The Religious Poetry of Stevie Smith and Emily Brontë:

Negotiating Between Hope and Despair

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Shut from his Maker's smile
The accursed man shall be:
Compassion reigns a little while,
Revenge eternally –
(E. Brontë, "Shed no tears ...")

[…]
A black man comes in with the evening tide.
What is his name? Tell me! How does he dare?
He comes uninvited. His name is Despair.
(S. Smith, "The Sea-Widow")

This paper aims at exploring the religious connections between Stevie Smith (1902-71) and Emily Brontë (1818-1848) through a close reading of some of their most representative poems. In spite of their very different historical contexts – Victorian and Modern, these women poets seem to share experiences and concerns regarding their respective views on God and Mankind, as well as a rich spiritual dimension in spite of religious dissention. Often referred to as sceptics or mystics, Smith and Brontë have in fact absorbed the prevailing religious doubt and the spiritual experiments that characterised their respective periods. Their religion, inclined toward spirituality not doctrinal orthodoxy, is often used in their poems as a critique of social failures or as an appeal to inner moral standards. They reflect the chiastic tension between hope and despair, between the desire to believe and the realization that Christianity was seriously flawed.

Reflecting the early Victorian 'signs of the times', an unstable climate of religious and political change, Patrick Brontë's Haworth parish was neither easy on its

pastors nor pacific in the quarrels between Evangelicals, Methodists and Calvinists.[1] But the Reverend had a parallel challenge in two of his children, Branwell and Emily Jane, who according to Stevie Davies "sat to listen to the paternal sermons with sneers in their hearts and feelings of violent or cold dissent" (Davies, 1994, 139). The first saw through the feeble logic of a church that preached a God of love and sentenced believers to hell (*Azrael, or, Destruction's Eve*, 1838), the second felt affronted by a male religion that was the oppressive agent of patriarchy – condemning its daughters to perpetual exile (Davies, 140).[2] But Emily Brontë was herself very much a product of Protestantism. The 'inner light' of all believers, a doctrine which offered each individual the right to freedom of conscience, "ironically" gave this woman poet "a legacy of power and authority to criticise its own icons and structure" (Davies, 140).

In her works, singularly devoid of direct mention of orthodox beliefs, Brontë not only reacted to the raging sectarian strife of her period but she also anatomised the inherent contradictions of the Bible, viewing God's creation as a world of strife and rejection. In the double context of heavenly and earthly war or apocalypse, reflected by both contemporary religious and political conflict, the poet features the crimes and sufferings of the doomed man and woman.[3] Violence and dispute seem to be built into the natural, social and religious order; all forms of theological controversy appear to be

[1] "The Armenian-Calvinist controversy between Wesley and Whitefield had concerned the question as to who would be saved, Wesley considering that God's offer was open to whoever might accept by faith, Whitefield, following Calvin in a strict view that the elect had been chosen by God for salvation." The development of more authoritarian views of the Church seemed to cause the drift of Methodism into Dissent after Wesley's death. See A. Pollard (1984, 47-48).

[2] Branwell's atheism in espousing the cause of Azrael in open revolt against God and Noah, in this long poem, is very interesting (Winnifrith, 1983, 141-154). In turn, Davies considers Emily Brontë's religious attitude as 'feminist Dissent' because Christianity's God was not a woman's God and church and Bible blamed Eve for man's fall (1994, 140).

[3] And, in fact, Brontë's generation – the 1830s and 40s – would witness not only unprecedented religious controversy but also social and political confrontation both at home and abroad, as growing industrial unrest in the North was being fuelled up by Chartism and the Continental revolutions. The constant threat of a violent conflagration was especially felt around Haworth, namely Lees Moor, where gatherings and demonstrations were taking place.

base and insane struggles for power, as the poem "My Comforter" (1844) aptly describes:

> […]
> Around me, wretches uttering praise,
> Or howling o'er their *hopeless* days,
> And each with Frenzy's tongue –
>
> A Brotherhood of misery,
> With smiles as sad as sighs;
> Their madness daily maddening me,
> And turning into agony
> The Bliss before my eyes.
> […]
> (13-20, my emphasis)

In the midst of religious fanaticism, and namely Calvinist fundamentalism, the speaker expresses her suffering at the implicit destruction of her vision (of universal salvation?), turning her latent hope into agonising despair.[4]

Only two years later, in "No Coward Soul" (January 1846), she would overcome this divisive feeling, firmly rejecting the fear implicit in this controversy – "Vain are the thousand creeds / That move men's hearts, unutterably vain" (9-10) – and asserting instead her own powerful and self-sufficient creed in the soul's immortality. But with this final and extreme statement of faith Emily Brontë intended also the annihilation of the boundaries between 'human woman' and divine power, presenting them as equally vital universal forces. There is an unmistakable relationship of equality in the phrasing that reveals the balance of power intrinsic in the poet's statement and which might

[4] Although there are no autobiographical records as to Emily Brontë's personal beliefs, Marianne Thormählen states in *The Brontës and Religion* (2004) that "Calvinist tenets caused Anne, Charlotte and Branwell much spiritual anguish […]" and that "an awareness of sin and a desperate yearning for salvation were feelings promoted by all the denominations represented in their immediate milieu." (16). Nevertheless, Thormählen points out also that "these fears coexisted with hopes for everlasting bliss whose nature and intensity few of us can imagine today." (16). It is known that Anne Brontë defended the view of the 'universal salvation', but there is no evidence regarding Emily.

qualify her self-centred pride as sinful: "Life, that in me hast rest / As I – Undying Life, have power in Thee" (7-8). God-in-Emily means that she does not see herself as a passive vessel, giving God "the chance to 'rest' in her whilst in exchange she exercises 'power' in God" (Davies, 144).[5]

Nevertheless, serene self-confidence is not always typical of Emily's general life and work. Just a year before, in "The Philosopher" (February, 1845), she had expressed her despair – a sense of imminent breakdown and vulnerability – in the disguised form of a dialogue. The 'little frame' of the speaker can hardly contain, let alone reconcile, a trinity of belligerent divinities and thus keep all the divergent aspects of his identity together, ultimately formulating a desperate wish – "To cease to think and cease to be" (48). In the same way, the poet feels fundamentally riven and at strife with herself, reflecting in Davies's words "the strife that cracked the Biblical Heaven apart" (145):

> […]
> Three Gods within this little frame
> Are warring night and day.
>
> Heaven could not hold them all, and yet
> They are all held in me
> And must be mine till I forget
> My present entity.
> […]
> (17-22)

Because traditional theologies cannot "light the clouds that wilder" (46) her or assuage the conflicts that ravage her, she seems to prefer this stark descent into nothingness – "Be lost in one repose" (56). This fear of disintegration and death in Emily could derive precisely from an extreme or 'heathen' form of Calvinism, the exultant and exalted

[5] Davies further states that "her sense of specialness, singleness and apartness made her a kind of reverse-Calvinist. […] she stood self-elected and self-justified against the system and outside the law." (146).

antinomianism of "No Coward Soul". But, as Davies remarks, "The vein of Calvinism which was part of her inheritance" also "gave her ironic ammunition against the Deity" (146).[6]

In her 'reinterpretation' of Emily Brontë's *Metaphysical Rebellion* (1994), Jill Ghnassia states that "we cannot consider Emily an atheist simply because her […] speakers […] utter metaphysical questioning […]; she is, in fact, an *anti*-theist. She has only one loyalty: to the God within her breast" ("Prefatory Note", x). Like anti-theists, the poet does not deny the existence of God but she denies His right to meddle in man's affairs on earth, since He has forsaken man, considering him guilty at birth. For Ghnassia, Brontë's canon over the years (from October 1839 to January 1846) shows a consistency in the speakers' declared rejection of conventional salvation (8).[7]

In "There should be no despair for you" (November, 1839), the poet shows a clear-eyed recognition of life's finitude and the inevitability of death, a lucid view of a fate shared by all living things. Emily's emphasis on man's determination to endure and not to despair – "Then journey onward, not elate, / But *never* broken-hearted" (15-16) – evinces a quiet stoic awareness of the laws of nature. In another poem of encouragement to endure one's suffering, "Lines" (October, 1837), man is existentially described as a lonely "worn" traveller subject to divine indifference and cruelty and to nature's hostility – a hopeless being:

[…]

[6] Antinomianism, in theology, is the idea that members of a particular religious group are under no obligation to obey the laws of ethics or morality, and that salvation is by faith alone. The term became a point of contention among those opposed to religious authorities. Charges of antinomianism were frequently directed against Calvinists, namely during the virulent controversy between Arminian and Calvinistic Methodists.

[7] Anti-theism typically refers to direct opposition to theism or belief in any deity. Anti-theists not only maintain that all religions are versions of the same untruth but hold that the effect of religious belief is positively harmful. In this sense, I believe that Ghnassia's statement has to be qualified; the fact that Brontë's speakers appear to reject conventional salvation does not mean that they or their creator see themselves as 'anti-theists'; if they are religious, they are in fact burdened by guilt and fear of eternal punishment; if they are pagan or pantheistic, they find courage and consolation in a final fate shared by all living things.

Dark his heart and dim his eye;
Without *hope* or comforter,
Faltering, faint, and ready to die.

Often he looks to the ruthless sky,
Often he looks o'er his dreary road,
Often he wishes down to lie
And render up life's tiresome load.
(6-12, my emphasis)

The only relief for man, Brontë suggests, is found in self-control: to face the impossible conditions of his life and to continue to endure unceasingly – "If you still *despair* control, /Hush its whispers in your breast, /You shall reach the final goal, / You shall win the land of rest" (13-20, my emphasis). The idea of suffering after death is unacceptable, because to have suffered in life is penance enough; death can only be a rest. The traditional Christian conceptions of purgatory and hell are replaced in most poems by a lasting rest or union with nature.

This idea is surprisingly present even in the more 'pagan' poems dedicated to the Gondal saga. [8] In "Written in the Gaaldine Prison Caves to A.G.A." (January 1840), the doomed Fernando de Samara[9] cannot bear the thought of eternal suffering and penance in eternity, after all the pain he has endured:

[…]
And say not that my early tomb

[8] "Gondal originated in childhood 'plays', i. e. games, but the fiction was carried on until Emily ceased to write poetry altogether. […] Emily and Anne chronicled the doings of its characters; but the Gondal prose has been lost." (Roper, "Introduction" to *The Poems*, 1995, 1). John Hillis Miller believes that "Emily Brontë's characters, like the personages of Blake, are used to express general notions about the relations of God, man, and the universe." ("IV. Emily Brontë", *The Disappearance of God*, 1963, 157-158).

[9] A.G.A. (Augusta Geraldine Almeda) was the most prominent Gondal figure, its reigning queen and the speaker of several poems. Unscrupulous in love, she successively abandoned or destroyed the men who admired her. Fernando de Samara, who deserted his childhood sweetheart for A.G.A., had a brief affair with her, being afterwards imprisoned, driven to exile and suicide by her. Samara is the tortured speaker of, at least, four poems in the saga.

Will give me to a darker doom –
Shall those long, agonising years
Be punished by eternal tears?

No; *that* I feel can never be;
A God of *hate* could hardly bear
To watch through all eternity
His own creations dread despair!
[…]
(5-12, author's emphasis)

Samara's belief in a merciful God, which seems to reflect Emily's own views at this stage, appears to waver even as he tries to convince himself. In exile, Samara has no hope of altering the present or of recovering his lost love. All that remains to him is to will his own death and hope for eternal peace, "Must claim from Justice, lasting rest" (14). After reflecting on his life of pain, Samara states that he refused to humble himself before any angry god, either for mercy, help, or pity:

[…]
Earth's wilderness was round me spread;
Heaven's tempests beat my naked head;
I did not kneel: in vain would prayer
Have sought one gleam of mercy there!

How could I ask for pitying love,
When that grim concave frowned above,
[…]
(21-26)

In his rebellious attitude, Samara would ultimately come to reject Eden and its glories, words that would later echo in Brontë's personal poem "I see around me tombstones grey" (July, 1841):

[…]
Let me remember half the woe
I've seen and heard and felt below,
And Heaven itself, so pure and blest,
Could never give my spirit rest.
[…]
(11-14)

This idea also recurs in Emily's *devoir*, "Le Papillon", about her view of God's Creation, "[…] why was man created? He torments, he kills, he devours; he suffers, dies, is devoured – there you have his whole story. It is true that there is a heaven for the saint, but the saint leaves enough misery here below to sadden him even before the throne of God",[10] and in *Wuthering Heights* when Cathy tells of her dream: unhappy in Heaven, she had been thrown out by the angels and awakened on the moors above the Heights.[11] These characters' lives under God's "frown" have been unfortunate, and the only feelings they retain for Him are distrust and scorn. Brontë's life, as reflected in the poetry, evolves progressively into an ordeal to be endured, where suffering is the norm and relief comes only from the will.

The offer of redemption through Christ that Hope represents is significantly exposed as indifference in an allegorical poem with the same title "Hope" (December, 1843). The speaker, a prisoner in a "grated den", is daily tormented by the ineffectual presence of personified Hope as "she sat without" (2) keeping an unrelenting but sneering watch over the sorrowful inmate and finally deserting him altogether. First posing as a "timid Friend", Hope becomes progressively "selfish", "cruel" and "false",

[10] "[…] pourquoi l'homme était il créé? Il tourment il tue, il dévore; il souffre, se meurt, est dévoré – voilá toute son histoire. C'est vrai qu'il y a un ciel pour le saint mais le saint laisse assez de misère ici bas de l'attrister même devant le trone de Dieu." (*Le Papillon*, 11th August 1842, in Lonoff, *The Belgian Essays*, 178-179).

[11] "[…] I was only going to say that heaven did not seem to be my home; and I broke my heart with weeping to come back to earth; and the angels were so angry that they flung me out, into the middle of the heath on the top of Wuthering Heights; where I woke up sobbing for joy." (Volume I, Chapter IX, 71).

refusing to soothe his suffering and "turn[ing] her face away" (5-8). As she "soared to heaven" (19), the speaker realises that God's condemnation demonstrates the futility of all hope.

As she considers in her work the atrocities permitted by God in nature and man's treatment of his fellow man [12] – his sense of estrangement from his inner self, Brontë progressively replaces the traditional Christian creed with a personal one. This is visible in "Plead for me" (October, 1844), where facing a symbolic judgement she tries to justify her unorthodox choice:

> And am I wrong to worship where
> Faith cannot doubt nor *Hope despair*
> Since my own soul can grant my prayer?
> […]
> (36-38, my emphasis)

Conventional faith, for Brontë, is not a peace but a tragic experience. Only the power of imagination – represented by her "God of Visions" (39) – and "the world within" will ultimately save her from utter despair. In "How clear she shines" (April, 1843), Brontë had called on "Fancy" to bring her rest and bliss precisely from the "void and brief" labour that Life represents (39), in which Hope is but the "phantom of the soul" (38). And, in "My Comforter" (February, 1844), the poet reveals that "deep down – concealed within [her] soul" a "light lies hid from men" that "glows unquenched" and in great contrast with the gloom of her "sullen den" (6-10).[13] In "To Imagination"

[12] See Brontë's last documented poem, "Why ask to know the date – the clime?" (September 1846), of Gondal inspiration, where the poet analyses the general state of mankind under civil war: "Men knelt to God and worshipped crime, / And crushed the helpless even as we" (Roper, *The Poems*, 3-4). An unfinished second version of this poem, dated from as late as May 1848, seems to corroborate Brontë's earlier view and her universal and intemporal message: "Why ask to know what date what clime / There dwelt our own humanity /power-worshippers from earliest time / Feet-kissers of triumphant crime / […] / mocking heaven with senseless prayers / For mercy on the merciless" (Roper, *The Poems*, 1-11).

[13] Lisa Wang states that Brontë makes use here of New Testament *topoi*: in those passages of the gospel of John that refer to Whitsunday or Pentecost, the Spirit is often referred to as the 'Comforter' (2000, 163-4).

(September, 1844), it is the "kind voice", the "voice divine" of this personified entity that calls the speaker back to life from the "*hopeless* […] world without", every time she is "lost and ready to *despair*" (3, 4, 7, my emphasis). Both that light and this voice originate from "within our bosom's bound", which surprisingly holds its own private Eden: "a bright untroubled sky / Warm with ten thousand mingled rays/ Of suns that know no winter days" (15-18). Brontë's apostrophe to Imagination includes even this entity's capacity to "call a lovelier life from death" by envisioning "bright" transcendent "worlds" (28, 30).[14]

This "benignant power", in spite of the "phantom bliss" it confers, thus represents for Brontë an alternative faith in "sweeter *hope* when *hope despairs*" (31-36, my emphasis). The fact that she recognises the latently sinful nature of this close idolatry, namely in "Plead for Me", is only a sign of the poet's lucid awareness of her mental and spiritual condition.[15] Having put aside dogmatic hope, Brontë is finally prepared to reject both despair and fear in her supposed 'final word' in "No Coward Soul is Mine" (1846): the poem is a profession of faith not in a separate or distinct divinity but in the "God within [her] breast", the very "Being" and "Breath" of existence – infinite Life. As Ghnassia states, "in affirming the sanctity of the inner life and its illumination", Emily Brontë "invests that inwardness with the power to create, transcend and transform" (1994, 200).[16] In this same poem, and according to Lisa Wang, Brontë also emphasises the primal nature of religious experience over and above its doctrinal formulations (2000, 162). Many of the poems "make extensive use of

[14] Wang notes once again that the concept of the Spirit as life-giver plays a role in this particular poem, "like the Spirit of God in Ezekiel 37:1-14" (164).
[15] "[I] gave my spirit to adore / Thee, ever present, phantom thing" (23-24) and "by day and night / Thou art my intimate Delight" (29-30).
[16] Ghnassia summarises Emily Brontë's strategic solution in the following way: "[…] her key to peace is her way out with her exit *within*." (210). Hillis Miller shows a similar understanding of this solution: "God is more immanent than transcendent, more a ubiquitous presence than an external object. The deity is as intimate and pervasive as inner consciousness is to the self." (172).

biblical tropes and topoi presenting the Holy Spirit as a mighty rushing wind, as animating breath of God and as indwelling Spirit of God" (162). [17]

Emma Mason, in a relatively recent article, defends that Brontë's "fiercely emotive poetics" derives from what she designates as 'religious enthusiasm' and defines as "a wild and burning form of poetic and religious feeling excited by a personal and heightened interaction with God" (2003, 263). She gives as an example not only Emily's admiration for Wesley's sermons but also the language "scorched by the hell-fire of revivalist rhetoric", including Methodist ranting, in many of her poems.[18] Mason stresses that the poet felt ambivalent about 'enthusiasm' as a dangerous religious idea but as a rich poetic vehicle. Mason also refers to Brontë's struggle "to envisage a different kind of religion", "spirituality rooted in strong feeling" and freed from an external authority (274).

Like Emily Brontë, twentieth-century poet Florence Margaret Smith, known as Stevie Smith, used the heightened and charged language of Protestant religion and some of its mostly characteristic rhythms and forms (the hymn and the psalm) to write about the fundamental issues that move man in this world.[19] Like Brontë, Smith 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 (St. John's in Palmers Green, a

[17] Wang adds that "the tropes of wind and breath were much more appealing than the images of Father and Son." (162). In fact, they emphasise the power, energy, and life-giving aspect of the spirit of God or powerful and animating forces such as the ones in the poem "High waving heather" (1836).

[18] Mason states elsewhere ("Emily Brontë and the Enthusiastic Tradition", 2002) that "Brontë's awareness of Methodism, the religion dominating both her home and society, was profound. Methodism had its most dramatic outbursts in the West Riding area of Yorkshire, in which Haworth is situated and where Brontë lived, […]" (7 par.).

[19] 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). Stressing the greater weight that tends to be given to experience in feminist spirituality, he quotes Ursula King's argument that 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).

London suburb).[20] Like her, 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 are rather unusual in the multicultural and secular society of Britain today and they closely resemble Brontë's own concerns a century before.[21]

The intense religious and philosophical questionings, the strange obsession with death and war, the childlike simplicity and allusiveness of the language, the implicit criticism of a violent and hypocritical society and the use of several disparate voices other than the poet's, are only some of the characteristics that their respective poetical works share. Cruelty, despair and death feature prominently, so they are often dark poems, but Smith's do not sink into the delight of terror, they confront it by using humour as a coping strategy. The complexity of her beliefs can be gathered from the words of a longtime friend:

> In religion Stevie was ambivalent: neither a believer, an unbeliever nor agnostic, but oddly all three at once. […] 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.[22]

Stevie Smith may have been influenced not only by Thomas Huxley's Darwinian form of agnosticism but also by her contemporary Bertrand Russell's

[20] 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).

[21] In spite of this, it has to be conceded that the advent of feminism, which Smith but not Brontë witnessed, inevitably led to significant changes in religious language and imagery during the transition to the 20th century. While some women abandoned institutional religion altogether, opting to withdraw into a private spiritual world isolated from patriarchal control, others, however, sought change from within established institutions.

[22] The Reverend Gerard Irvine, quoted in James McGibbon's "Preface" to Stevie Smith's *Selected Poems* (2002, 19).

objections to some of the arguments for the existence of God and to Christian teachings.[23] Her specific position appears to oscillate between Russell's 'agnostic atheism', *i.e.*, 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.[24] Nevertheless, Smith once declared that there was always the danger that she might "lapse into belief".[25]

Significantly, in the 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". It 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 one individual's desires and the poet makes this idea sound ridiculous. In this playful way, Smith appears to reject simultaneously one of the main Christian tenets – the established idea of God's goodness (present also in her pun with the word 'good'), and the elitist pride in the supposed central role of mankind

[23] The term 'agnostic' was introduced by Thomas Henry Huxley in 1860 to describe his philosophy which rejects Gnosticism, by which he meant not simply the early first millenium religious group, but all claims to spiritual or mystical knowledge. In a letter to Charles Kingsley, Huxley would write: "I neither affirm or 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*, 237-239). Bertrand Russell's pamphlet of 1927, *Why I am Not a Christian*, is considered a classic statement of agnosticism. In 1939, Russell gave a lecture on *The existence and nature of God*, in which he characterised himself as an atheist. In the 1947 pamphlet *Am I An Atheist Or An Agnostic?*, he ruminates on the problem of what to call himself. In his 1953 essay, *What Is An Agnostic?*, 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*, Vol.10, 255-258).

[24] See the entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Additions Series, 1993) and *Agnosticism*, II and VIII in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, New Advent [2] and [3].

[25] 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'." (1998, 326).

in God's creation and in that which differentiates man from "silent inhumanity" (12) – present in the tortured statement "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. As in the previous one, she gives us images of animal life, discusses all things that hurry to eat or be eaten, and then moves on to the human sphere:

> Man too hurries,
> Eats, couples, buries,
> He is an animal also
> With a hey ho melancholy,
> (13-16)

Ironically, she goes on to say that 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 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).[26] 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 is also a brave attempt to face doubt without shrinking, to come to terms with the idea that God

[26] Smith's attitude to the Christian religion, like that of Emily Dickinson, was that of an agnostic who could not entirely abandon belief in a God of Love. It is this God of Love that organized Christianity has distorted for Smith, whose responses are consistently informed by a fairly rich knowledge of Church history, as well as of more specifically biblical and liturgical matters.

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 human condition.[27]

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'. In fact, just like Emily Brontë, Death becomes a powerful masculine figure in her mythology, being seen as the supreme release, as the gateway to whatever eternity there may be (a hope?).[28]

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.[29] In this sense,

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[27] John Mahoney prefers to state that "Stevie's religious sense often mutes the despair" as "God is personified as Creator, Protector, Lover again and again" (1998, 323). In his turn, Seamus Heaney emphasises the humane in "A Memorable Voice", his essay on 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).

[28] The recurrent obsession with death that characterises Stevie Smith's life and work cannot be ignored. James MacGibbon's testimony as her 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. Her last poem, *Come Death* (the second of that title), was written after she became fatally ill and, […] , she made it clear she did not wish her life to be prolonged, handing me the typescript of that poem with the word 'death' encircled." ("Preface" to *Selected Poems*, 19).

[29] 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).

eternal life is more of a threat to her, rather than a theological promise of redemption or damnation. Like Brontë, 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.[30] 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:

> […]
> 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)[31]

"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

[30] For example, in the poem entitled "When One", death is seen as a force which breaks the tedium of conflict. It has a positive connotation, since it comes "happily" and with speed in order to dissolve the frustrating conflict: "He scatters the human frame/ The nerviness and the great pain, / Throws it on the fresh fresh air / And now it is nowhere" (4-7).

[31] The poem may constitute a reply, namely, to Brontë's "No Coward Soul is Mine", especially in Smith's initial argument that it is vain to preach courage when facing death. One should reserve that for life.

Him in his/her image. As in Emily Brontë, the problem, therefore, lies not in an external deity but 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 serve as the setup to put the reader off balance for the powerful and unexpected "reason" in the final couplet:

> My life is vile
> 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 Brontë's "The Philosopher", and 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, she thus implies, will depend directly on how exactly she interprets the divinity.

Another piece on the nature of the divinity is "God the Eater", which deliberately exhibits a paradoxical semantic construction, as Smith attempts a synthesis between her unbelief and her belief. It is a 'prayer' or religious statement of faith which,

at first sight, much resembles Brontë's "No Coward Soul", namely in the similar use of paradoxical language to describe the deity:

> There is a god in whom I do not believe
> Yet to this god my love stretches,
> This god whom I do not believe in is
> My whole life, my life and I am his.
> […]
> (1-4)

But, unlike Brontë's powerfully assured utterance, Smith's only highlights the basic religious inconsistency or contradiction in which the common agnostic finds himself or herself. Yet, this childish statement – which could be a covert self-criticism – perhaps best summarises the bitterest irony of what Smith considered to be her own religious predicament: the inner divide between reason and the will to believe.

The famous "Our Bog is Dood" (1950), which can be translated into 'Our God is Dead', is a dialogue poem about the vague and dogmatic faith many Christians feel for God and it describes the same 'divide' as in the previous poem. The speaker is approached by children, whom upon being asked about their Bog announce that "we know because we wish it so" (7), a reply that emphasises the idea that self-righteous Christians are behaving childishly or unreasonably. In spite of the fact that they cannot explain their Bog – only that "our bog is ours, and we are wholly his" (17-18) – the children demand that the 'heretic' they are speaking to "think it so" or she "shall be crucified" (11-12). Like Brontë before her, Smith also broaches sectarianism and religion-inspired hatred with the additional lines "For what was dood, and what their Bog / They never could agree" (23-24) and "Each one upon the other glared / In pride and misery" (21-22). In the end, the speaker claims that she does not feel regret for being unreligious because she is free to think as she pleases in the advancing 'sea' of

agnosticism: “Oh sweet it was to leave them then / […] / The sea that soon should drown them all / That never yet drowned me” (25, 30-31).[32] Her superiority is manifested in that the speaker will never allow herself to be obfuscated by vain and illusory hopes.

The other side of the problem for Smith was the belief in Hell, and the concomitant desperate state of mankind which is implicit therein – another aspect of Christianity that greatly disgusted her. This was a disgust that she probably shared not only with the Victorian scientist Charles Darwin, and his follower T. Huxley, but also with the Brontës themselves (as we have seen). The poem “Thoughts about the Christian Doctrine of Eternal Hell” makes her position clear:

> The religion of Christianity
> Is mixed of sweetness and cruelty
> Reject this sweetness, for she wears
> A smoky dress out of hell fires.
> […]
> (1-4)

In this feminine personification, Smith suggests that the torture hidden under a cover of sweetness was not something that a honest Christian could separate himself from – it was inherent in Christianity. In 1958, Smith had written an essay for the Cambridge Humanists[33] on “The Necessity of Not Believing”, a title with disguised but deliberate

[32] As Smith’s speaker walks along the shore in the poem, declaring herself free from all that religious controversy, we are recalled of Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” – a poem which addresses the issue of isolation and the decline of faith through an image of the retreating sea. In Smith’s poem, it is rather the wilful ignorance of the Christians that ‘estranges’ or isolates the speaker. According to James Najarian, the poem (which echoes Anglican liturgy in “Our Bog is ours”) not only dismantles theism but romantic and postromantic substitutes for it as well, to all of which Smith alleges her superiority (2003, 491-2).

[33] The Cambridge Humanists (CH) were founded in 1955 'for discussion, to hear talks by visiting speakers, and, in general, to give expression to the humanist point of view in the City and University of Cambridge'. Members included Prof. JD Boyd, Meyer Fortes, JSL Gilmour, CJ Goodchild, RL Marris, JW Miller, JR Northam, CCD Shute, Cargill Thompson, R Weatherall, KW Wedderburn, Bertrand Russell, and Edmund R Leach, amongst others. Humanists believe they can live meaningful, decent and

Shelleyan resonances, where she made it clear that she did not find it easy to be a non-believer:

> The path of an unbeliever, especially if he is *an unbeliever with a religious temperament*, is fraught with the perils of flatness and ennui, and religion […] its sweet promise of a heavenly father, oh how sweet that can be, this sweet interest that never fails, *even if it damn us*. (Spalding 1988, 235, my emphasis)[34]

However, she also wrote that she did not find the world of uncertainty "a cruel place", stating that "there is room in it for love, joy, virtue, affection, and", as Shelley and Brontë themselves knew, "room too for imagination" (Spalding, 236).[35]

The long and restlessly questioning poem "How do you see" is a later prophetic and admonitory piece; one which explores her religious objections more fully, consequently arousing a great controversy at the time.[36] Smith begins with the humblest profession of faith, and only gradually eschewing any kind of spiritualism or supernaturalism. As she reaches the final stanza, which contains a modern apocalyptic prophecy, Smith makes her most directly controversial but also most lucid statement:

> I do not think we shall be able to bear much longer the dishonesty
> Of clinging for comfort to beliefs we do not believe in,
> For comfort, and to be comfortably free of the fear

---

moral lives without superstitious or religious beliefs, and that there can be no divine revelation. For their understanding of the universe, their search for meaning and their judgments of right and wrong they must rely on their own observation and reasoning. For support, wisdom and guidance they must look to one another.

[34] The poet seems to infer that the exciting 'opiate' of religion holds harmful consequences for mankind, which is akin to an anti-theist position.

[35] The more overtly atheist spirituality of P. B. Shelley is nevertheless a reminder of how greatly indebted many Christian theorists and practitioners of the spiritual life, not to mention writers and poets, are to the Romantics. If in *Prometheus Unbound*, the suffering hero delivers a ferocious attack on God, it is probably because He must be challenged and not ignored.

[36] It was commissioned by the Guardian newspaper and published in Whitsunday 1964. All the next Saturday's letter page was given over to responses to it. Smith was inundated with mail for weeks after its publication, congratulating her, abusing her or trying to convert her.

Of diminishing good, as if truth were a convenience.
I think we do not learn quickly, and learn to teach children
To be good without enchantment, without the help
Of beautiful painted fairy tales pretending to be true,
Then I think it will be too much for us, the dishonesty,
And, armed as we are now, we shall kill everybody,
It will be too much for us, we shall kill everybody.
[…]
(139-148)

The poet knew from experience that religious beliefs are often tarnished with the desire for power and that a belief in the rightness of one's own version of God might contribute to the records of death and destruction. This awareness resembles the one of Emily Brontë in her last poem on Gondalian civil war, "Why ask to know the date, the clime / […] / Men knelt to God and worshipped crime" (1-3). Like her predecessor, Smith implies that not only violence but servility is at the heart of Christianity and that if we recognised this we might have a less cruel and belligerent world.[37] Reflecting on the future of Christianity, Smith significantly compares its obsoleteness to the colonial system, formulating her Hope of an impending end:

Oh Christianity, Christianity,
That has grown kinder now, as in the political world,
The colonial system grows kinder before it vanishes, are you vanishing?
Is it not time for you to vanish?
(134-137)

[37] Stevie Smith develops this idea much further in her poem entitled "The Leader", a political and religious parable about the dangers for mankind of following blindly a "hollow" leader, be it a despot like Adolf Hitler or simply a god. The notions of servility and violence that are implicit in her poem are also present in Brontë's last composition and the two reflect faithfully their authors' respective historical contexts (totalitarianism and war): post-Napoleonic and post- Hitlerian Europe.

This poem reflects how our perceptions of the world are (and should be) changing as our understanding of things, from the cosmic to the molecular, is growing and, above all, as our human society and mentality inevitably evolve.

That Smith, deep down, believed in this possibility emerges from her apparently more optimistic "Do Not!", a poetic statement of hope and trust in humanity addressed to an anonymous entity, which can be the common religious individual or Christ as God himself. Again, 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), the speaker asks, but especially the presumptuousness of wanting to impose a philosophy or religion 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)

– and find the residual goodness of others in Himself. Smith, therefore, ironically implies that if He still fails after this advice it will be His own fault and, "Of yourself 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.

Michael Tatham once observed that "Stevie Smith's remarkable achievement as a poet was to sustain a dialogue with God in which there was no pretence that a comfortable response was possible" (qtd. in Sternlicht 1991, 134). Smith's determination to look at life as it really was, with all its absurdities, her constant questioning and search for meaning, her refusal to accept dogmatic Christianity (its 'angels' and 'categories') even though it would have given some comfort and meaning to her life and, simultaneously, her understanding of the importance of the religious impulse and the impossibility of denying it, are all part of a honest record of this poet's spiritual dimension – a record that the Victorian poet Emily Brontë would not only have respected but, in many ways, also identified with.

Smith's pungent 'cry' or 'melancholy midnight sigh' could perhaps best summarise this theological identification:

> 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.
> […]
> (Stevie Smith, "No Categories!", 1-5)

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