also a going-away. It builds on the question we implicitly bring

to Smith: what are her texts for? What are her allusions, her humour, her lightness, her pictures trying to achieve? Smith's difficulty resides in the fact that the whole point of her poems is a failure to have a rhetorical effect, disguised as something which we understand (lazily) as aimed entirely towards having a rhetorical effect.

This is a peculiar difficulty, as Chapter Two pointed out: where something simple insists on itself but flatly refuses penetration. Smith is hard – hard to read, hard to interpret, hard to use – in more ways than one. Her language loops around refrain, cliché, quotation, aphorism, the lurid bits of proverb: language gone hard, through repeated exposure, like a baguette left out. And this sense of 'hard language' as something stale is useful: something waste or wasted. Smith's poetry has been discarded by critics even as they praise her; her language invites people to dismiss it, too simple to be interpreted, too troubling to be simply enjoyed. Her writing presents itself as something whose time has already passed, which is always-already archaic in its unusable references to obscure Victorian novels and outfitters' catalogues: running too late.

If aphorisms come too late, as witnessed in Chapter Three, they also come too early, located in an unrecoverable past, whose subsequent time is an afterthought, a flat existence in which nothing can happen and nothing can be hoped for. We exist only in hindsight in relation to an aphorism: its truth can only be apprehended when looking back, too late. This twilight time (again I am reminded of the weather of 'She got up and went away') is a limbo, in which everything has already been said.

This study of aphorism in Stevie Smith, as a declaration which is also a departure, has implications for our reading of women's writing of the early- to-mid-twentieth century. Jan Montefiore outlines how Smith has been passed down through a feminist critical tradition, in which the female poet is firstly marginal because female, and secondly marginal because considered inferior to the female novelist.⁷⁵⁴ Montefiore identifies the contradiction which emerges, for readers, where this female marginality comes into conflict with the immense ambition implied by the act of writing poetry. As a result, Smith has been read as subversive, playful, tricky: secretly moving out of this marginal position, finding ways to seize social and rhetorical power, as James Najarian suggested, while seeming to disavow any interest in it.⁷⁵⁵ In contrast, to see her as not subversive – as earnestly saying the thing, and just as earnestly departing, enabled by the double-move of aphorism – complicates our view of women's writing. One does not need to be 'subversive' to present the world as something which one accepts completely, but at the same time unquestioningly and unflinchingly departs from. So in other words we may find – not aphorism itself, necessarily, but the sleight-of-hand which characterises aphorism's idiosyncratic withdrawal from the scene. Aphorism offers a way of underlining the unacceptability of the status quo without bidding for power, without believing that the truth it declares will be or even should be attended to. It is no coincidence, then, that Smith's critical stock has increased in the last decade, precisely as our political understanding of speech has become more nuanced: as we have come to terms with a social context in which truth or untruth, provided they are clearly and emphatically declared, make no difference either way. That is the world which Smith

⁷⁵⁴ Jan Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women's Writing* (London: Pandora, 2004), 2.

⁷⁵⁵ James Najarian, 'Contributions to Almighty Truth: Stevie Smith's Seditious Romanticism,' *Twentieth Century Literature* 49, no. 4 (2003): 472.

acknowledges, visible in the nineteen-thirties as now, and on whose edge she holds herself.

The aphorism is waste (a waste of time, wasted bits discarded from a longer text). Yet it is also frugality: those bits saved, recycled, fished out of the waste bin in the belief that they might some day be worth holding on to. In that sense, as we hinted in Chapter One, it is a site of hope: a space where we may return, again and again, in the faith that something may be revealed, and the thing which draws our attention, unyieldingly, may finally come into focus in a way that we can grasp.

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