

## 'Ach ja': Stevie Smith's Escheresque Metamorphoses

I am a frog

I live under a spell

I live at the bottom

Of a green well

And here I must wait

Until a maiden places me

On her royal pillow

And kisses me

In her father's palace.

(Stevie Smith, 'The Frog Prince')<sup>1</sup>

Stevie Smith names her poem 'The Frog Prince', and so ushers her text into the world of fairytale.<sup>2</sup> Smith had read and reread the Grimms' *Kinder- und Hausmarchen* in the

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1 Stevie Smith, *The Collected Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith*, ed. Will May (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), p. 471. Further references to Smith's poems are to this edition, indicated in the text.

2 For analysis of Smith's numerous fairytale poems, with specific attention to the problematically slipping discourses in 'The Frog Prince' which undermine standard social (and gendered) patterns, see 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 (Cornell: Cornell UP, 1997), pp. 147-165. Laura Severin reads Smith's revisionary fairytales as a feminist response to a mid-century rhetoric of domesticity (Laura Severin, "The guilt is off

original German, so can confidently remark, along with the frog in her poem, that 'The story is familiar/Everybody knows it well'.<sup>3</sup> For centuries, the tale has been told in different versions across Germany and Britain, describing a maiden who either kisses a frog, or cuts off his head, or throws him at a wall.<sup>4</sup> Whatever the framing circumstances, the result never changes: the frog turns into a handsome prince. And so Smith's frog can, in fact, omit the moment of transformation from his story. Since both frog and readers know that metamorphosis is bound to occur in a fairytale world, he need only refer to 'When the changes come' and when he will 'be set free' (*Collected Poems*, pp. 471-2). The text's key metamorphosis is so thoroughly known, so wholly given within the fairytale genre, that it can remain invisible within Smith's poem.

Freed, therefore, of the necessity to surprise its readers, fairytale narrative can proceed leisurely. Indeed, its very form depends on a slow, unfolding delivery of story, a knowing procession of traditional formulae.<sup>5</sup> Beginning with the stage-setting 'Once upon a time', or its equivalent, the fairytale doles out one element after another with ritualistic ceremony. Fairytale and folktale never begin *in media res*. Its generic structure relies on walking the reader through the emergence of its geography of enchantment, acclimatising the gingerbread": Stevie Smith's Revisionary Fairytales', *Journal of Gender Studies* 12:3 (2003): 203-214.)

3 Jack Barbera and William McBrien, *Stevie: A Biography of Stevie Smith* (London: Macmillan, 1986), p. 16.

4 D. L. Ashliman, *A Guide to Folktales in the English Language: Based on the Aarne-Thompson Classification System* (London and New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), pp. 92-3.

5 See Andrew Teverson, *Fairy Tale* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 24 for a brief acknowledgement of the role of verbal formulae in developing fairytale narrative.

him or her to one fantastic element before venturing to introduce another. So the opening to 'Der Froschkönig oder Der eiserne Heinrich' [The Frog-king, or Iron Henry], in the Grimms' seventh edition of 1857, follows a familiar pattern:

...Nahe bei dem Schlosse des Königs lag ein großer dunkler Wald, und in dem Walde unter einer alten Linde war ein Brunnen...<sup>6</sup>

[Now, there was a great dark forest near the king's castle, and in this forest, beneath an old linden tree, was a well.<sup>7</sup>]

This is a narrative which fully manages the flow of knowledge. The Grimms bestow each element on their reader - 'this forest', 'an old linden tree' - with choreographed confidence. Offered no other choice by this deliberate delivery, we consent to being guided, step by step, down through a gradual process of optical adjustment. Once the castle has been introduced, we are permitted to apprehend the forest; once the reader has focused on the 'Wald' – the word repeated to steady us, to consolidate our attention – we are allowed to see the well. Moving through fairytale, our lines of sight are steered so precisely that we have no room to resist. The process of reading fairytales is like being ushered into a sacred site with a ceremony so elaborate that it prevents us from seeing quite what is

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6 Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, 'Der Froschkönig oder Der eiserne Heinrich', *Kinder und hausmärchen: gesammelt durch die Brüder Grimm*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 3 vols. (Göttingen: Dieterich, 1857), p. 1.

7 Jack Zipes, *The Golden Age of Folk and Fairy Tales: From the Brothers Grimm to Andrew Lang* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2013), p. 262.

happening. Ultimately, we find ourselves charmed into accepting the fantastic.

Introduced to each element of the story, one at a time, in small mouthfuls, we find ourselves swallowing everything we are told, no matter how strange. Before long, we are held spellbound.

Keeping the enchanting choreography of fairytale delivery in mind, this essay seeks a critical framework for Stevie Smith's particular – or, in Hermione Lee's annexation of Smith's own language, 'peculiar' – aesthetics.<sup>8</sup> Many of Smith's *strange* moments can be accommodated by the critical discourse around modernism: for instance, the digressive style of her *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936). Lee's choice of the word 'peculiar', however, is worth dwelling on. My subject is the particular methods of disorientation which poems like 'The Frog Prince' describe, methods which have evaded critical focus. Such texts are 'peculiar' because they hinge on a metamorphosis which is necessary but barely perceptible. 'Peculiar' suggests, etymologically, the personal or particular, a private world which can never be entirely inhabited by an outsider.<sup>9</sup> The 'peculiar' text is anti-modernist: instead of 'escap[ing] from personality', as T. S. Eliot prescribes, it installs itself firmly within it.<sup>10</sup> Above all, while 'strangeness' suggests the possibility of knowing (strangers may become friends), 'peculiarity' offers only an epistemic dead-end.

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8 Hermione Lee, ed. *Stevie Smith: A Selection* (London: Faber, 1983), p. 22.

9 "peculiar, adj. and n.". OED Online. September 2015. Oxford University Press.  
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/139494?redirectedFrom=peculiar&> (accessed November 08, 2015).

10 T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1920), p. 53.

Indeed, '**peculiar**' describes an occurrence which defies our understanding because we cannot, by necessity, witness its operation fully for ourselves. Like the frog's metamorphosis in 'The Frog Prince', the peculiar can be sensed, but not fully known or located.<sup>11</sup> Lee's word is apt. We know Smith is unusual, but we often struggle to define how or why.<sup>12</sup> Her oddness refuses to be seen directly: we can only hear it, muffled, singing from the bottom of a well.

Echoing fairytale both in form and content, poems like 'The Bereaved Swan', 'The Castle' and 'Who Killed Lawless Lean?' are narratively peculiar. They domesticate illogical change or progression so thoroughly that Smith's audience perceives a rupturing oddness, but is simultaneously stripped of the ability to register or locate it. Yet these texts receive little critical attention because – compared with some of Smith's better-known poems – their tendency to destabilise the reader, to exclude him or her from their internal

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11 The particular 'peculiarity' which recent critics have tackled is Smith's constant alternation of modes and styles. For a political reading of Smith's two novels which acknowledges their internal contradictions, and marshals them into a coherent reading of the texts as a dialogue between denial and epiphany, see Romana Huk, *Stevie Smith: Between the Lines* (London: Palgrave, 2005). For an explanation of Smith's fluctuation between the straightfaced and the teasing in terms of varying authorial "masks", see Will May, *Stevie Smith and Authorship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

12 Jan Montefiore was the first to note how Smith's rewritings of myth and fairytale do not in fact reinterpret fairytale narratives, but reconstitute them with 'an entirely new plot' whose purpose, parodic or otherwise, is often unclear. See Jan Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women's Writing* (London: Pandora, 2004), p. 48.

functioning, does not obtrude itself.<sup>13</sup> They are not secretly strange or “deceptively simple” in the tired formulation; internal inconsistency hides in plain sight. These poems are characterised by their overt resistance to their own textual rules – yet, even more strikingly, they manage the reader's response so that their refusal to remain in focus is passed over or ignored.

Questions of focus demand a visual parallel. Stevie Smith was herself a visual artist, who assigned her sketches a status equal to her poems; characters in her poems and novels constantly seek insight and comfort in paintings.<sup>14</sup> In the work of her contemporary, Maurits Cornelis Escher (1898-1972) I find a helpful critical parallel to the peculiar process of looking and not seeing that identifies the experience of Smith's poetry. Born in Leeuwarden in the Netherlands, Escher's work, like Smith's, centres on a 'peculiarity' at once palpable and elusive. Just as Joan the secretary in Smith's 'Deeply Morbid' would 'go and watch the pictures' in the National Gallery (*Collected Poems*, p. 340), Escher's aesthetic demands that we 'watch' his pictures. Faced with Escher's woodcuts, lithographs and drawings, our gaze repeatedly traverses a path whose well-worn smoothness belies the impossibility of its progression. His botanic detail and complex backgrounds are so

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13        Some of Smith's poems do have a destabilising or subversive effect, which has been skilfully explicated in, for instance, Laura Severin, *Stevie Smith's Resistant Antics* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997); Julie Sims Steward, 'Ceci n'est pas un Hat: Stevie Smith and the Refashioning of Gender', *South Central Review* 15:2(1998): 16-33; Catherine A. Civello, *Patterns of Ambivalence: The Fiction and Poetry of Stevie Smith* (Columbia: Camden House, 1997).

14        See, for example, Pompey's visit to the art gallery in Stevie Smith, *Over the Frontier* (London: Virago, 1980), pp. 9-18.

convincing that they persuade us to overlook the impossibility of the objects they surround.

Bruno Ernst divides Escher's mature work (post-1937) into three categories.<sup>15</sup> One includes works which play with spatial structure: for instance, allowing different worlds to interpenetrate. This category includes *Still Life and Street* (1937), where books on a windowsill morph unobtrusively into a busy street (Fig. 1).

Another includes the handful of 'impossible figures', and plays on perspective, which have come to identify the adjective 'Escheresque'. *Belvedere* (1958) is a key lithograph in this category (Fig. 2). It depicts a three-storied belvedere in which, as the viewer moves from bottom to top, inside imperceptibly turns into outside.

The final category contains Escher's experiments with flat surface structure. *Encounter* (1944), for instance, creates a pattern of precisely-tessellating white and black figures, which acquire three dimensions and march into the foreground. Alternatively, works of this category may trace the metamorphosis of one creature into another. *Metamorphosis III* (1967-68) traces the evolutions of abstract shapes, animals, towns and chessboards in a system which begins and ends with the word METAMORPHOSIS (Fig. 3).

Studies of Escher's work have focused on its relation to mathematics and to the work of

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15 Bruno Ernst, *The Magic Mirror of M. C. Escher* (Koln: Taschen, 2007), p. 24.

other optical illusionists.<sup>16</sup> A sustained study of the visual mechanisms of his particular effects is yet to appear. Smith and Escher, I contend, exploit our tendency to seek logic: they use the reader's reliance on established artistic forms, and an expectation of logical causality, to distort his or her clarity of perception as s/he moves through a (visual or poetic) narrative.

Like Smith, Escher is popular outside the academy – his work is, like hers, iconic enough for elements to be quoted or reproduced without citation – and yet comparatively neglected within it. Both are absolute originals, but in neither case does this translate into canonical status. Is the comparison legitimate, given that – as far as we know – the British Smith and the Dutch Escher were not in contact? Escher developed his extraordinary effects in parallel with those of the Surrealists; there is no evidence that either influenced the other. Yet they achieve, in some ways, similar results. Bruno Ernst's classic text on Escher details some comparisons with Magritte. He concludes, however, that Magritte aims to create irresolvable chaos, whereas Escher 'consciously pursued' logic to create impossible worlds whose rules, nevertheless, can be universally understood.<sup>17</sup> Ernst's comparison of artistic practices which developed independently strengthens the case for affiliating Smith and Escher. Though no evidence exists that the two encountered each other, a careful reading of the artist's work can throw the spatial

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16 See Doris Schattschneider, *M. C. Escher: Visions of Symmetry* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2004) for a mathematical analysis of Escher; Al Seckel, *Masters of Deception: Escher, Dali & the Artists of Optical Illusion* (New York: Sterling, 2004) for comparisons to other optical illusionists.

17 Ernst, p. 68.



disorientations of Smith's texts into relief.

## Interpenetrating Worlds

"Ach ja", sagte sie, "ich verspreche dir alles, was du willst, wenn du mir nur die Kugel wiederbringst." Sie dachte aber: Was der einfältige Frosch schwätzt, der sitzt im Wasser bei seinesgleichen und quakt und kann keines Menschen Geselle sein.<sup>18</sup>

["Oh, yes," she said. "I'll promise you anything you want if only you'll bring back the ball!" However, she thought, 'What nonsense that stupid frog talks! He just sits in the water croaking with the rest of the frogs. How can he expect a human being to accept him as a companion?'"<sup>19</sup>]

When the princess in 'Der Froschkönig' promises to cherish the frog in return for her golden ball, she reasons that she will never have to keep her oath, as they are – above all – spatially misaligned. Frog and princess exist in different spheres. A frog 'kann keines Menschen Geselle sein', cannot exist side by side with a human. In order to fulfil social conventions (not the conventions of reality) he must remain in surroundings which match him, 'im Wasser bei seinesgleichen'. And so the princess's mental logic is dedicated to

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18 Grimms, 'Der Froschkönig oder Der eiserne Heinrich', *Kinder und hausmärchen*, p. 1.

19 Zipes, p. 263.

organising the parts of her world into appropriate adjacent spaces. Hierarchy and species are understood in terms of spatial segregation, each occupying their own constrained, demarcated sphere.

The princess's conviction against spatial misalignment lures her into an act of mishearing. Though the frog is speaking to her in fluent German, she continues to argue that frogs can only 'quak[en]'; though she understands him and replies to him without trouble, she still wonders, 'Was der einfältige Frosch schwätzt[?]' The princess comes from the castle and the frog lives in the water; impossible, she thinks, that they should meet in the same aural space. The familiar logic of her spatially hierarchized world is irresistible, and overrides the evidence of her own eyes.

Confident in her (defective) apprehension, the well-brought-up princess manages the jarring moment with 'Ach ja'. 'Oh yes' is a social glossing-over of awkwardness which transforms the impossible into the given. It hurries us past, preventing our focus from lingering. But the princess is wrong to believe that this flourish of social grace has controlled her kingdom's spaces and habitats. Not until the frog leaves the water and comes hopping up the castle steps will it dawn belatedly on her that incompatible worlds have already truly interpenetrated. Distracted by a golden ball, she has not noticed her own constrained, microscopic sphere expand to encompass a far broader vista of interpretation and possibility.

Escher organises his compositions similarly as a set of competing visual distractions. He begins his guided tour for the viewer, in *Still Life and Street* (1937), with some distracting solid objects. The viewer's line of sight is steered first to the lidded pot in the foreground, which is comfortably smooth and rounded. Morning or evening light (judging by its sharp contrasts and shadows) plays on the deck of cards and the pipe. Ach ja: this is a familiar space of relaxation, whose leisure objects are disposed for us in harmonious accessibility.

Our gaze moves outwards and reaches stacks of books. Their positioning, angles and patterns are rendered in reliable and forensic detail. We start at the first book and move upwards; ascending from smallest book to tallest, climbing step by step on their top edges. Each step is small and safe: we are escorted courteously from one familiar given to the next. Each invites an 'Ach ja' of easy acceptance.

Quietly, we might say, Escher has been working the enchantment of fairytale: charming us into entering a world which seems small and securely controlled. By the end of our ascent up the sides of the woodcut, we are prepared to accept whatever comes. We can take that final, highest step, from the top of the tallest book to the top of the high building, without blinking.

Our comprehension of this transformation occurs only belatedly. Like the princess, we are unable fully to witness a spatial misalignment which defies our understanding,

especially as it occurs when our focus has been sedated. Because we have been led to see the house as the tallest book of all, or a bookend, we continue on some level to receive it within this framework even after we realise our error. For the tone of the image remains stable as we step from still life to street. Just as the books rested calmly against each other, the atmosphere in the street is harmonious and unhurried. Laundry dangles from lines; flowers bloom on windowsills. We have engaged so thoroughly with the image's social contract of charm and placidity that it does not even occur to us to evince unseemly surprise when still-life becomes street, short-view becomes long-view.

Encouraged thus to meet Escher's shift in scale with yet another tranquil 'Oh yes', we are not prompted to switch our interpretative framework to one more appropriate to the macroscopic. Escher initially escorted us into an inhabitable space, whose objects seemed graspable – each in their right place – and invited our participation. Now we have progressed, imperceptibly, to a spacious scene which stretches beyond our vision, and from which we are isolated. Detached, we watch the street's inhabitants from afar; the road snakes around a corner and out of sight.

Escher has enchanted us into accepting a profound metamorphosis as given. Progression through the image is revealed as alienation: we were invited into a cosy world of familiar objects only to find ourselves looking into a vast, self-sufficient world from outside. It is this visualisation of a normalised metamorphosis which makes Escher's art such a valuable lens for reading Stevie Smith's poetry. The spatial qualities of Escher's visual

sleight-of-hand – conjoining short- and long-view, cosy and vast, harmonious and alienating, by subsuming them all under the same tonally bland surface – can be mapped helpfully on to Smith's almost unlocatable slippage between tragic and comic social and generic registers.

If we translate these terms of Escher's potent-but-invisible metamorphosis on to a poem like Stevie Smith's 'The Bereaved Swan', for instance – an early poem from her 1937 collection *A Good Time Was Had By All* – an Escheresque transformation is visible, though its direction is reversed. Although her text begins with a dignified, austere vista of sombre lake, four lines later we find that we are enclosed, instead, in a mundane (if comfortable) bath, a bar of soap in hand.

Wan

Swan

On the lake

Like a cake

Of soap... (*Collected Poems*, p. 35)

Short lines stack up like a narrow staircase; deprived of room to manoeuvre, we are forced to go straight down through the text. The imperious, rhythmic rhymes steer our sightlines irresistibly, from the expansive world of a tragic scene – one wan swan, barely tangible, languishing on a lake – to the small perspectives governing a solid cake of soap.

This shift is profound: Smith switches from the intangible to the graspable, from the huge vista to the tinily localised. This spatial metamorphosis necessarily involves a shift in register. Large spaces – empty lakes or moors – invite a tragic register, suggesting an infinite historical or metaphysical sweep outside the sphere of human control.<sup>20</sup> This sense of the tragic as disproportionately vast in relation to individual lives is important: Shakespeare underlined it by placing Lear alone on a moor, just as, here, Smith positions one small swan alone on a lake.

To move from the vast to the tiny (or vice versa) can be read, therefore, as a transition between comic and tragic registers. Comedy often circles smallness: whether focusing on the minutiae of the body (food, sex, farts), or through a carnivalesque levelling of social hierarchies (shrinking the puffed-up down to size).<sup>21</sup> So when, in *Still Life and Street*, Escher fuses a space identified by small, familiar objects with one too large for the viewer's eye to encompass, his audience experiences it as a shift in register. Even though the tone (the presentational cues which dictate reception) remains blandly serene, the register of the image changes, subtly, from the cheerfully quotidian to the solemnly

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20 See, for instance, Hegel's *Aesthetics*, for acknowledgement of tragedy's historical/ethical vastness: 'In tragedy the eternal substance of things emerges victorious...' (T. M. Knox, trans. *Hegel's Aesthetics*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 1199)

21 Cf. Northrop Frye's famous identification of comedy with (re-)integration into society; a process of fitting-in, of taking an appropriate and proportional size. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of criticism: four essays, with a foreword by Harold Bloom* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 43.

grand.<sup>22</sup> Smith's 'The Bereaved Swan' sharpens the shift in register by increasing the contrast: as with Escher, a space where familiar, bodily objects invite us to join them (soap) interpenetrates another space whose size excludes us from participating (lake). Comedy and tragedy, in other words, interlock in spatial terms.

How do viewers manage this transition between registers? In *Still Life and Street*, we instinctively backtrack from the too-vast street, to return to the cosy leisure space of home. But just as the first building held, for a moment, its role as a book in the series, the reverse occurs as we move backwards towards the desk again. Instinctively unwilling to accommodate spatial misalignment, our perception loses acuity: we register the tallest book, for a moment, as a smaller adjacent building. This junction of desk and street, micro- and macro-, is tangible but slippery; bidirectional and hazy, even as the incompatibility of the juxtaposed worlds is starkly obvious. As our gaze travels between the spaces, it takes us a while each time – like the princess – to register that the rules of the game, the framework for interpretation, have quietly altered.

And this shifting intersection characterises Smith's 'The Bereaved Swan'. Her style is

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22 For an elucidation of my implied distinction between tone and register, see Peter Trudgill, *Sociolinguistics: An introduction to language and society*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed (London: Penguin, 2000). Trudgill defines register as linguistic variation which is linked to particular occupations or topics – or, we might say, particular spaces or (social) spheres (p. 81). Register, which is indicated by vocabulary choices, positions speaker and listener within a particular social context. Tone, in contrast, implies a certain intonation or delivery; one might switch registers while maintaining the same tone, or switch tone within the same register.

jarring because of the juxtaposition of the incompatible: the tragic and comic, the sublime and the mundane, the romantic and the quotidian. On another level, however, it alienates the reader because the join between modes is so smooth. The exact place where the pathetic transforms into the bathetic shifts as her reader moves between lines.

Interpretative frameworks outlive their usefulness, form and dismantle themselves:

Wan

Swan

On the lake

Like a cake

Of soap

Why is the swan

Wan

On the lake?

He has abandoned hope. (*Collected Poems*, p. 35)

We might read the poem initially as a serious participant in the 'dying swan' tradition of Tennyson and Mikhail Fokine, intended to be read straight for the first three lines as they guide us, step by step, down into a recognisable poetic world.<sup>23</sup> This reading would locate

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23 Debra Craine and Judith Mackrell. "Dying Swan, The." in *The Oxford Dictionary of Dance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010)

<http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199563449.001.0001/acref-9780199563449-e-815>.



the point at which tragedy becomes comedy at the Sitwellian 'cake of soap' simile.<sup>24</sup>

But another reading implies that this is simply the point at which Smith's bathetic comedy becomes outright unignorable. From another angle, the comedy starts with the first two words: 'Wan/Swan', a rhyme so perfect, so stripped-down and reduced as to be deadpan in its no-nonsense summation of a familiar and normally melodramatically-overwritten trope. Montefiore considers that it is the 'repeated 'Wan/Swan...swan/Wan [which] comically sends up its own overblown poetic register', a nice construction which hints at the retrospective functioning of humour in this poem.<sup>25</sup> The poem is serious until we reach the soap, and the 'swan/wan' repetition – then, in hindsight, the opening poker-faced words are cast into a humorous light.

As the poem progresses into the second verse, its pithily monosyllabic comedy lengthens into a more spacious tragic discourse:

Wan

Swan

On the lake afloat

Bows his head:

O would that I were dead

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24 The designation of this simile as 'Sitwellian' originates in Janet Montefiore, *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The dangerous flood of history* (Routledge: London, 1996), p. 131.

25 Ibid., p. 131.

For her sake that lies  
Wrapped from my eyes  
In a mantle of death  
The swan saith. (*Collected Poems*, p. 35)

The colon seems to mark the point where comedy becomes tragedy: the beginning of the swan's lamentation is formally reflected in a shift to a less gaily insistent rhythm and a longer, more flowing line length. Indeed, Montefiore reads this section as straightforwardly tragic when she suggests that the second verse moves into a 'rhetoric of mourning whose archaism...is hardly camped up at all'.<sup>26</sup> 'Hardly', however, is an important qualification. This upright colon is the Escheresque join between book and building: the site of a transition which is marked but unable to effect an interpretative shift. Even in this passionately tragic second verse, we cannot shake a comedic frame. The final line, 'The swan saith', anticipates the famously deadpan contrast of 'Not Waving but Drowning' which Smith would publish twenty years later:

It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,  
They said. (*Collected Poems*, p. 347)

As in 'Not Waving but Drowning', a line allowed to expand to its fullest tragic length is contracted abruptly into comical brevity. Its pithiness underlines the ironic distancing implicit in this second-hand reportage of speech. We are encouraged, in hindsight, to

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26 Ibid., p. 131.

reread the swan's lament as comedy. 'The swan saith' is a bald statement of fact which, on one level, flatly refuses dissent and demands a serious reception. Like the princess's 'Ach ja', it delivers its bombshell, and hurries us past before we can protest. At the same time, however, its shortness hints at a reserve which is unwilling to commit itself. The phrase's careful neutrality signals the fact of its reaction to an impossible event – such as a talking swan, or indeed frog. Its poker-facedness encourages us to look askance at what it is describing.

For a poem which begins with such spatial precision – one swan on a lake – 'The Bereaved Swan' ends, then, on an unplaceable note. Like the princess, we are misled, find ourselves belatedly somewhere we did not expect. We discover that the origin-point we identified as tragedy was actually comedy, and that our destination interpenetrates both depending on the direction from which we approach it. With its roaming intersection of comedy and mourning, each point of progression in 'The Bereaved Swan' casts a different hue over what has preceded. Humour and tragedy, straight and deadpan turn almost imperceptibly into each another, depending on our line of sight and our movement through the poem. Seeking to move through strangeness into familiarity, we constantly find ourselves somewhere peculiar instead, trapped in an interpretative impasse. Yet the interpenetration of modes is so thorough that we struggle to feel the clear surprise needed to switch our interpretative framework. We move, without blinking, across impossible junctions.

## Impossible Objects

"Was hast du vor, Königstochter, du schreist ja, daß sich ein Stein erbarmen möchte."

Sie sah sich um, woher die Stimme käme, da erblickte sie einen Frosch, der seinen dicken häßlichen Kopf aus dem Wasser streckte. "Ach, du bist's, alter Wasserpatscher", sagte sie...<sup>27</sup>

["What's the matter, princess? Your tears could move even a stone to pity."

She looked around to see where the voice was coming from and saw a frog sticking his thick, ugly head out of the water. "Oh, it's you, you old water-splasher," she said.<sup>28</sup>]

Doling out one fact after another, fairytale keeps total control over what its readers experience and when, as it leads us down into its world. We are being walked, we sense, through a complex argument which we could not hope to comprehend on our own. The slow materialisation of the fairytale space reduces its readers to passivity. Confronted with the exaggerated, meticulous guidance of its narrator, we lose faith in our own faculties of evaluation.

The Grimms' matter-of-fact diction excludes the possibility of argument. They lead us,

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27 Grimms, 'Der Froschkönig oder Der eiserne Heinrich', *Kinder und hausmärchen*, p. 1.

28 Zipes, p. 262.

step by elaborately-proffered step, down stairs which are so narrow that we cannot struggle. Reduced to disempowered children, readers of fairytale must take their evaluative cues from the fairytale's narrative voice. So when the maiden greets the frog with 'Oh, it's you', she dictates our response. Casually unimpressed, she establishes the frog for us as given and mundane. The amazing has occurred before our eyes, but any space in which to experience amazement is stripped away: surprise is immediately battened down into weary disdain. The impossible appears before us, but is normalised before we can evince (or even feel) astonishment. Our only choice is to accept the fantastic.

This particular mode of illogic – openly visible but simultaneously sabotaging our capacity for wonder – identifies the second category into which Ernst divides Escher's work: his famous 'impossible objects'. *Belvedere* (1958), for example, depicts a building against a meticulously-detailed mountainous landscape (Fig. 2). Our line of sight begins in the right-hand foreground, with the most eye-catching figure: a woman in a long, flowing gown, darker and more highly contrasting than the image's other figures. Her garb is straight out of fairytale; we may also recognise that she herself is, in fact, literally straight out of Hieronymous Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (c. 1500). Bosch's triptych revels ambiguously in the fantastic, its portrayal of hell balancing between nightmare and carnival.

We are prepared, therefore, for a moment of fairytale strangeness. In line with Bosch's

ambiguity, our interpretative frames remain open to accommodate either the grotesque or the celebratory. This figure, we are led to believe, will be the site of any strangeness in the work. Yet we have to watch Escher's print for a while (a la Joan in Smith's 1946 poem 'Deeply Morbid', watching the pictures in the National Gallery) before we notice the rupture at the heart of the image. As our sightline leaves Bosch's woman and moves up the stairs, into the belvedere, our eye is caught by the background mountains, which sweep diagonally upwards from right to left. When our focus moves into the foreground, that diagonal motion is replicated by the ladder: crossing over the mountains, directed upwards from left to right. Escher, once again, takes us on a journey through his image, where he manages and steers our lines of sight. But it takes an act of transgression – a moment where we rest our eyes, briefly, from our strenuously-guided tour – to locate the image's central peculiarity. When our eyes stray from the ladder, we realise that the pillars at the front of the lower floor join, incomprehensibly, to the back of the floor above.

I want to emphasise that this structural impossibility is not fairytale because it is strange, or indeed because it elicits a moment of surprise. On the contrary, we move through *Belvedere* along fairytale lines of progression precisely because the lithograph – like the too-casual princess in 'Der Froschkönig' – sabotages our capacity firstly to notice, and secondly to respond to, the strangeness which it lays openly before us. Though the building is obviously structurally impossible, our realisation of that fact is significantly belated.

To make this idiosyncratic (and peculiar) effect of Escher's 'impossible objects' more visible, it is worth comparing *Belvedere* to a Dadaist predecessor: Duchamp's 1916 artwork, 'Apolinère Enameled' (Fig. 4). Duchamp's readymade portrays a child painting a bed-frame which turns out to be an impossible object, since the right-hand bed edge connects to the left-hand bedpost. This object is mechanically impossible in the same way as Escher's *belvedere*: it is a structure whose internal connections defy logic. The difference lies in Duchamp's approach. 'Apolinère Enameled' deliberately omits part of the bed-frame, to ensure that the viewer encounters its impossibility in a shocking, single instant. We do not need to journey through the image to discover its impossibility; its strangeness is instantly forced on us. We register it, get to grips with it, and detach from the image in the knowledge that we have “solved” what it offered us to solve.

In contrast to this conspicuous flagging-up, Escher designs his images to be, at first glance, as neutral as possible. Micky Piller describes an encounter with Escher thus: 'different perspectives...run into each other so unobtrusively that it is not immediately apparent that they are contradictory'.<sup>29</sup> *Belvedere's* detailed backgrounds and closely-trained lines of movement render the image matter-of-fact, refusing to countenance the possibility that the version of events it shows is not the most natural and obvious. A particularly passive observer, submitting to Escher's direction through the image, could find plenty to admire and discuss in *Belvedere* without ever noticing the impossibility of

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29 Micky Piller, Patrick Elliott and Frans Peterse, *The Amazing World of M. C. Escher* (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2015), 100.

the structure. The background is forensically detailed; Locher notes how 'our attention is purposely distracted in a very subtle way to the mountainous landscape.'<sup>30</sup> It takes a 'deliberate effort', therefore, in Locher's terms, to note how inside almost imperceptibly metamorphoses into outside.<sup>31</sup>

A similar 'deliberate effort' is needed to focus correctly on a moment of strangeness in Stevie Smith's poem 'The Castle', from her 1950 collection *Harold's Leap*. In a setting which balances between fairytale magic, Tennysonian melancholy and prattling dinner-party, the speaker describes her life:

I married the Earl of Egremont,  
I never saw him by day,  
I had him in bed at night,  
And cuddled him tight.

We had two boys, twins,  
Tommy and Roly,  
Roly was so fat  
We called him Roly-poly. (*Collected Poems*, p. 262)

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30 J. L. Locher, 'The World of M. C. Escher', in *The World of M. C. Escher*, ed. J. L. Locher (New York: Harry N Abrams, 1974), p. 9.

31 Ibid., p. 9.



'I never saw him by day.' The bizarre fact is baldly stated in the very second line. But, as in 'Der Froschkönig', we are given no space to absorb the irruption, or wonder what it implies. The poem steers us confidently and calmly, with an unblinking leisureliness: its structure draws our attention immediately onwards through the poem. Ending the line with 'by day' qualifies and softens the force of 'never'; the speaker does meet the Earl sometimes, then, which we suppose is something. More, 'by day' shifts the attention away from the Earl's invisibility towards the completist tendency of diurnal cycles. Like the first part of a rhyme, the phrase 'by day' demands conclusion: it needs a complementary 'by night', particularly according to fairytale conventions. Our attention is therefore already running ahead to the second line, where we find the harmonious, familiar completion we are socialised to crave. Pulling her reader firmly down through her text, past the inexplicably vanishing Earl, Smith has successfully enabled a moment of strangeness to stand uninterrogated.

Smith further dismantles our capacity to focus on the mystery of the Earl's daytime absence by distracting our attention with a sideways shift in register. From a fairytale context which involves marriage to an Earl, and play with the oppositions of day and night, we find most of our attention called upon to cope with a rapid switch to the banal diction of the Women's Institute.<sup>32</sup> Her narrator describes her 'two boys, twins', and lingers, with frustratingly evident pleasure, on her unimaginative, anticlimactic name for

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32 Smith relishes this chatty, banal diction and deploys it frequently. See, for instance, 'Thoughts about the Person from Porlock' (*Collected Poems*, pp. 445-7), 'Emily writes such a good letter' (*Collected Poems*, pp. 500-501), 'v.' (*Collected Poems*, p. 578), and 'Scorpion' (*Collected Poems*, p. 593).

her plumper son, 'Roly-poly'. She has accepted her husband's nature as given, like the frog; we are forced to do likewise. Smith skews our attention, forcing it into an angle to the poem's opening register, like Escher's sloping ladder. She leads us up the rungs of banal reminiscence, away from what is openly visible but unseeable: the vanishing Earl.

What Smith engineers in 'The Castle' is an open secret. The unexplained absence of the earl from his castle is clearly stated, but the whole of the poem works to deflect the reader's focus from that fact. In other words, the text's sleight-of-hand lays its central, puzzling disharmony open to view, but at the same time creates conditions which make it difficult to focus on that illogic. Nothing is hidden – this is no 'deceptive simplicity', or concealed complexity. The twist is simply that our ability to pay attention to what is in front of our eyes has been neutralised. Not until the penultimate stanza does Smith frame that situation as supernatural:

My children never saw their father,  
Do not know,  
He sleeps in my arms each night  
Till cockcrow. (*Collected Poems*, p. 263)

Some sort of spell has been placed on the husband: cockcrow brings disappearance, or perhaps another unmentionable metamorphosis. But the news is delayed in its revelation, and presented in the same casual tone as Roly-poly's nickname. As in *Belvedere*, the

moment at which we register strangeness is delayed. We see the talking frog, but can only move straight on, unable to argue against its apparent givenness until we find it sitting – slimy and unignorable – at our plate.

For both *Belvedere* and Smith's 'The Castle', then, the realisation of the artwork's central, organising strangeness is delayed because of a context which prevents us from focusing on this rupture. In 'Illusion and Visual Deadlock', E. H. Gombrich describes the late onset of the revelation in language which could describe Smith's poem: 'It would make an excellent test of the powers of observation to time the moment when it dawns on the beholder that he is confronted with a self-contradictory structure.'<sup>33</sup> How do we conceptualise the moment at which the self-contradiction does 'dawn' on us? Not all moments of clarity are identical. Ernst, for one, chooses the detective story as a 'literary analogue' to Escher's effects: in Escher as for detective novelists, he argues, 'The mystery makes no sense until it can be seen in the light of the more-or-less thrilling denouement.'<sup>34</sup> For both Escher and Smith, the parallel is thoughtful, but – for a number of reasons – imprecise. While a detective story moves from confusion to clarity, Escher's images make visual sense until the 'thrilling denouement' is reached. Not until the moment of realisation does his intact world suddenly acquire a flaw at its heart.

Moreover, what happens to our journey through Escher's art after the viewer's realisation?

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33 E. H. Gombrich, 'Illusion and Visual Deadlock' in *Meditations on a Hobby Horse* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1963), p. 155.

34 Ernst, p. 70.

In a detective story, the revelation of the “answer” provides resolution. The story ends at that point: we have received tacit permission to disconnect from the aesthetic experience with the satisfaction of a process complete. In Escher's art, in contrast, discovering the “secret” does not terminate our engagement with the artwork. Up at the top of the belvedere, grappling with spatially nonsensical structures, we continue to watch the painting because we struggle to experience the shock of revelation as rupture. It took us so long to notice that we are already invested in the world as a stable construct; we are reluctant to retract the acceptance which we have already been enchanted into offering.

Like the readers of fairytale, we accept the impossible as normalised in the moment of reception, because Escher's surrounding detail remains, for the most part, convincing and intact. So our line of sight backtracks down the ladder, past the prison with its inmate peering out, to reach the boy poring over his own model of an 'impossible object'.

Mirroring the central oddness of *Belvedere*, this boy both underlines the work's central preoccupation and distracts visually from it. He comprises a detail sufficiently provocative to coax our gaze away from the interlocking belvedere and on to smaller, graspable (physically, by the boy) details. And he is just one of Escher's (literally) diverting devices. We may then make a quick return across the foreground to Bosch's figure, to wonder again what she is doing in this image in light of the impossible building. With no answer forthcoming, we go up the ladder again, down again, out to the mountains and back into the belvedere. And so on.

*Belvedere*, it becomes clear, is not precisely strange – not unfamiliar in a way which may be resolved into familiarity. Escher's image is, instead, peculiar: its impossibility is observable but resists a conclusive act of understanding. Revelation is too belated to trigger the conclusion of the artwork.

It is this breakdown of the relationship between knowledge and narrative change which identifies the speaker's experience in Smith's 'The Castle', and therefore our interpretative experience. Just as Escher imports the familiar figure from Bosch as a visual steer for our focus, Smith turns to the crumbling desolation of Tennyson's 'Mariana' (1930) to divert her reader's attention:

Oh that was a romantic time,  
The castle had such a lonely look,  
The estate,  
Heavy with cockle and spurge,  
Lay desolate.

The ocean waves  
Lapped in the castle caves.

Oh I love the ramshackle castle,  
And the room

Where our sons were born. (*Collected Poems*, pp. 262-3)

Smith recasts Mariana as a dreamy romantic. Details which could have underlined the Earl's abandonment are recast firmly as positives. For Smith's speaker, desolation becomes an aesthetic choice, a decision to observe from outside with an artistic eye. Instead of reflecting on her loneliness in the castle – the building positioned in the title to reflect how wholly it comprises her world – the speaker can observe, 'The castle had such a lonely look', in phrasing which positions her as external to her own experience. She casts herself, then, as an onlooker who can enjoy the 'romantic' scene without feeling trapped by it, revelling in an overblown, pleasurable Tennysonian melancholy.<sup>35</sup>

This reading is at odds with Julia Sims Steward's view that the 'ramshackle castle' and 'tall hollyhocks' indicate that the poem is an 'imprisoning' fantasy, indicating 'incarcerated desire'.<sup>36</sup> Her interpretation centres on Smith's accompanying sketch of a girl, smiling mysteriously, surrounded by long grass and tall flowers. Sims Steward reads the figure's

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35 Tennysonian melancholy becomes an explicit source of pleasure for Pompey in *Novel on Yellow Paper*: 'For you can't escape your fate. And I've known cats overlay babies. It was in the newspapers.'

Reader do you ever feel sea-sad, loamishly-sad, like Tennyson, with that sadness too deep for words?... 'Deep as first love and wild with all regret, Oh death in Life the days that are no more.'... I enjoy these moments of sadness and relish them to the uttermost deep.' (Stevie Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1951), pp. 16-17).

36 Julie Sims Steward, 'Pandora's Playbox: Stevie Smith's Drawings and the Construction of Gender', *Journal of Modern Literature* 22:1 (1998), p. 82.

sideways glance as a gaze beyond the imprisoning castle to a 'rampant, Bacchic alternative' where she is free.<sup>37</sup> I argue otherwise: given the pleasure which the speaker finds in the landscape surrounding the castle, her slanting gaze seems to fix instead on on the huge, stylised, romantic flowers which grow up around her. She is indeed looking beyond the castle's building – hovering on the horizon, holding its mysterious, invisibly-metamorphosing Earl – but, contrary to Sims Steward, she revels in the Earl's territory rather than visualising a life beyond it. Flowers, caves, cockle and spurge; the room where her sons were born; Smith's phrasing inscribes the world which encloses her with personal, tender memories of her married life. The monstrous Earl persists in the periphery, but he is not the locus of her attention. She studiously directs her focus away from the poem's central rupture, guiding her gaze – and ours – instead through the details of her husband's lands.

Smith's picture suggests that the refusal to look straight at the inconsistent heart of her life – to focus on and experience the Earl's reality as a shattering revelation – does not derive from naivete or ignorance. With one raised eyebrow and a Mona Lisa smile, the figure's expression is wry. It is, in fact, the look of someone who has a secret – an open secret – but who has decided not to allow it to matter. She signals her intention to assimilate the Earl's metamorphosis as a given.

What we reach with both Smith and Escher, then, is a kind of revelation which occurs visibly and starkly, but manages not to make a difference. Identification of a logical or

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37 Sims Steward, 'Pandora's Playbox', p. 82.

tonal rupture does not cause the (visual or plot) structures of these artists to fall apart. Their worlds go on intact: they do not work but they do not end, and so the audience remains ensnared. The structure is so convincing that even the realisation of fundamental illogicality does not prompt an abandonment, but rather an enchantment into passive acceptance, as the audience struggles (and fails) to resolve what they see and what they know. So, in 'The Castle', Smith's speaker reveals not only the facts of her life with the Earl of Egremont, but ultimately, the fact that this revelation affects neither her nor her audience:

My children never saw their father,  
Do not know,  
He sleeps in my arms each night  
Till cockcrow.

Oh I love the ramshackle castle,  
And the turret room  
Where our sons were born. (*Collected Poems*, p. 263)

The poem opens up, in the penultimate stanza, to reveal the Earl as supernatural - but ends with a three-line repetition of the charms of family life. This is not quite a change of subject: there is no sense of a thought-process being aborted. Throughout 'The Castle', the pace is leisurely; the speaker recounts her impressions of her marriage with an unhurried,



dreamy focus, moving from element to element with the changing rhythms of conversation. External to her own life, observing the aestheticised environs from a distance, she is content to fence off strangeness into irresolvable peculiarity. The revelation is made, and then bypassed in favour of what the speaker prefers to talk about: her memories, her family, her sense of aesthetics.

So oddness is laid out for us – from the start of the poem – but Smith engineers her text so that we barely register it. In the terms with which Escher described his own *Sun and Moon* (1948), noticing Smith's open secret requires 'a leap of the mind' to mentally turn background to foreground: sky to birds, dreamy romantic idyll to fairytale transfiguration narrative.<sup>38</sup> And even then, they have a tendency to reverse unexpectedly; the 'ramshackle castle' and Roly-poly keep looming back into focus in our reception of the text. It is these images which remain with readers. We do not describe 'The Castle' as a poem about a transfigured fairytale Earl; we identify it in terms of the castle, the sons, romantic desolation.

Discovering the 'trick', then, does not endanger the stability or convincingness of this world. Smith's 'The Castle' trots on despite the disturbing content which it lays out, and expresses itself overall as a positive, happy text. Escher's belvedere keeps standing even after we have realised that it makes no physical sense: our sightlines continue to rove around it, worrying at it, being distracted and returning to it. Peculiarity is delayed – and,

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38 M. C. Escher, *The Graphic World of M. C. Escher*, trans. John E. Brigham (London: Oldbourne, 1961), p. 13.

even when it is revealed, the work continues to hold us within it. The form remains too convincing to escape. It propels us onward.

### **Conclusion: Smith's Metamorphoses**

Come then, royal girl and royal times,  
Come quickly,  
I can be happy until you come  
But I cannot be heavenly,  
Only disenchanted people  
Can be heavenly. (*Collected Poems*, p. 473)

Locating metamorphosis in Smith's 'The Frog Prince' is even more elusive than it first appears. The prince's transformation into a frog, though titillatingly invisible in the poem, turns out to be a red herring. This text's real metamorphoses centre on mood, as the frog navigates his potential transformation from 'enchanted' to 'disenchanted'. He is contented in his enchantment: 'I am happy, I like the life'. Existence as a frog has been normalised for him; he is 'habituated/ To [his] quiet life' in a well (p. 472). It has become a given.

Even locked in his enchantment, however, the frog describes how he alternates between innocence and reflexive self-awareness. Sometimes he realises that his happiness 'is part

of the spell'. Crucially, that happiness is largely uncompromised by this realisation. The frog knows that he is being fooled, that he is spellbound into passively accepting an unnatural order of things. Yet the power of the enchantment is such that the knowledge fails to exert control over him. Though the frog understands that his happiness is artificially-induced, he continues to live contentedly within a life to which he is 'habituated'.

As this essay has explored, reading Smith and “watching” Escher engenders that same sense of an alteration having occurred – a fundamental shift in register, a rupturing of the work's basic assumptions – to which we are rendered unable to react. The 'enchantment' they weave is so powerful that our realisation of its inconsistency fails to pierce it. The tight fairytale logic of these artists steers us assertively through their work, delineating each new stage as a given. Metamorphosis – from comedy to tragedy, house to street, happy marriage to fairytale nightmare, logical world to spatial anarchy – seems to occur, in their worlds, because it was simply inevitable.

Both Escher and Smith gain mileage from this notion of metamorphic inevitability. Moving from left to right along Escher's *Metamorphosis III* (1967-68), lizards broaden into hexagons (Fig. 4). These round out into honeycomb, and bees fly out. Bees blacken into coarseness, and move to the background as white fish emerge from the spaces between them. We move through fish to ships to fish to horses; a town's coastline merges into a chessboard.

What narrative is emerging here? What have fish to do with horses, towns to do with chessboards? Escher's is not the logic of metonymy, nor of symbolism, nor of narrative causality. His associations derive from formal similarity. The shapes between the bees resemble fish, and therefore fish emerge. The tower on the edge of the town's coast resembles a rook, and so the sea flattens into a chessboard for the rook to play on. Form determines content absolutely, in a drawn-out, sequential production. The artwork's narrative is derived from the rigours of formal necessity. Each metamorphosis occurred because every new stage inhered, visually, in the one which preceded it.

Much of Smith's poetry is propelled in the same way, prompted by the form or sound of a word, rather than an idea or plotline. Smith's early poem, 'Who Killed Lawless Lean?' from her first collection *A Good Time Was Had By All* (1937), flaunts its derivation from the possibilities inherent in a three-way rhyme.

The parrot

Is eating a carrot

In his cage in the garret... (*Collected Poems*, p. 80)

Smith echoes the slow ritual delivery which opens 'Der Froschkönig', as she populates her text with a series of assertively simple images. Its lines lengthen exponentially, like stairs, as our field of vision expands; we descend these stairs into the vista which Smith is

gradually revealing. Each stair leads inevitably to the next. The parrot eats a carrot, and he does so *because* the words rhyme. That is also the reason why he is caged in the garret. One image generates another sonically. Smith's opening rhyme in 'Who Killed Lawless Lean?' opens up a constrained aural space into which her two closing rhymes must adjust themselves to fit.

There is a frugality to this strategy. Just as Escher's metamorphoses use every last bit of available space, tessellating animals precisely to fill the canvas, Smith's generation of plot through wordplay is so formally self-justifying, so unarguable, that it eliminates any sense of a narrative alternative. Their art proceeds from a sense of necessity, one object proceeding from another with the calm inevitability of fairytale, creating a solid wall which their audience cannot penetrate. We are unable, with our assumptions of logical causality, to get inside this world which originates in and is perpetuated by nothing more than wordplay. All we can do is deem it peculiar.

## Figures

[figures removed for reasons of copyright]

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