

Hope and Despair in Modern British Women's Religious Poetry. Stevie Smith's Representations of the Divine and the Human: 'A god is a Man's doll'

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I cry I cry

To God who created me

Not to you Angels who frustrated me

Let me fly, let me die,

Let me come to Him.

(S. Smith, "No Categories!")

A great critical need of our time is to search for ways to discuss religious and spiritual dimensions in works of literature that include the rich possibilities of human development. This urgency of a recovery of certain fundamental insights is not being answered by the reigning critical discourses, which have been unable to enter into a productive relation with spiritual and theological studies.¹ In spite of the fact that the advent of feminism has led to significant changes in religious language and imagery, some examples in modern women's religious poetry, in particular, seem to cry out for a sophisticated critical treatment that has been lacking in recent decades.² While some

¹ As Dennis Taylor has stated, 'What is left over is a nagging spiritual question about the man, about the worth of his life as we see it, and as he sees it. [...] We no longer know how to discuss [...] achieved insights, persistent blindnesses, [...]' ("The Need for a Religious Literary Criticism", 8).

² That has been the case of the woman poet and novelist known as Stevie Smith, whose work has gone through every phase of critical appreciation: the biographical, the theoretical, and the political. The dialogic theory of Bakhtin and the psychoanalytic

women poets abandoned institutional religion altogether, opting to withdraw into a private spiritual world isolated from patriarchal control, others, however, sought change from within established institutions.

Mid-twentieth-century poet Florence Margaret Smith, whose pseudonym was Stevie Smith, used the heightened and charged language of Protestant religion, and some of its most characteristic rhythms and forms, such as the hymn and the psalm, to write about the fundamental issues that move Man in this world.³ Smith (1902-71) was born into a religious Yorkshire family of the Anglican Church and was deeply influenced by the ceremonies that she attended regularly as a child at St. John's, in Palmers Green, a London suburb.⁴ She was infused with the sorrow of loss and would later assume a very ambiguous, and often antagonistic, relationship with orthodox Christianity. The importance that Smith attributes to the figure of God and the intensity with which she explores the Christian religion in her work is certainly unusual in the multicultural and secular society of today's Britain. The unique complexity of her beliefs can be gathered from the words of a longtime friend:

approach of Kristeva have provided both the most popular and sophisticated ways of interpreting the weird heterogeneity of Smith's subjects and forms.

³ Gordon Mursell, in *English Spirituality* (2001), states that 'the rich and multivalent imagery of the Psalms forms a vital dimension of women's spirituality' (476). Religious language 'as found in prayers, songs, devotions, utterances of prophets and seers, and in the accounts of saints and mystics of all religions, is closer to its experiential source', being therefore more open to female imagery (475-6).

⁴ According to John Mahoney, Smith 'delighted as a child and as a young woman in the ceremony, ritual, and Prayer Book of that Church.' (1998, 322).

In religion Stevie was ambivalent: neither a believer, an unbeliever nor agnostic, but oddly all three at once. [...] Intellectually she rejected the dogmas of her high Anglican background, as unreasonable and morally inferior. But she had an obsessive concern with them. [...] One could say that she did not like the God of Christian orthodoxy, but she could not disregard Him or ever quite bring herself to disbelieve in Him.⁵

Although Smith's work is consistently informed by a fairly rich knowledge of Church history, as well as of more specifically biblical and liturgical matters, the poet may have been influenced not only by Thomas Huxley's Darwinian form of agnosticism but also by her contemporary Bertrand Russell's objections to some of the arguments for the existence of God and to Christian teachings. Her specific position appears to oscillate between Russell's 'agnostic atheism', that is, not claiming to know the existence of any deity and not believing in any, and 'apathetic agnosticism' or the view that there is no proof of either the existence or non-existence of any deity since it appears unconcerned for the universe or the welfare of its inhabitants.⁶ Nevertheless,

⁵ The Reverend Gerard Irvine, quoted in James McGibbon's "Preface" to Stevie Smith's *Selected Poems* (19).

⁶ The term 'agnostic' was introduced by Thomas Henry Huxley in 1860 to describe his philosophy which rejects Gnosticism and all claims to spiritual or mystical knowledge. 'I neither affirm nor deny the immortality of man. I see no reason for believing it, but on the other hand I have no means of disproving it.' (*Collected Essays*, 237-9). In his 1953 essay, *What Is an Agnostic?*, Bertrand Russell states: 'An agnostic thinks it impossible to know the truth in matters such as god and the future life with which Christianity and other religions are concerned.' (*Collected Papers*, 255-8).

Smith once declared that there was always the danger that she might ‘lapse into belief’.⁷ This religious indecisiveness is, in turn, reflected in her art’s profound ambivalence; as Jane Dowson states, ‘Stevie Smith is orthodoxly *thirties* in articulating a liberal humanism but her stylistics are unorthodoxly radical.’ (2005, 6).

Replying to a questioner in 1951, Stevie Smith significantly wrote that ‘poetry must be rooted in religion and philosophy’ (qtd. in Barbera 71) and, in fact, critics like Michael Tatham have described her as ‘a profoundly religious poet [...] speak[ing] to our condition as modern piety can seldom hope to speak’ (qtd. in Mahoney 323). Nevertheless, John Mahoney has recognised that ‘No facile theological speculation, no philosophical gymnastics will do for Stevie’ (324) and Holbert Weidner corroborates that ‘She, like her image of Christ, was not mild [...] Her poetry is prickly, and she dares to be as impatient and questioning as Job [...]’ (1983, 490).

Smith’s notable lecture on “The Necessity of Not Believing” to the Cambridge Humanists (1953) is ‘instructive in getting close to the core of her love/ hate relationship with Christianity’ (Spalding 233).⁸ There, the poet bemoans what men and women have made of God, how they have shaped institutional configurations that belie the purity of the message, how they have twisted God’s words into tortuous and stern creeds of good and evil, heaven and hell, rewards and punishments. (Mahoney 324).

⁷ John Mahoney thinks that ‘It is, [...], a mistake to attribute too quickly a kind of naked agnosticism to Smith [...] who once agreed with a friend about “how very imperfect an agnostic I am”.’ (326).

⁸ Smith described the lecture as ‘partly autobiographical, showing how very religious I was when young ... and later how I became not religious but consciously anti-religious’ (qtd. in Spalding 233).

Ultimately, Smith would set about ‘reconstructing’ God through her metaphysics into a more sympathetic, less autocratic and vengeful deity.

Significantly, in her poem entitled “Egocentric”, Smith begins by posing the question of God’s concern for his creatures, whose refrain begins and ends the poem: ‘What care I if good God be / If he be not good to me’.⁹ The poem is built around the ambiguous use of the adjective ‘egocentric’, which may serve to characterise either the deity, seen as a cold and selfish creator who does not manifest itself, or the speaker’s own carelessness for his fellow creatures. If God ‘will not hear’ the speaker’s ‘cry / Nor heed [his] melancholy midnight sigh’ (3-4), what then is God’s purpose and the purpose of the speaker’s faith? In another perspective, it is obviously absurd to expect God to have created the universe to satisfy any individual’s desires, and the poet makes the idea sound ridiculous. In this playful way, Smith appears to reject simultaneously the established idea of God’s goodness (present in her pun with the word ‘good’), and the elitist pride in the supposed central role of mankind in God’s creation and in that which, for her, differentiates man from ‘silent inhumanity’ (12) – ‘the questing conscious flame/ That is my glory and my bitter bane’ (14-15).

In the argumentative poem called “Away, Melancholy”, the poet addresses the issues of God’s Creation and goodness again, with the purpose of inverting preconceived ideas. Man is superlative as *he* of all creatures ‘raises a stone’ and ‘Into the stone the god / Pours what he knows of good ...’ (24-25). She affirms that it is indeed something that man has an idea of Good which he venerates. What is admirable

⁹ All the poems by Stevie Smith quoted in this article can be found in James MacGibbon’s 1978 selection, reprinted in 2002 by Penguin Classics, *Stevie Smith. Selected Poems*. The numbers that appear inside brackets are those of the lines quoted.

about Man is precisely that he aspires to good, to love, and that even when he is beaten, corrupted, dying, '[...] heaves an eye above / Cries Love, love.' (43-44); therefore, she concludes, 'It is his virtue needs explaining, / Not his failing' (45-46). Smith considers that man, not God, is the true 'hero' because he manages to keep his goodness in spite of trying circumstances. The poem is full of doubt but it is also a brave attempt to face doubt without shrinking, to come to terms with the idea that God may well be a human construct, and to celebrate humanity in spite of the 'tears', 'tyranny', 'pox' and 'wars' (28-29) that are part of the human condition.¹⁰

Smith's typical ambivalence regarding the life possibilities which are open to humans and to herself is best represented in her poem "Is it wise?", where in three successive questions with the same negative reply she discards not only the choice of misery and despair, 'To make a song of Melancholy' (3), but also that of hope of an afterlife through religion, 'To make a song of Corruptibility' (9); she considers the first 'a garland of sighs' and the second 'a chain of linked lies' (4, 10). When she finally pronounces that 'No, it is not wise', the poet thus refuses the conventional Christian solution of 'a martyr's dowry' for the much more easeful 'Death's prize' (16-17). Part of Smith's quarrel with Christianity was that it absolutely forbids command over death, a power that she found 'delicious'. Death becomes a powerful masculine figure in her

¹⁰ The poet Seamus Heaney also emphasises the humane in "A Memorable Voice", his essay on Stevie Smith: 'Death, waste, loneliness, cruelty, the maimed, the stupid, the trusting – her concerns were central ones, her compassion genuine and her vision almost tragic [...]' (1991, 212).

mythology, being seen as the supreme hope of release, as the gateway to whatever eternity there may be.¹¹

Smith's later poems reveal her infatuation with mortality: death is often viewed as a merciful friend or lover, whose power of passing away is envisioned as a source of great strength, yielding solace and an utter, almost welcome, finality.¹² In this sense, eternal life is more of a threat to her than a theological promise of redemption or damnation. Smith takes on a celebratory tone in many poems, in this homage to the natural force which 'scatters' and 'breaks things up', forming an alliance with this kindest of gods. For her, death not only preserves the balance but it also 'keeps us honest': it cuts through the hypocrisy of an opiate religion that 'comforts' its followers with illusory promises of Heaven as a reward. In her poem "Come Death (I)", Smith reveals her understanding of this profound human paradox:

[...]

¹¹ MacGibbon's testimony as Smith's friend and editor may help us understand this feature of the poet, who attempted suicide in July 1953 at her London office: 'She did not believe [...] that suicide was necessarily wrong and often discussed the possibility for herself, should life, mentally or physically, become intolerable. Indeed, death probably held less fear for her than most: she had come to terms with it as her *gentle friend*, in the manner of the metaphysical poets.' ("Preface" to *Selected Poems*, 19).

¹² A slow, musical, and romantic piece, "Tender Only to One", presents the musings of a speaker as she plucks the petals of a flower and envisions her lover; but this speaker knows to whom she is betrothed and she is ready for his cold embrace: 'Tender only to one, / Last petal's latest breath / Cries out loud / From the icy shroud / His name, his name is Death.' (16-20).

How vain the work of Christianity

To teach humanity

Courage in its mortality.

Who would rather not die

And quiet lie

Beneath the sod

With or without god?

Foolish illusion, what has Life to give?

Why should man more fear Death than fear to live?

(12-20) ¹³

“The Reason” is another brief poetic colloquy with self, in which the speaker muses not only on the hypothetical nature of God but on His very relation to the speaker; in fact, that God does not exist *without* the speaker and that he/she has made Him in his/her image. The problem, therefore, lies not in an external deity but in the internal workings of the speaker. The first two quatrains set the reader up into believing that the poem is just a light play of banalities on life and death, yet they also serve as the setup to put the reader off balance for the powerful and unexpected ‘reason’ in the final couplet:

My life is vile

¹³ The poem may constitute a reply, namely, to Emily Brontë’s “No Coward Soul is Mine” (1846), especially in Smith’s initial argument that it is vain to preach courage when facing death. One should instead reserve that courage for life. For Smith, ‘[...] being alive is like being in enemy territory.’ (qtd. in Walsh 2004, 18).

I hate it so
I'll wait awhile
And then I'll go.

Why wait at all?
Hope springs alive,
Good may befall
I yet may thrive.

It is because I can't make up my mind

If God is *good, impotent* or *unkind*.

(1-10, my emphasis)

As in other poems that express the strife between hope and despair and the fundamental schism in the poet's mind, Smith describes the cause that torments her life: the indecisiveness regarding her own religious beliefs – 'I can't make up my mind' (9). Besides the primary choice of death or nihilism, the options that Smith considers include a marked gradation of beliefs or unbeliefs – 'theism', 'atheism' and 'anti-theism', represented in the succession of adjectives in the final couplet. The very decision to stay alive, Smith thus implies, will depend on how exactly she interprets the divinity.

In her apparently more optimistic "Do Not!", a poetic statement of hope and trust in humanity addressed to Christ as God himself, there is a deliberate inversion or reversal of conventional theological discourse, resulting from a shift in the traditional perspective of the 'divine/human' relationship. The message of this mock-sermon is

rather that the addressee should ‘not *despair* of man’ and above all that He should not judge him, that He should ‘see life’ ‘with compassion’ or, if it proves to be too much for Him, simply ‘*flee strife*’ (1, 19-20, my emphasis). To be able to achieve this, the addressee only has to look inside Himself, ‘know your own heart’ (17), recognise His own limitations – ‘are you not also afraid and in fear cruel?’ (5), but especially the presumptuousness of wanting to impose a system which only aggravates wrongs:

[...]

Made a philosophy [...] beautified

In noble dress and into the world sent out

To run with the ill it most pretends to rout.

[...] (14-16)

Smith ironically concludes that if the addressee still fails after this advice it will be His own fault and, ‘Of [him]self despairing’ (20), will be justified in taking His own life. Besides the implicit anti-theistic position she assumes in this poem, Smith makes the extended or implied image of a suicidal Deity, instead of a self-sacrificial one, deeply disturbing or unsettling in her religious and political context.

In Smith’s barely disguised autobiographical poems, mostly dramatic monologues and dialogues, the poet’s view of spirituality, particularly in female experience, can be very challenging and even controversial, due not only to religious and political connotations but also to the ‘angry, rebellious, iconoclastic, indeed blasphemous’, voice and tone she employs (Mahoney 319). That is the case of “Childe Rolandine”, in which the poet associates the godly or divine Spirit – ‘the spirit from heaven’ (29) – to both oppression and social exploitation of lower-middle class women,

like herself.¹⁴ In life, and as a ‘secretary-typist’ (2), the speaker’s time and talents are wasted at the service of rich employers – ‘a work that is tedious’ (17) – until she is left only with dark feelings of hatred. Her tears and suffering – experienced as ‘a daily death’ – are explained in a deeply bitter and ironic concluding remark about the only existing Deity for the miserable:

[...]

There is a spirit *feeds* on our tears, [...]

Mighty human feelings are his *food*

Passion and grief and joy his flesh and blood

That he may live and *grow fat* we daily die

This *cropping* One is our immortality.

[...] (23-7, my emphasis)

Although Stevie, the secretary, inevitably ‘bowed her head’ (28) during the day, at the end of it she openly exposed the Christian and Protestant work ethic by ‘drawing the picture’ (29) of patriarchal belief as an oppressive and parasitical order.

In her strong imagery, Smith reverses the symbolism of the Eucharist: it is not the Christian who drinks the blood of Christ, it is the Divinity who literally ‘grows fat’

¹⁴ Stevie Smith, who never married and did not go to university, became a secretary in the magazine publishing company Newnes Pearson. This clerical job, which Smith kept for thirty years, must have been dull at best and crushing at worst for her (‘Dark was the day for Childe Rolandine the artist /When she went to work as a secretary-typist’). But, according to MacGibbon, ‘She gave out that her work was never heavy’ and that she ‘had time to entertain her friends to tea’ in her ‘private office’ (Preface to *Selected Poems*, 17).

(26) on human suffering and mortification. The implicit cruelty of this God is emphasised by the deliberate play or pun with the word ‘immortality’: humans have to daily ‘die’, both literally and metaphorically, so that this Deity’s immortality can be fed or sustained.¹⁵ It constitutes a deliberate inversion of God’s symbolic sacrifice of his own Son, his flesh and blood, to save Man – that which Smith classifies as ‘the dreadful bargain’ (in “How do you see”). But the tears of Rolandine also water the sap of a wicked tree: hatred. Because of this, her ‘soul will fry in hell’ (14) and her oppressors will go to heaven as they cannot be blamed for her suffering. Smith’s character takes off on a similar journey to Robert Browning’s almost hopeless quest for victory against impossible odds in the desolate landscape of *Child Roland to the Dark Tower Came*, but her own quest has a different ending because she visualises the occupant of the Dark Tower.¹⁶

Patriarchal authority and religious institutions are further challenged in another poem about female spiritual experience, “Mrs Simpkins” (1937). A drastic change in this woman’s dull life as a wife – ‘never had very much to do’ (1) – occurs when she

¹⁵ This same notion or idea is present in several other poems, namely the ones entitled “God the Eater” and “God the Drinker”, in the first of which the poet refers to the Deity as a sort of gorging monster – ‘Eating my life all up as it is his’ (12) and, in the second one, as a vampire – ‘draw the blood out of my wrist / And drink my life’ (3-4).

¹⁶ If Robert Browning’s *Childe Roland* may be seen as an allegory about the despair of being without a belief in God, a nightmare of many Victorians who felt that without it mankind would be lost, then Stevie Smith’s *Childe Rolandine* could be a daring debunking of this religious crisis: her poem implies that mankind is, in fact, lost *with* God.

decides to give up conventional faith in the 'Trinity' for *séance* spiritualism.¹⁷ This alternative belief offers her a brighter view of death not implying the suffering of final separation. But Rees-Jones states that 'if the woman's turn to spiritualism is due to her gullibility it is also due to the church's failure to sustain her' (2005, 78). She adds that 'Spiritualism was a movement (...) which historically attracted women, [...] because of the voice it gave them in comparison to their silenced position within the hierarchies and patriarchal structures of orthodox Christianity' (78). And 'voice' is an important issue for Smith, who often represents the poet-performer as a 'medium' and poetry as mediumship.¹⁸

But the husband's reaction to Mrs Simpkins's new 'conversion', probably reflecting the orthodoxy, is first an appalled refusal to accept the hypothesis that there is no final rest for the soul and, ultimately, the more extreme or desperate act of taking his own life. This hypothesis of a 'return' shocked the poet herself, who viewed death as a sweet release from the suffering of the material world. The other unexpected and ironic outcome is that Mrs Simpkins, now a widow, has to work 'for her daily bread' (22) in a

¹⁷ The primary purpose of the *séance* was to evoke beings from another world by producing sensory intensification. The role of the medium, as a fluid and transmissible body, was to provide a channel for those other entities.

¹⁸ The spiritualist in Smith's poem can in some ways be compared with the poet herself in the manner that she performs as *medium* for the language, both as poetic creator and performer. The poem seems to suggest that Mrs Simpkins becomes a spiritualist because of her awareness of the limits of the power of the female voice.

menial job.¹⁹ Although she is no longer idle, she will never attain rest as ‘her spiritualist interests have indirectly caused the death of her husband at the same time as reducing her to poverty’ (Rees-Jones 79). In this sense, Smith’s negotiation of body and voice/spirit in the poem also dramatises anxieties of a theological nature.

“The Hostage” analyses allegorically another extreme situation of a Stevie Smith in disguise, that of an imprisoned lady who is going to be hung ‘at dawn’ (1). Her previous circumstances are not explained, except that she is ‘a member of the Church of England’. Although she has ‘done nothing wrong’ (2), as the ones who keep her there cruelly insist, she still wishes to be heard in confession – ‘Just a talk, not really a confession’ (10) – by a Father of another ‘persuasion’ (7). What seems to bother this woman – ‘my heart is sore’ (10) – is not that she *has* to die but the knowledge that she has ‘always / wanted to’ (10, 11). Her mind is disturbed by the contradiction or paradox that ‘life is so beautiful’ (19) and her wish, ‘Even as a child’, that her life ‘was over and done with’ (15-16). Being religious, this obsession with windy death – ‘I snuffed it up and liked it’ (38) – is seen as a sinful or an ungrateful and unnatural thought; she even refers to it as a ‘malaise’ severe or ‘infectious’ enough to prevent her from ‘form[ing] any close acquaintance’ (40-43) in life, such as marrying.²⁰ From this woman’s ‘confession’, it is further implied that she not only wishes death but also believes that it

¹⁹ Laura Severin’s comprehensive examination of Smith’s work, *Stevie Smith’s Resistant Antics* (1997), illustrates how part of Smith’s goal was to undermine an ideology of feminine domesticity.

²⁰ In a conversation with her friend Kay Dick, Smith would reveal her personal strategy of life: ‘[...] I keep myself well on the edge. I wouldn’t commit myself to anything. I can always get out of it if I want to.’ (qtd. in Walsh 2).

is this entity who truly rules, and not God. The only afterlife that she envisions for herself is as a ‘*vegetable* leaning against a quiet wall, / Or an old *stone*, [...] / Or a *flash* in the fire [...]’ (49-50, my emphasis). One feels, though, that this nihilistic ‘reincarnation’ only serves to reflect and reinforce the image of the woman’s previous existence as a roaming outsider or misfit – like the poet, a hostage of life:

[...] Oh the scenery.

[...]

But I was *outside* of it, looking, *finding no place*,

No excuse at all for my *distant wandering face*.

[...] (19-23, my emphasis) ²¹

This unreligious death-wish is also the theme of “A Dream of Comparison”, a dialogue poem written ‘after reading Book Ten of *Paradise Lost*’ (its sub-title), in which two ladies are described as strolling together and talking. The apparent matter-of-factness of the situation hides the richness of the Biblical and literary allusions, namely the coincidence of the women’s names with those of Eve and the Virgin Mary. The reader soon realises that theirs is not a typically feminine conversation and that they are invading the male domain of intellectual speculation. In fact, the poet’s almost casual reference that “they talked philosophically” (4) is subsequently corroborated by the women’s own statements about the issue of existence and non-existence. Eve, who may represent Smith’s point of view, formulates an unexpected and blasphemous death-wish in her exclamation “Oh to be Nothing”, in which she demands from her Creator “a /

²¹ From a certain moment in Smith’s life, death would offer a resolution to the ‘prison’ of melancholia and depression, and she would focus even more intensely on the allure of nothingness.

Cessation of consciousness” (5-6). Mary, in her turn, decides as the representative of orthodoxy to question the contradiction or unnatural logic of her friend’s statement: ‘How can Something envisage Nothing?’ (9), to which Eve typically replies with another question about the origins of human consciousness: ‘Where were you before you were born?’ (12).²²

But Eve’s painful philosophical questionings, which seem to parody those of Adam in the Bible and those of Smith’s literary fathers (Milton and the Romantics), are not really understood by her friend Mary. This one ‘love[s] Life’ (13) unconditionally and probably does not need a sophisticated explanation for existence, in spite of the contradiction in her statement that she ‘would fight to the death for it’ (14), thus revealing a latent religious fundamentalism. It is furthermore clear that she is unable to find ‘a reason’ to match her strong ‘feeling’ – one that might convince the more rational and sceptical Eve. Although ‘they talked until the nightfall’, an understanding between the two was not finally reached because, as the poet laconically concludes, ‘the difference between them was radical’ (20). It appears that, through the dissonant and irreconcilable voices of Eve and Mary, Smith is representing the irrevocable schism the

²² This biblical feminine duo or pair and their ‘radical’ differences seem to mirror those that Stevie Smith experienced in her own life, namely the religious divergences between herself and her sister Molly, who would convert to Catholicism at the same time that Smith assumed her agnosticism. The use in the poem of the figure of the Virgin Mary, who is a strong Catholic icon, is therefore not a simple coincidence.

poet herself experiences between power of reason and will to believe, between a love of life and a leaning towards death.²³

In “God and the Devil”, a poem about another biblical duo or pair, the poet illustrates the arbitrariness of human existence as a means to a designed end – ‘We’re here to point a moral and adorn a tale’ (14), thus representing God as a capricious cynic and as an accomplice of the Devil. The poem is again in the form of a dialogue or argument between these two divine entities, in which a childish but cruel bet is made. When God first presents his vision of Man’s creation to his interlocutor – ‘Suppose / Things were fashioned this way’ (4-5), an unbelieving Devil challenges him to ‘Prove it if you can’ (8). Through this parodic exchange, Smith exposes a deliberately simplistic version of the biblical episode of Creation: ‘So God created Man / And that is how it all began’ (9-10).

This mutual ‘play’ or ‘joke’ could have ended just as it began since the point had already been proven by the Deity. Instead, the poet says, ‘It has continued now for many a year’ (11). God had neglected his duty to put a stop to it when it became clear that there was something wrong or flawed with his creation – ‘[...] why should bowels

²³ It is pertinent to compare the theme and the statements in Smith’s poem to Emily Brontë’s “The Philosopher” (1845). In this dialogue between a philosopher and a seer, the first formulates a desperate death-wish in the face of the fragmentation of his identity, the struggle between the power of reason and the will to believe: “O for the time when I shall sleep / Without identity – / And never care how rain may steep / Or snow may cover me!” (7-10). The attitude of Smith’s ‘Eve’ closely resembles that of Brontë’s ‘philosopher’, thus establishing a dialogue with the female literary tradition on the issues of identity and belief.

yearn and cheeks grow pale?’ (13-14). If God had set out to prove he could make Man in his own image, why did he neglect the outcome of his experiment when he saw mankind permanently subject to disease and death? The poet seems to ask. Stevie Smith’s subversive theological explanation of how we came to be is enriched and complemented by a hard existentialist questioning of the male myths of creation.

The poet’s purpose is to detect the basic or fundamental insufficiencies and contradictions of religious texts, including the Bible, at the same time that her agnostic attitude to Christianity does not really contradict her strong Anglican background, her knowledge of ‘holy writ’ and her latent belief in a God of Love.²⁴ Smith has herself referred to ‘my formidable conscience, a most practical agent, a really literal creature, full of the plainest common sense and a determination to make words mean what they say’ (qtd. in Spalding 234).

As she engages in serious and deep spiritual commentary, Smith does not exclude satire or ridicule to prove her point. That is the case of “Mother, Among the Dustbins”, a conversation between a son and his mother, in which the poet seems to satirise the sometimes naïve and foolish convictions of the common believer, stating that ‘Man is most frivolous when he pronounces’ (15), and defending instead a lucid and rational view of existence in which there is no pretence or beautification. Given the repressive environment created by the Church around women, it is certainly relevant that it is the capitalized ‘Mother’ who in the poem plays the critical role of dispeller of

²⁴ It is perhaps significant that Stevie Smith reviewed many theological works during the course of her life, including the *New English Bible*. She had always known the King James’s version intimately and lovingly, and would strongly disapprove of the modern translation (MacGibbon 11).

certain generally assumed or preconceived religious ideas. Incited to corroborate the almost silly statement of her inquisitive son about his heightened feeling of ‘the presence of God’ ‘among the dustbins and the manure’ (1), the mother replies critically that she feels rather the Deity’s presence in her hard menial domestic task – ‘in the broom / I hold’ (7-8), in the indifferent passing of time – ‘in the cobwebs of the room’ (9) and ‘most of all’ in final death – ‘the silence of the tomb’ (10). The huge contrast between the two speakers in the poem, that is, a romanticized view of God’s immanence and a disenchanting but informed onlook of life, is further aggravated by the Mother’s final speech. In it she reveals that nothing lies beyond that boundary and that mankind’s hope for ‘eternal life’ is ‘an empty thing’ – ‘Naught but the vanity of a protesting mind // That would not die’ (12-14).

For Smith, Man is most vain in assuming that part of himself is immortal and, furthermore, stubborn to resist the inevitable end of consciousness. For her, this preconception is what prevents him from scientific ‘Inquiry’ and from objective pronouncement. As it is usual in Smith, the two conflicting views do not harmonise when we reach the poem’s end, perceived in the son’s outraged reaction to his mother’s heretical philosophy and in his ambiguous rhetorical question: ‘Can you question the folly of man in the creation of God? / Who are you?’ (19-20). The son thus embodies orthodox patriarchal belief when he asks his own mother ‘Who are you to question the faith of man in God?’ But the awkwardness of his phrasing allied to the lack of arguments seems to betray him, affirming – instead of rejecting – the obvious

conclusion of the poem: that Man is foolish and that God is just a childish fiction or creation.²⁵

Smith's "The Leader" is a political poem with extended or parallel religious implications and obvious connections to the idolisation of the repressive patriarchal figure, as well as the dangers that may derive to mankind in general from such fearful and blind adoration of a despot. In this striking parable, Smith uses the same adjectives as in previous poems to characterise its followers – 'foolish', with no 'sense' and 'mad', even if these 'Men' are significantly represented as animals (squirrel, mole and cock) and not as human beings. This, Smith implies, is because they have lost their humanity in submitting and slaving to 'the hollow man at the top of the tree' (1), allowing themselves not only to be exploited – 'keep his rules / And bring him food' (8-9), but also letting fear rule their lives – 'none of them dare say what they feel (5).

Although the poet's parable is universal and may apply to any one despot or historical context, namely the ones described in P. B. Shelley's sonnet "England in 1819" and song "Men of England" (intertexts certainly at the back of Smith's mind), the 'Leader' she is referring to is Hitler himself, the 'phoney majority' (2) that supports him

²⁵ According to James Najarian, 'The most interesting development in Smith criticism has been the belated recognition of the point of Smith's naughtiness' and 'that [she] is only now beginning to be read as the subversive she is.' (2003, 485). It is certainly true that the 'play' of her poetry provides both the means and the cover for cultural and social subversion. MacGibbon states that, in society, Smith was 'amusing and deliciously barbed in her comments on people and events. [...] the quality of her talk elusive as quicksilver and ranging from metaphysical speculation, through gossip, to raucous humour.' (18).

is the Nazi party and the ‘people’ who ‘run mad in the Fuehrer Prinzip’ (21) are the Germans in the 1930s and 40s – the poet’s own era.²⁶ But the poem is a much more complex statement than that of a momentous rejection and overthrowal of totalitarianism – ‘They should run him out in the cold’, ‘Or burn him up in the hot fury / Of a flame’ (11-12). It is a sophisticated and subtle incitement to civil disobedience to all forms of authoritarian influence and censorship, be it political or religious, and it represents the poet’s deep concern for the future of humanity. Because that ‘Who sits at the top of the old oak tree’ (7), surveying what goes on down below, is also a traditional static representation of God, and the people ‘will have a lord and it matters not who’ (22), Smith’s poem may constitute a most daring critique of Christianity, especially that kind which thrives on bigotry and violence.

For Stevie Smith, Christian dogma unnecessarily complicated the simplicity of God and His message, which is one of love and, as it is clear from her long argumentative poem “How do you see?”, the Church will not ‘answer our difficulties’ (77); she thus blames these institutions and their leaders for what she sees as contradiction and obfuscation. Again, for the poet, it is a question of language, ‘a determination to make words mean what they say’. Smith is, therefore, an artist who catches the human quest for the deepest love, for the divine, but also the frustrations and failures and torments that often are part of that quest – ‘my *glory* and my bitter *bane*’ (my emphasis). Philip Larkin once observed that Smith’s poetry ‘speaks with the authority of sadness’ (qtd. in Sternlicht 89), but what it more frequently speaks with is the license of despair, the hushed despair of drudgery and isolation. The result is a

²⁶ Stevie Smith had ‘travelled to Germany in 1929 and 1931, experiencing the ominous ‘between the wars’ atmosphere’ (Mahoney 321). She also had a direct contact with soldiers coming from the front of battle and must have witnessed the London air raids during World War II.

compelling portrait of mental and spiritual extremity, one that the poet herself summarises in her most famous poem: 'I was much too far out all my life / And not waving but drowning.' (11-12).

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