DESIRING TO BEAR THE WORD:

THE POETRY OF STEVIE SMITH

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy at Oxford Brookes University, March 2005.

ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that Stevie Smith's poetic style can be attributed to her gender. It shows that the dominant status of masculine poetry and poetics, and the prejudice against women poets, affected Smith's poetic style and led to her search for the source of a feminine poetic voice. The prevailing circumstances when Smith began to publish poetry are examined in order to establish Smith's socially appropriate poetics. The thesis offers detailed textual analyses, informed by feminist theories.

Chapters one and two take a socio-historic materialist approach to examine the problems confronting Smith as a woman poet. This includes considering Smith's categorisation as a poet of the suburbs, and the dominance of the Auden group. Chapters three to five look at Smith's use of children's literature and the influence of Blake and Wordsworth. Judith Butler's ideas of performativity, and Carolyn Steedman's of interiority, are used to propose that both are relevant to Smith's preoccupation with childhood. Smith's engagement with, and subversion of, the male poetic tradition and the idea of the muse are also considered. The last two chapters on the themes of birth and death draw on the ideas of Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva in order to argue that Smith's longing for death is a wish for rebirth, therefore a return to the maternal semiotic source which facilitates poetry. In this way death does not withhold language, but enables linguistic acquisition.

This thesis adds to existing knowledge about Smith, and extends debates surrounding women and poetry. It contributes to feminist analyses of fairy tales, the poetic tradition, and the idea of the muse, and expands psycholinguistic theory to propose the relevance of death

as well as infancy, and to suggest that Smith's preoccupations with the source of feminine poetry anticipates some fundamental theories of the 'French' feminists.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many librarians have given me help during this project, including those at the British Library, the London Library, Oxford Brookes University, Texas A & M University, the McFarlane Library at the University of Tulsa, Washington University in St Louis, and the local history department of the Borough of Enfield. I am indebted to Dr Steven Matthews for his suggestion of the 1930s case study, and to my supervisor, Dr Lynnette Turner, for her unfailing support and guidance. I would also like to thank my family, especially Jim, Adam, and Miranda, for listening to my ideas and never allowing me to give up. Finally Charles who, despite being my own Person from Porlock, has clarified my ideas about the semiotic chora. This is for him, and his future.

PREFACE

Stevie Smith (1902-1971), English poet, spinster and eccentric, published three novels as well as numerous prose works and articles. However she is principally known as a poet. Poetry was her preferred medium, and although she was forced into writing novels as a means of getting her poetry published, Smith maintained that '[t]here is no strong distinction between what is poetry and what is prose.'[1] This view blurs the distinction between the two genres and partly justifies her habit of inserting poems within the novels, essays and plays, as well as revealing that, for Smith, descriptive prose can be another version of poetry. Although this project is concerned with Smith's poetry, her own view that 'there is little difference' between it and prose also gives me the justification to use Smith's prose where appropriate, since she often used the medium to expand on ideas that are present in her poems.

Despite Smith's preference for writing poetry, her poems reveal an ambivalence about the genre itself. Indeed, in the highly self-reflexive poem, 'The Word' (1971), Smith writes 'I fear the Word, to speak or write it down, / I fear all that is brought to birth and born'[2] thus voicing her anxieties about the genre of poetry, which she 'fears' both to speak and write. This thesis will examine some of the reasons for her anxieties. In particular, the idea current in the 1930s that serious poetry was, properly, a masculine prerogative; and further ideas that led to her categorisation and marginalisation as both a woman poet and a poet of the suburbs. Smith's light and non-serious poetry, derived from oral and children's literary forms, appears to react to and confront these ideologies. The playfulness of her poetry gave her a voice and a recognisable poetic persona. Yet to take these poems at their face value is to overlook the serious concerns that her work engages with; concerns such as theology, the social position of women, the English poetic tradition, and her own search for a feminine source of poetry. Smith may 'fear all

that is brought to birth and born' but she does desire to bear the word, and this thesis will trace her own search for a feminine source of poetry.

In the nineteen seventies, after Smith's death from a brain tumour in 1971, both Philip Larkin and Seamus Heaney wrote reviews of her poems. These reviews serve as examples of near-contemporaneous receptions of her work, as well as showing that Smith's distinctive poetic style was problematic for those who were looking for serious poetry. Thus it is a mark of Smith's importance as a poet by this time that in 'Stevie, Goodbye' (1972) Larkin considers her to be 'a writer of individuality and integrity, who had perfected a way of writing that could deal with any subject, and a tone of voice that could not be copied.'[3] But that very individuality clearly troubles Larkin as a reader, for he argues that '[s]he showed her heart by blurting things out, artlessly, in a *faux naïf* style'.[4] Larkin's assessment suggests that Smith's work was spontaneous, uttered thoughtlessly and 'artlessly' rather than crafted, and therefore neither seriously conceived nor considered. In 'A Memorable Voice: Stevie Smith' (1976) Heaney also focuses on Smith's individuality, deciding that:

> One is tempted to use words like 'fey', 'arch', and 'dotty' when faced with her *Collected Poems* and yet such adjectives sell Stevie Smith's work short. These odd, syncopated, melancholy poems are haunted by the primitive and compelling music of ballad and nursery rhyme, but it has been transposed by a sophisticated and slightly cosseted poetic ear into a still, sad drawing-room music[.][5]

Clearly Heaney, like Larkin, finds Smith's idiosyncratic style, with its borrowings from popular culture and seeming lack of seriousness, difficult to categorise, and this leads him to decide that it is adopted because of poetic inadequacy: 'the style, the literary resources are not adequate to ... [that which] we sense they were designed to express.'[6] Heaney makes no mention of Smith's femininity, but gender may have some bearing on the assumptions beneath his judgements, for (as this thesis will show) ballads and nursery rhymes are traditionally associated with women, moreover, transposing them

into a 'drawing-room' associates them with a feminine territory. I will argue that Smith's style, rather than being due to poetic inadequacy, can be both a means of visibility and a strategy that permitted her participation in the male dominated genre of poetry. Moreover, it is an expression of her own feminine poetic voice.

Following these early criticisms of Smith, there have been two general trends in Smith scholarship of the past two decades: the biographical and the feminist. Jack Barbera and William McBrien's *Stevie: A Biography of Stevie Smith* (1985) and Frances Spalding's authorised biography, *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography* (1988), focus principally on Smith's life, using analyses of the poems illustratively, so that biography and poetry are aspects of each other. Both therefore follow the tendency, particularly in readings of women's poetry, to assume that poems can offer direct and unmediated access to the poet's psyche. This can result, as Romana Huk argues, in 'a going "in search of [the 'real' it is implied] Stevie Smith"'.[7] Huk is here quoting the title of Sanford Sternlich's collection of essays about Smith, *In Search of Stevie Smith*, that appeared in 1991. The problem with such an approach, as Roland Barthes pointed out about the biographical tendency in literary criticism, is that 'when the Author has been found, the text is "explained"'.[8] The text is thus limited in its interpretation, whereas concentration on the words of the text themselves can reveal ideas and assumptions of which the author may have been unaware.

The second critical tendency, that of a feminist approach, has been employed in full length critical works and essays by Catherine A. Civello and Laura Severin, as well as in essays by Romana Huk, Alison Light and Sheryl Stevenson. Of the latter, both Romana Huk and Sheryl Stevenson use Bakhtinian theory to examine Smith's use of parody. Huk explores her 'concentrism', or engagement with traditional poetic forms and values,

which Smith parodies in order to disrupt dominant ideas;[9] and Stevenson considers Smith's 'unresolved clash of perspectives ... rendered in distinct ... voices.'[10] Light's essay, 'Outside History? Stevie Smith, Women Poets and the National Voice' (1994) concentrates on the role of English literature in ideologies of nation, ideas of which have focused on male writers, and proposes that Smith conveys a specific type of domestic and suburban Englishness. The former critics all attest to Smith's current status as a poet of note, recognising that Smith's contemporaneous marginality and specific mode of expression in both poetry and prose, require feminist examination. However each offer only partial accounts: Huk's examination of Smith's use of traditional forms does not consider her ambivalence as regards the poetic tradition; and Stevenson's argument neglects that aspect of Smith's use of 'voices' that attests to Smith's own search for a poetic voice. While Light makes many useful points about Smith and ideas of nation, I will show that Smith's suburban Englishness accords with traditional ideas of Englishness that reside in the pastoral.

Of the full length works, Laura Severin's *Stevie Smith's Resistant Antics* (1997) maintains that Smith uses the different genres of fiction, poetry, short stories, drawings and songs to criticise and resist popular definitions of femininity. Key to Severin's argument is Smith's work in the publishing industry, which, Severin argues, gave her a close knowledge of the women's magazines that propagated domestic ideology, and also ensured that she was not a literary outsider. However, Smith was employed as a secretary, and while this did not preclude her knowledge of the publications of Pearson's (later Newnes), it certainly did not allow her access to and equal status with the prominent poets of that time. In *Patterns of Ambivalence: The Fiction and Poetry of Stevie Smith* (1997) Catherine Civello traces the ambivalence that Smith's poems and novels exhibit towards feminism and women's independence, and concludes that Smith

was not 'a feminist in fact or in fiction.'[11] Civello does, briefly, consider that Smith's narrative technique contains elements of *écriture féminine*, but at less than 100 pages Civello's text leaves much still to be said about Smith's use of this mode of writing in her poems, and, indeed, her anticipation of the ideas contained in Cixous' 'Laugh of the Medusa' (1976) as well as her attitudes towards religion, childhood, death, motherhood, and the Romantic influence.

The publication of Romana Huk's *Stevie Smith: Between the Lines* (2005) has coincided with submission of this thesis. It is, at the present time, the longest critical examination of Smith's work. It therefore testifies to Smith's current status and the seriousness with which she is now regarded. Huk employs what she calls a 'close-cultural' reading practice, that is, one that recognises that the texts were produced in a specific cultural context, but which also 'takes seriously ... [Smith's] artistic intentions – the formal structures ... [and] her generic devices'.[12] In this book Huk therefore attempts to correct the bias that can result from examining Smith's supposed 'feminism' in isolation from the wider circumstances of contemporary society and culture. It is also valuable in that it devotes two chapters to the novels, however this inevitably leaves less space for an in-depth study of Smith's poems. Indeed, the poetry is relegated to a single eighty-page chapter that also considers the short stories and radio play. While I agree with Huk's argument that a cultural reading is necessary, Huk does not consider whether these very circumstances of poetic production affected Smith's poetic voice, or led to her search for a feminine source of language. Nor does Huk consider the relevance of birth and death: indeed, Huk argues that Smith's death drive, rather than being connected with the desire for rebirth (as I shall argue), is related to other suicidal imagery of the 1930s, and as such serves as a 'political metaphor, or as evocative of the social rather than the gendered psyche.'[13]

Other critics, such as John Carey, Janet Montefiore, and Elizabeth Maslen have looked at Smith as part of broader projects. Maslen includes a consideration of Smith in *Political and Social Issues in British Women's Fiction 1928-1968* (2001), thus making a useful contribution to understanding Smith's three novels in terms of inter-war and World War II concerns, however Maslen's survey is not concerned with Smith's poetry. Carey's *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia 1880-1939* (1992) offers some useful insights into Smith as a poet of the suburbs, moreover his study covers the 1930s, an important decade for any study of Smith since it is the period in which she began to publish and to find her specific poetic voice. Still more relevant to this period is Janet Montefiore's *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The Dangerous Flood of History* (1996), in which Montefiore considers Smith's poetry as well as her novels, and compares her with other writers of the so-called Auden generation. While Montefiore's work is important in that it grants to Smith an equal status with the male writers of the nineteen thirties, her work on Smith is as brief as Carey's.

While much work has been done on Smith in recent decades, no-one has looked in a sustained way at the effect of the Auden group's dominance of poetry on Smith's poetics, and the important and recurring themes of motherhood and death. Critical theories surrounding the theme of motherhood in literature concentrate on either motherhood as a symbol, or motherhood as a linguistic source. Of the former, Susan Stanford Friedman's 'Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor' (1989) argues that childbirth is used in women's writing as a female creativity metaphor. The latter approach is exemplified by Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous, both of whom propose that the source of poetic and feminine language is to be found in the figure of the mother. The

relevance of death in literature as well as pictorial art has been thoroughly examined in Elizabeth Bronfen's *Over her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (1992). Although Bronfen does not consider Smith's use of the death trope, Bronfen's work is crucial for an understanding of the meanings surrounding representations of dead women and the ways in which dead or dying women function as a muse. While Smith uses a personified figure of death, rather than a dead figure, death usually stands in for a male lover, thus allowing Bronfen's argument regarding the dead feminine figure to be extended to suggest that other representations of death act as poetic inspiration. However, Smith's work strongly suggests that death is connected with rebirth, thus extending ideas of both childbirth and the creativity metaphor, and motherhood as a linguistic source. I will therefore propose that the themes of motherhood and death are connected in Smith's search for a feminine source of language.

The shape my argument takes is informed by the question: can Smith's style of writing and thematic preoccupations be attributed to her gender? I will therefore begin by taking a socio-historical approach in order to establish the circumstances that existed when Smith began to publish poetry in the 1930s: the ascendancy of the Auden set and their promotion of masculine poetics; and the prejudice against the suburban and the spinster. I will then look in detail at Smith's use of the themes of childhood and children's literature in order to suggest that childhood identity, for Smith, is both a performative strategy and connected with her understanding of herself, while her use of fairy tales and nursery rhymes allows her to continue and rework specifically feminine genres. Following this I will take an approach that is informed by the psychoanalytic and linguistic models of Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva in order to consider the significance of birth and death in Smith's work, her own linguistic search for a feminine source of poetry, and her anticipation of Cixous and Kristeva's ideas regarding feminine

writing. The readings in these chapters will further elucidate Smith's trope of childhood. Furthermore, the thesis as a whole will explain that those aspects of Smith's poetry that Heaney and Larkin found problematic and poetically inadequate are crucial aspects of her own feminine poetic, born out of circumstances that assumes that poetry should be a masculine privilege.

Notes

1. *Me Again: Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith*, ed. by Jack Barbera and William McBrien (1981; rpt. London: Virago, 1988) p. 353.

2. Stevie Smith, *The Collected Poems*, ed. by James MacGibbon (1975; rpt. London: Penguin, 1985) p. 542.

3. Philip Larkin, 'Stevie, Good-bye', in *In Search of Stevie Smith* ed. by Sanford Sternlicht (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991) pp. 114-116) p. 115.

4. Ibid p. 114.

5. Seamus Heaney, 'A Memorable Voice: Stevie Smith', in *In Search of Stevie Smith* pp. 211-213 (p. 212).

6. Ibid p. 213.

7. Romana Huk, 'Eccentric Concentrism: Traditional Poetic Forms and Refracted Discourse in Stevie Smith's Poetry', *Contemporary Literature*, 34 (1993), 240-265 (p. 241).

8. Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Literature in the Modern World: Critical Essays and Documents*, ed. by Dennis Walder (1990; rpt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) pp. 228-232 (p. 231).

9. See note 7 above.

10. Sheryl Stevenson, 'Stevie Smith's Voices', *Contemporary Literature*, 33 (1992) 24-45 (p. 27).

11. Catherine A. Civello, *Patterns of Ambivalence: The Fiction and Poetry of Stevie Smith* (Columbia, Camden House, 1997) p. 92.

12. Romana Huk, *Stevie Smith: Between the Lines* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) p. 18.

13. Ibid p. 14.

CHAPTER 1: 'THE HYSTERIA OF MASCULINE *AGAPE*': THE CONTEXT OF POETRY IN THE 1930s

1. Introduction: the dominant position of the Auden group

Smith's poetry was first published in the 1930s, although she began to write in the 1920s.[1] During these decades the genre and the canon of poetry was dominated by masculine aesthetic principles, and this thesis will argue that a conscious or unconscious awareness of this led to Smith's own poetic style, which can be categorised by an apparent lack of seriousness. Through the frame of the work of the Auden set this chapter will consider the promotion of masculinity in poetry, going on to explore misogyny and prejudice against women. My focus on the poetry and critical ideas of the writers in the Auden group, that is MacNeice, Spender, Auden and Day Lewis, is appropriate since they were the dominant poets in the 1930s and wrote prolifically about poetry and poetics. However this will be done only in order to compare Smith's work and consider her place as a poet in this decade. It is not, therefore, intended to be an intensive examination of the work of the Auden group,

Samuel Hynes's book, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (1976), purports to be about 'the making of a literary generation – the young English writers of the 1930s'.[2] While this definition appears to be quite broad, the title of Hynes's book testifies to the prominence of W.H. Auden and his group, and it is notable that works by only two women writers are represented: an essay by Storm Jameson and criticism by Rosamund Lehmann. Similarly, in his anthology, *Poetry of the Thirties* (1964), Robin Skelton assumes that the decade's poetry belongs to the same specific group of men, arguing that 'this "thirties generation" ... almost defines itself ... Auden, Day Lewis, Spender, and MacNeice [are] central figures'.[3] Moreover, only one woman, Anne Ridler, is represented in this collection. Indeed, Jane Dowson's anthology,

Women's Poetry of the 1930s: A Critical Anthology (1996) is 'the result of an investigation into the apparent void of women's poetry in the 1930s. In searching through anthologies and surveys I found no mention of women poets, nor any explanation of their absence.'[4] As Peter Childs argues in his examination of twentieth century poetry and history, 'the decade's heterogeneity has frequently been undervalued.' Although Childs does emphasise the breadth of 1930s' poetry, and cites Smith as an original and idiosyncratic writer, he confirms that 'the decade is often considered to belong to Auden and his circle'.[5] Indeed, in *Dividing Lines: Poetry, Class and Ideology in the 1930s* (1991), Adrian Caesar justifies concentrating on male poets on the grounds that the literary world was male dominated and women poets were rarely published or discussed.[6]

In these terms, Janet Montefiore's *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The Dangerous Flood of History* (1996) is unusual in that Montefiore devotes as much space to women writers as she does to men. Montefiore's examination of the decade thus corrects the gender bias seen in work by Hynes, Caesar and others, and in so doing revises a dominant trend in literary criticism of the twentieth century by not concentrating on the Auden group. As Montefiore notes:

> Clearly ... accounts of the literature of the thirties subscribe to a consensus about which writers "counted" ... The middle-class women writers – and not only they – have been nudged out of view by the unquestioned assumption that the literature of the 1930s belongs only to its young(ish) males[.][7]

Montefiore is referring to recent criticism, which has privileged the works of the 'young(ish) males', and contributed to the idea that these writers, to the exclusion of others, had literary merit. Until recently women have been virtually written out of literary history of the 1930s by the dominant status of male writers, including the poets of the Auden group. Yet Montefiore's study establishes that during the 1930s much work

by women writers was published by major publishing houses; literary magazines also reviewed women's work, including poetry, throughout the decade.[8] This would appear to point to a contemporary visibility, although it should be added that social attitudes to women were hardly favourable to the woman writer, and, as later pages will show, there was an assumption of masculine superiority that was often coupled with misogyny during the period. However, the idea that literature of the 1930s belonged to a specific group of young men is not only the result of critical decisions made in the last decades of the twentieth century. When, in 1939, Auden and Isherwood listed ten most promising British writers, no women were included.[9]

The critical and literary output of the Auden group certainly promoted their own position, as well as ensuring further attention from critics, so that in 1940 George Orwell identified 'the Auden-Spender group' as 'the movement'[10] of the preceding few years. In the same year Virginia Woolf also pointed to this literary group as having particular prominence, arguing that 'if you read current literary journalism you will be able to reel off a string of names – Day Lewis, Auden, Spender, Isherwood, Louis MacNeice and so on'.[11] Clearly, the literary climate favoured the work of men at the time when Smith began to publish poetry, and this established ideas of women's exclusion from serious and canonical poetry, an exclusion that could affect a woman's style of writing. The following pages will therefore examine the ideas and ideology of the Auden group regarding poetry and poetics, together with their own promotion of masculinity, and look at Smith's position as a spinster and writer of that which was perceived to be light verse.

2. Poetic concerns in the 1930s

In his autobiography, *World Within World* (1951), Stephen Spender wrote that the Auden circle was a 'socially conscious group of young writers... [who] wrote with a near

unanimity ... of a society coming to an end and of revolutionary change.'[12] The events to which these writers reacted were social, economic and political: the depression caused widespread unemployment and poverty, and the sense of imminent catastrophe was furthered by the rise of fascism in Europe and approaching war. In the birthday poem, 'August for the people and their favourite islands' (1936), addressed to his friend and collaborator Christopher Isherwood, Auden makes it clear that the perceived crisis of the present demands a specific kind of action:

> So in this hour of crisis and dismay,
> What better than your strict adult pen
> Can warn us from the colours and consolations,
> The shadowy arid works, reveal
> The squalid shadow of academy and garden,
> Make action urgent and its nature clear?
> Who give us nearer insight to resist
> The expanding fear, the savaging disaster?[13]

Both the speaker and his friend are writers, and the poem focuses on their public responsibilities in that role: Isherwood has a duty to 'warn' of the dangers that are faced. While the second line, with its rhetorical question of '[w]hat better than your strict adult pen', credits Isherwood with a special maturity and ability, the use of the genre itself carries another message: Auden is pointing to the lack of substance in ideas coming from 'arid works' and 'squalid ... academy' and is himself making the need for 'action urgent and its nature clear'.

In Auden's poem the lines are unusually ambivalent in that they do not reveal the precise nature of the crisis, however in other works Auden and his circle of friends explicitly engage with political and social ideas. Writing about literature in the 1930s, George Orwell noted that 'quite suddenly, the literary climate changes ... the typical literary man ... becomes an eager minded schoolboy with a leaning towards communism ... the keynote of new writers is "serious purpose".'[14] Orwell therefore shows that socially and

politically committed literature is a dominant characteristic of the Auden group. Indeed, in one of the earliest promotions of the poetry of the Auden group, the preface to *New Country: Prose and Poetry by the Authors of New Signatures* published in 1933, Michael Roberts states that: '[t]oday we have no security ... our sympathies turn towards revolutionary change'.[15] What Roberts calls 'revolutionary change' was, as Orwell shows, manifested in a leaning towards communism. Roberts goes on to ask 'how is this to affect our writing? ... it will affect our subject-matter and our attitude to it.'[16] Roberts therefore argues that poetry and prose writing should serve a political purpose.

While Louis MacNeice claims that his poem, *Autumn Journal* (1939), is not 'a didactic poem proper' since it may contain 'overstatements and inconsistencies', he nonetheless concedes that it is 'half way between the lyric and a didactic poem',[17] thus admitting his intention to instruct his readers, albeit in the form of a lyric poem. Certainly *Autumn Journal* takes the form of a meditation on personal and political events leading up to World War II, and ideas of what Roberts called 'revolutionary change' run through this long poem. For example, in part 3 MacNeice exposes the unequal system that allows a few to exploit the many that are merely wage-slaves:

> Exploited in subservience but not allegiance
> To an utterly lost and daft
> System that gives a few at fancy prices
> Their fancy lives
> Where ninety nine in the hundred who will never attend the banquet
> Must wash the grease of ages off the knives.[18]

The shortness of the second and fourth lines expresses exasperation at a system that benefits only the affluent minority. The poet, however, hopes for:

> ... another and a better kingdom come,
> Which is now sketched in the air or travestied in slogans
> Written in chalk or tar on stucco or plasterboard
> But in time may find its body in men's hearts' accord.[19]

MacNeice calls for social change through a compressed phrase that adopts and

adapts the language of the Lord's Prayer in order to emphasise an ideal state. Such ideas are at the time of writing merely 'sketched in the air', an image that suggests that ideas are both unformed and expressed in speech. Other images suggesting impermanence, such as the slogans that are 'written in chalk', point out that these sketchy slogans may take root and become embodied in men's bodies and hearts.

Allied with concerns about social inequality and the need for change was a fear of war. The previous war remained in the collective memory and haunted the poetry of the decade, indeed, in 'Now the Leaves are Falling Fast' (1936) Auden refers to the 'Dead in hundreds at the back [who] / Follow wooden in our track',[20] giving the idea that the war dead of the previous generation haunt the present generation, reproach them for ignoring the threat from Europe, and urge them to action. Since the writers of the so-called Auden generation were born between 1900 and the First World War,[21] members of that generation entered a world that was at war, or, like Smith, reached their teenage years during wartime. As Auden wrote in 'Ode V':

> Your childish moments of awareness were all of our world.
> At five you sprang, already a tiger in the garden,
> At night your mother taught you to pray for our Daddy
> Far away fighting,
> One morning you fell off a horse and your brother mocked you:
> "Just like a girl!"[22]

The belief that women should stay at home while men go to war is firmly established in this poem. The child who is addressed is, even at the age of five, becoming ready in his turn to take part in the war. Springing like 'a tiger' evokes a childish game that in the context of the Great War is a preparation for fighting. Horse riding similarly prepares him for military skills. Militarism, however, excludes girls, and in the context of this poem a fall from a horse, provoking the sneer of '[j]ust like a girl!' endorses war as a

masculine activity. Indeed, women were what Virginia Woolf termed 'Outsiders'[23] and the problem that men of this generation faced – could they fight for their country as their fathers had? – did not apply to them.

Despite this, Smith did engage with themes of war, mainly by offering considerations and critiques of impending military action. In her essay, 'Mosaic', published in March 1939 but written on the night of Chamberlain's visit to Hitler in Berchtesgaden in September 1938, she wrote:

> If there is no possibility of two opposing ideologies existing side by side, then the choice must be made, even the choice of war ... when war has broken out there is no existence of a private peace; you fight for your country or, refusing to fight, you yet fight, and directly for the enemy. That is perhaps the ultimate most horrible demand of war; the State must have your conscience. War does not initiate a moratorium upon the Sermon on the Mount. [24]

Smith's position towards war is ambivalent: she accepts the inevitability of war while remembering Christ's teaching of peace. Pacifism, or objecting from conscientious motives, Smith realises, presents other problems, for if one abstains from military service one is effectively fighting for the enemy, and this would destroy peace of mind.

In 'Bye Baby Bother' (1938) Smith offers a more radical criticism of a state which leads its subjects into war, but her use of the nursery rhyme genre renders her criticism ambiguous. This poem, clearly derived from the nursery rhyme 'Bye baby bunting', opens with an innocence that is characteristic of many of Smith's poems, taking the premise of the traditional nursery rhyme and lullaby ('Daddy's gone a - hunting'[25]) then changing it so as to foreground the use of guns for a more sinister purpose. Smith further alters the original so that it is a brother rather than a father who is absent; his fate is not revealed, indeed the euphemistic 'so-and-so' implies that which cannot be said, but which is clearly associated with the results of his questioning of authority:

Bye Baby Bother

Where is your brother?

They so-and-so and so-and-so
And twisted his guts
In a nasty way
Because he said they were nuts.[26]

In the third verse Baby Bother's words of reassurance to his mother ostensibly show military obedience:

I will be quiet now, Mother, but when there is a general mobilisation
Dozens of chaps like me will know what to do with our ammunition.

There is, however, sufficient ambiguity to frustrate a clear interpretation: will they 'know what to do with [their] ammunition' in the sense that they will use it correctly, to fight the enemy, or to turn their guns on those who have brought them to war? Smith's characteristic avoidance of formal punctuation in the dialogue, however, leaves the interpretation open, so that in the last couplet it is unclear whether it is the mother speaking in reply to Baby Bother, or whether both characters are speaking in turn:

Dozens by hundreds will be taken and torn,
Oh would the day had died first when you were born.

These last lines, then, can be read either as the mother's response to her son's jingoistic attitude, or as a dialogue in which Baby Bother's implicit threat of revolution will have the result that 'Dozens by hundreds will be taken and torn'.

One major difference between Smith's engagement with the topic of war and that of Auden, for example, was the time when these themes entered her writing. In Auden's poetry war is seen to be a recurring trope throughout the 1930s, whereas Smith's war poems are only to be found in her 1938 collection. Smith therefore became concerned about war only when it was imminent. Similarly, *Novel on Yellow Paper*, published in 1936, shows little interest in current affairs, while *Over the Frontier*, published (like *Tender Only to One)* in 1938, regards the prospect of war as a certainty to be faced.

Indeed, in this novel Pompey becomes recruited into the secret service and rides over an unspecified frontier into a world of war. However, the lack of realism in a novel dominated by fairy tale elements, and the late stage at which militarism encroaches upon Pompey's convalescent holiday, suggests that war is not Smith's over-riding interest in this novel. As Elizabeth Maslen argues, 'woman is shown to take over a man's militarist role once she is in uniform' but this is part of a 'dark fantasy / dream sequence',[27] and the novel as a whole 'questions the "frontiers" between men and women'[28] rather than with war per se.

However, Smith does recall 'the old men of 1922, the old broken shamefully broken body of the shattered soldier, drawn up lifted up crucified upon his crutches'.[29] As Janet Montefiore has observed, '[d]ead, maimed or dying soldiers are a constant haunting presence'[30] in the literature of the 1930s, and clearly Smith's was no exception. But, in *Tender Only to One* (1938), she includes 'The Lads of the Village' which can be seen specifically to argue *against* writing about war. This poem is about the ordinary soldiers who became the victims of war in Flanders. These are not officers, but typical of the ordinary enlisted men whose surnames are repeated in family groups listed in war memorials throughout England:[31]

> The lads in the village, we read in the lay,
> By medalled commanders are muddled away,
> And the picture the poet makes is not very gay.[32]

The poet's reference to 'the lay' in this poem appears to be a generic reference to all war poetry; indeed this poem contains echoes of others, including Siegfried Sassoon's 'Memorial Tablet', dated 1918, which is written in the voice of one such lad from the village who was 'nagged and bullied'[33] by the Squire until he fought and was killed at Passchendaele. Smith's reference to 'muddles' in the third stanza where it is juxtaposed with 'medals and clay' also recalls Sassoon's 'The General', who caused the deaths of

his soldiers 'by his plan of attack.'[34] In 'The Lads of the Village', then, Smith refers to poetry of the First World War, which was often derived from military experience, while making a direct address to the war poets:

> Poet, let the red blood flow, it makes the pattern better,
> And let the tears flow, too, and grief stand that is their begetter,
> And let man have his self-forged chain and hug every fetter.

Smith thus shows that writing about war is futile: 'it makes the pattern better', and reactivates grief, but ultimately war is an ideology in which all men collude, it is a 'self-forged chain', and a 'fetter' that is clung to, or hugged. The reference to Blake's 'mind forg'd manacles' in this line reinforces the idea that enslavement to militarism is self-induced. While this poem confronts the reader with the realities of war, its main concern is with war poetry:

> For without the juxtaposition of muddles, medals and clay,
> Would the picture be so very much more gay,
> Would it not be a frivolous dance upon a summer's day?
>
> Oh sing no more: Away with the folly of commanders.
> This will not make a better song upon the field of Flanders,
> Or upon any field of experience where pain makes patterns the poet slanders.

The last verse shows that the second and third are ironic: writing about blood, clay (or the mud of trenches), military honours and the 'folly of commanders' merely makes 'patterns' or ornaments of the pain that is suffered. Smith's command to 'sing no more' makes the poem stand as an argument against using the lyric to memorialise war, and anticipates Theodore Adorno's post-World War II statement 'that to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'.[35]

No poet works in a vacuum, devoid of the ideas that are current at the time of writing; Smith was therefore no exception to other poets of her generation in that she was aware of, and derived inspiration from, contemporary concerns. Smith, however, overturns Auden's ideas about the poet's social duty. Rather than believing in the special ability

and duty of the poet to inform, making the need for 'action urgent and its nature clear', 'The Lads of the Village' argues against it, while 'Bye Baby Bother' is intentionally unclear, the need for action being masked by its ambiguous diction and apparently innocent form. As James MacGibbon recalls, Smith 'wasn't a political person; it wasn't her field.'[36] A letter that Smith wrote to Naomi Mitchison in 1937 confirms this, and reveals a belief that is in strong opposition to the political commitment of many of her contemporaries:

> There is a sort of hubris in this world-worrying ... at the moment the world is a great deal too articulate! ... Yes, our times are difficult but our weapon is not argument I think but silence & a sort of self-interest, observation and documentation (I was going to say "not for publication" but I am hardly in a position to say that!)[37]

Smith's comments are typically contradictory: her belief in 'silence & ... self-interest' is at odds with the idea that 'documentation' is also a weapon. It is of greater significance that she tries to divorce this from publication, although, as a writer employed in publishing, she is aware of the irony in voicing this idea. Nonetheless, it is her statement that 'the world is a great deal too articulate' that is most telling, clearly showing that Smith, in contrast to the Auden set, did not believe in the airing of political concerns through poetry and the publishing machine that uses war as a textual commodity.

3. The promotion of masculinity; ideas of ancestry; poetry and prophecy

Cecil Day Lewis's influential *A Hope for Poetry* (1934) corroborates contemporary ideas of the importance of W.H. Auden and his circle, and, as Stephen Spender points out, is considered to be a manifesto for these poets.[38] *A Hope for Poetry* was written with the intention of examining contemporary poetry in the belief that current writers, 'notably W.H. Auden and Stephen Spender, are true poets having more in common than mere contemporaneousness'.[39] Day Lewis is therefore concentrating on the work of the Auden group, and arguing that 'their social and literary influences, their aims and technique'[40]

will verify their cohesiveness as a literary movement. That Day Lewis believes this movement to be important is as obvious as his wish to promote the work of the group of which he was a member, and the title of the book is surely significant, suggesting as it does that the 'hope' for poetry rests with Auden and his circle.

It is clear that this group believed that important poets, or what Day Lewis terms 'true poets', believe that there is a zeitgeist, a spirit of the age with which they are in touch; moreover they believe that they have a duty to speak for that age. Indeed, it has been seen that these ideas are present in Auden's birthday poem to Isherwood.[41] Similarly, in *Modern Poetry: A Personal Essay* (1938), Louis MacNeice argues that 'any contemporary poet is a mouthpiece of the Zeitgeist'[42] and 'primarily a spokesman, making statements or incantations on behalf of himself or others'.[43] These claims for the poet, while straightforward, are somewhat lofty in that they assume that the poet has a high degree of influence by having the ability to interpret and speak for the spirit of the age. But in *A Hope for Poetry* C. Day Lewis grants the poet an even more elevated position: the production of poetry is associated with a 'vision to perceive those invisible truths which are like electrons the basis of reality'; poetic 'imagination' is an awareness of 'the cryptic links that bind our universe together', and the poet must be 'a clairvoyant [or] nothing.'[44] Familiar ideas of social purpose are therefore reiterated, but Day Lewis credits the poet with special abilities and near-psychic insight that enable him (for Day Lewis, like MacNeice, genders the poet as 'he') to fulfil the social role that was outlined by MacNeice and Auden:

> What is the nature of the poet? ... A wireless station: masts rooted in earth, stretching towards heaven, sensitive to the horizontal waves of sound: an instrument receptive of the messages that crowd the air: another instrument, translating these messages out of the code into a universal language, selecting and co-ordinating them, transmitting them to whoever will turn a dial.[45]

Day Lewis's exposition shifts to the 'nature of the poet', thus reinforcing ideas of a poet's gifted difference, and his comments in this extract from his text supplement ideas of a poet's vision. Using the metaphor of the wireless station, in terms that can be seen to expand on Ezra Pound's aphorism that '[a]rtists are the antennae of the race',[46] Day Lewis shows that the poet should be a privileged transmitter of knowledge. The poet is 'rooted in earth' therefore the populace, but particularly 'sensitive' and 'receptive of the messages that crowd the air'; he can convey these ideas in the 'universal language' of poetry and thus reveal them to the reader.

What is implicit in Day Lewis's argument is the familiar idea that a poet is more than simply an interpreter, he is also a prophet. Elsewhere in *A Hope for Poetry* he is somewhat shy of making the claim directly, suggesting that the prophetic role is forced on the reluctant poet by necessity, when 'circumstances may force the poet unwillingly to take up the role of the prophet' in order to 'warn'.[47] This, together with the metaphor of the wireless station, assumes that poetry is a medium of communication that is as influential and widely read as journalism.

Ideas of prophecy in poetry are not new, and neither are they restricted to the western tradition. In 1942, therefore roughly contemporaneous with Day Lewis's and MacNeice's texts, Nora Chadwick argued that:

> Everywhere the gift of poetry is inseparable from divine inspiration ... The lofty claims of the poet and seer are universally admitted, and he himself holds a high status wherever he is found.[48]

Claiming a prophetic role is thus connected with status: it grants the poet a social significance that might otherwise be lacking. In Western thought, which is frequently derived from the Bible, ideas of prophecy are inevitably associated with transmitting the word of God. The first English poet can be seen in this tradition: Caedmon was, as Bede

tells us, ignorant of poetry until he was commanded by an angel in a dream to sing the Creation.[49] Prophecy in poetry became secularised with the work of Thomas the Rhymer, a poet of the thirteenth century, who claimed to have been granted the gift of prophecy by the Queen of Elfland, and who maintained a reputation as a soothsayer until the nineteenth century.[50] The Romantic poets, however, promoted a secularised but quasi-religious role. In this sense prophecy, despite Blake's claim in the 'Introduction' to *Songs of Experience* that 'the voice of the Bard' was claiming to see 'Present, Past, & Future',[51] becomes one who passes on the truths of human existence to his readers. His special medium is poetry, or what Wordsworth called 'the mystery of words' in which the 'Visionary Power' becomes embodied.[52]

In his *Defence of Poetry* Shelley examines why poetry as a genre deserves a high status, and argues that a poet 'essentially comprises and unites' the qualities of 'legislators and prophets':

> But poets ... draw into a certain propinquity with the beautiful and true, that partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion ... Not that I assert poets to be prophets in the gross sense of the word or that they can foretell the form as surely as they foreknow the spirit of events: such is the pretence of superstition , which would make poetry an attribute of prophecy, rather than prophecy an attribute of poetry.[53]

Shelley is concerned here with defending the status of poetry and the poet's social role, which, he argues, is associated with that 'which is called religion'. Religion, in this sense, is not the organised religious practice of the established church, but the spiritual and intellectual truths that relate to human existence. Shelley is careful to remove ideas of prophecy from the foretelling of events, and instead he grants to poets an imaginative insight: 'he ... beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time.'[54] What comes out of Shelley's argument is the strong belief that 'prophecy is an attribute of poetry', therefore the poet must be a prophet in

order to interpret the spiritual or material world for his readers. From this we can see that Day Lewis's ideas of the poet acting as a transmitter in order to warn, together with Auden's and MacNeice's beliefs about the duty of a poet to be in touch with the zeitgeist in order to speak on behalf of others, are rooted in Romantic ideas about poetry.

It is no coincidence that the poets who have been cited above are all men, since prophecy, like the priesthood, has been a masculine prerogative.[55] The claim that the poet speaks as a prophet, together with the quasi-religious role that this assumes, gives the genre status as a particularly masculine form of public utterance. It is clear, then, that by voicing the ideas that have been outlined above Day Lewis is placing himself in a privileged position. As a poet he claims special powers, but his engagement with ideas of prophecy relates his own work to the great and canonised male poets of the past.

This indeed confirms Day Lewis's belief that he and the other poets with whom he is associated are working within a generic tradition, one in which they are in direct descent from great poets of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century:

> I have claimed Hopkins, Owen and Eliot as our immediate ancestors ... This feeling that each of us has some personal link with the past, some natural or quasi-supernatural being from whom we draw power and refreshment, someone with whom a sudden recognition of kinship takes place, is of the first importance to us.[56]

The poets cited by Day Lewis confirm that this is a male tradition. Day Lewis claims special powers for the 'immediate ancestors' who are believed to be 'quasi-supernatural', but, in an image that is similar to Harold Bloom's more recent idea of a 'filial relationship',[57] the assumption is of a patrilineal line with the earlier poets seen as 'ancestors' and in 'kinship' with Day Lewis's nineteen-thirties' circle of poets. Indeed, Day Lewis opens *A Hope for Poetry* with a metaphor in which the earlier poets are seen as the father and the newer poets as the son.[58] These poetic ancestors are attributed with

more than influence, since they provide the necessary 'power and refreshment' in the poetic process. Over all, Day Lewis makes a strong claim for his own poetry as well as that of Auden and Spender, since he invites comparison with the earlier poets and claims that the work of his group is worthy of such comparison. In *A Hope for Poetry* Day Lewis also lists an entirely masculine English poetic tradition, beginning with Dryden and Pope and continuing through the Romantics to Housman and the aforementioned Hopkins.

The underlying assumption, then, is that poetry that aims to be canonical is a masculine occupation. In *Modern Poetry* Louis MacNeice expands on his (and by extension the Auden group's) preferred style of poetic diction by similarly referring to poets in the masculine tradition:

> Our diction must have vigour. Our diction should be masculine ... After the feminine writing of most of the nineteenth century ... and after the neuter writing of the Georgians we are working towards the normal virile efficiency of Dryden or Chaucer ... Dryden ... is the most masculine of our poets; his style and his rhythms lay the strongest stress of all our literature on the naked thew and sinew of the English language ... That thew and sinew are nowadays reappearing.[59]

Both MacNeice's imagery and assumptions are masculine: the preferred poetic diction and the English language itself promotes a muscular poetry that has strength, vigour and vitality; while that which he sees as characterised by weaker diction is 'feminine' or 'neuter'. Throughout *Modern Poetry* MacNeice refers to the poet as 'him'. This could be taken as shorthand and not gender-biased, were in not for the masculine assumption of MacNeice's manifesto, in which he states that his 'own prejudice' is for a poet who is 'able-bodied [and] appreciative of women.'[60] Such statements serve to reiterate Cora Kaplan's argument that poetry is (or rather was, since this is a historical position) a male privilege from which the female poet is excluded.[61] Moreover, MacNeice's harnessing of

language to the masculine-gendered attributes of action and strength render the feminine into an inferior status by virtue of the hierarchical binary opposition that is implied.[62]

4. 'Miss Gee': women, spinsters and misogyny

The patriarchal appropriation of literature and MacNeice and Day Lewis's chauvinistic promotion of the poetry of men over that of women reflected women's wider position in society at the time. During the 1920s and '30s, notions of masculine privilege reinforced ideas of male superiority, with the attendant belief that a woman's role should be restricted to that of a wife and mother. Janet Montefiore argues that girls were denied educational privileges that were granted to boys: listing twenty four of the most important women writers of the 1930s she shows that only about a third were college educated.[63] Even the conferment of a degree did not guarantee equal opportunities since, as Spalding points out, teaching was the only profession available to women graduates in Humanities disciplines.[64] In 1931 women represented only 29.7% of the workforce.[65] A majority of these were employed in domestic service,[66] reflecting the idea that women were naturally suited to domesticity. Whatever the occupation, however, there was a general antipathy to women workers that was reinforced by state and local authority policies. There was a belief, particularly during the Great Slump during the early part of the decade, that a working woman was taking a job away from a man. All of this hindered women's progress in the workforce.[67] If a woman aimed higher than domestic service she would still have been hampered by the idea that only certain jobs and professions, such as clerical work and the aforementioned teaching, were appropriate for women.

The prejudice against women as workers extended to a prejudice against women's intellectual abilities so that even with a university degree a woman may have found that

there was a 'general intellectual consensus ... that civilizing women presents special difficulties.'[68] This view can be seen in the context of the widespread misogyny during the period, and a quasi-medical concern about women's intellectual restrictions. Writing in *Civilisation* in1928, Clive Bell claimed that:

> Nowadays the most sensitive and intelligent women are between the horns of this dilemma: they must become either wives or old maids ... any modern woman ... who bears and rears children and orders a house, will tend generally to blunt the fine edge of her intelligence and sensibility, [it] will indispose so delicate a creature that prolonged study and serious application which to the highest culture are indispensable ... What is the alternative? Spinsterhood ... If her intellect preserve its point and purity, her understanding shrinks ... I sometimes wonder whether the old maid is fit for anything less than the kingdom of heaven.[69]

Bell's tone is light-hearted, but informed by a chauvinistic gender bias and a belief in women's weakness: women are 'delicate' so that marriage is not conducive to 'prolonged study and serious application'. These lines also bring out the idea that marriage was considered to be the natural destiny of a woman. Nowhere does Bell consider other options and occupations for women, clearly if an unmarried woman were to take up one of the few professions open to her she would still be marked by the pejorative assessment of 'old maid', a term that betrays the attitude that a woman's status (or lack of it) is allied to her married or unmarried state. Bell acknowledges that women can be 'sensitive and intelligent', but underlying his thoughts is the unspoken assumption that sexual fulfilment is both necessary and damaging to a woman: motherhood will 'blunt' her intelligence and render her 'too delicate' for study; yet, in this double bind, a spinster may keep her intellect but 'her understanding shrinks'. The 'old maid', he concludes, is therefore useless in this life, and not fit for anything but 'the kingdom of heaven'.

As Deirdre Beddoe argues, even the term 'spinster' had derogatory connotations in the years between the first and second World Wars. 'The spinster', she notes, 'was portrayed

as an undesirable image ...It implied failure because spinsters were seen as having failed to marry. There was much talk in those years of 'excess' and 'surplus' women ... Newspapers discussed the problem ... and advocated nineteenth-century style emigration schemes for them.'[70] The woman who did not conform to the norm of marriage therefore represented social failure as well as contributing to a social problem of 'excess' and 'surplus'. There is a clear anomaly here: women's place in the workforce was not assumed to be the norm, yet a spinster, who may have needed financial support from other sources, represented a financial burden.

Not only was the spinster an 'undesirable image'; often writers of the 1930s simply presented the spinster as an object of derision. This is typified by W.H. Auden's 'Miss Gee' (1937), one of three comic ballads each of which tells the story of an eponymous character, but unlike 'Victor' and 'James Honeyman' Miss Gee is not granted a Christian name. She is known simply by the title that denotes her unmarried state. In this poem, Miss Gee's impoverished gentility and suburban origins are established by her income of 'one hundred pounds a year' and her address of 'Clevedon Terrace', while the poem also establishes that she is a plain, church-going virgin:

> She'd a slight squint her left eye,
> Her lips they were thin and small,
> She had narrow sloping shoulders
> And she had no bust at all.
>
> ...
>
> Miss Gee knelt down in the side-aisle,
> She knelt down on her knees;
> "Lead me not into temptation
> But make me a good girl, please."[71]

In these verses the poem relies for its comic effect on the irony of Miss Gee's prayer, since she is unlikely to be tempted, at least sexually. Her virginity is reiterated throughout the ballad by the symbol of her all-covering and tightly fastened clothing: she

visits the doctor or bicycles to church '[w]ith her clothes buttoned up to her neck'; similarly when she lays in the hospital 'ward for women' it is similarly '[w]ith the bedclothes right up to her neck.' Her erotic dreams of 'a bull with the face of the Vicar/ ... charging with lowered horn' remain an unfulfilled fantasy, and Miss Gee develops cancer because of sexual frustration. According to the Doctor:

> "Childless women get it,
> And men when they retire;
> It's as if there had to be some outlet
> For their foiled creative fire."

The difference between the paired categories of childless women and retired men is that the latter may have enjoyed a professionally productive life until reaching old age, whereas women are once again seen in terms of their reproductive potential. Any occupation that Miss Gee might have is unmentioned and irrelevant in a mind-set that assumes that a woman's creativity lies in her function as a wife and mother.

According to John Fuller, Auden was making use here of current theories which related cancer to repressed creative desires:

> Miss Gee represses her sexuality into guilty dreams about the Vicar, and thus develops an incurable tumour. The ballad is not intended to be a psychologically subtle or sympathetic character study, but a direct piece of polemic, rather Brechtian in tone. Our natural desires ... may defeat us if we deny them.[72]

Fuller therefore places 'Miss Gee' in the category of polemic poems, suggesting that Auden is concerned with issuing a warning about the dire consequences should we deny our natural instincts. Moreover, Fuller argues that Auden's polemic is 'Brechtian in tone'. Certainly in his preface to *The Poet's Tongue* Auden argues that poetry can make 'the necessity for action more urgent ... leading us to the point where it is possible to make a moral choice',[73] words which can be compared with Brecht's claim that epic theatre 'arouses [the spectator's] capacity for action [and] forces him to take decisions'.[74]

There are therefore similarities between the writers, and Fuller sees Auden's commitment to arousing the reader to action and making a rational choice as being extended to sexual matters. Certainly writers of the 1930s, including Auden, were aware of psychosomatic and psychoanalytic theories.[75]

The problem here is that Fuller's interpretation focuses on Miss Gee's illness. He therefore does not consider that her fate is not simply illness and death but the ridicule of her body, as Miss Gee becomes the object of masculine derision and dissection:

> They laid her on the table,
> The students began to laugh;
> And Mr Rose the surgeon
> He cut Miss Gee in half.
> ...
> They hung her from the ceiling,
> Yes, they hung up Miss Gee;
> And a couple of Oxford Groupers
> Carefully dissected her knee.

According to Fuller, '[t]he point about the Oxford Groupers dissecting her knee is that such a pious and sanctimonious movement as Moral Rearmament has a totally irrelevant notion of where the cause of moral distress and unhappiness lies.'[76] However, the 'Oxford Groupers' are not looking for the source of Miss Gee's cancer, they are using her corpse, hanging from the ceiling like a carcass of meat, as an anatomy lesson. This merely completes the humiliation of Miss Gee: useless because she is neither a mother nor sexually desirable, her body is first laughed at then mutilated.

While 'Miss Gee' comes under the category of black humour, there is a viciousness and sense of disgust directed towards women, particularly the spinster figure. The treatment of Miss Gee in this poem might be attributed to Auden's homosexuality, however, as Valentine Cunningham points out, women 'frequently counted for little ... [and] misogyny was rife in the writing of this period'.[77] The misogynistic representation of the

spinster in 'Miss Gee' can therefore be seen in the context of contemporary ideas in that it reinforces the canard that equated spinsterhood with chastity and sexual frustration. Indeed, A.M. Ludovici claimed that spinsters 'are not leading natural lives, [their] fundamental instincts are able to find no normal expression or satisfaction.'[78]

Clearly such ideas inform Louis MacNeice's comments on Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti. Referring to the use of poetic imagery in his 1938 essay, *Modern Poetry*, MacNeice is at pains to identify their spinsterhood as a common category that is relevant to their poetry:

> we can take two poetesses, both spinsters, recluses, and religious – Emily Dickinson and Christina Georgina Rossetti ... I suspect ... that in both these mystically minded women their fondness for using jewellery and clothes stuffs as images represents a repressed desire for the actual things.[79]

It could be argued that 'jewellery and clothes stuffs' are feminine images, moreover there is no reason why spinsters and recluses should not possess items of adornment rather than maintaining a 'repressed desire' for them. However MacNeice sees the lack of possessions as emblematic of spinsterhood; his comment about 'repressed desire' thus stands in for the sexual repression that was associated with the female and unmarried. Moreover, spinsterhood is seen to affect the content of these women's poetry.

Women in the 1930s lacked the educational and professional opportunities that men assumed as their right. Although the preceding pages have not concentrated on women writers, it can be seen that Clive Bell's assumptions about women's supposed delicacy could have affected attitudes to intellectual work such as writing. Moreover, the decade was marked by a misogyny that shocks the reader today and a rhetoric that places the figure of the spinster in a reviled and marginalised minority. The preceding pages have identified a prevailing attitude that is disadvantageous to women in general, both in literature and society during the nineteen thirties, but doubly disadvantageous to older

unmarried women. Smith, aged 35 and unmarried when her first volume of poems was published in 1937, remained unmarried throughout her life. Living in the suburbs and attending the local church, she was therefore in the same category as the derided figure of Miss Gee.

5. Smith's literary status

Smith had friends in the literary world. Indeed, her friend, Margaret Gardiner, was also a friend of Auden's.[80] However, it is clear that she was not part of the literary mainstream. There is evidence that her work was known by at least one member of the Auden group, although that knowledge was somewhat scant. In *Modern Poetry* Louis MacNeice refers to exponents of 'lighter poetry', stating that:

> America has produced a series of "hard-boiled" mocking poets from E.E. Cummings to Dorothy Parker and Stevie Smith. This poetry is usually strongly sentimental. It is the poetry of someone kicking against the pricks and shouting against the traffic. And the voice has an echo of the traffic in it.[81]

This passage is of interest not only because of MacNeice's categorisation of Smith as a 'lighter' poet, but also because of his ignorance of her poetry and of the woman behind the work: he assumes she is American and considers her to be similar to Dorothy Parker and E.E. Cummings. His assessment is also pejorative, since he considers such poetry to be 'strongly sentimental', and the poet is 'shouting against the traffic', but ineffectively, since the traffic remains as an 'echo' in the poetic voice. Moreover, he appears to be ignorant of the specifically English references to 'our beloved England' in 'The Suburban Classes'; to 'the young men of Eng' in 'Eng'; and to Palmers Green in 'Suburb', all of which betray the poet's English nationality. Although Spalding claims that 'the success of *Novel on Yellow Paper* drew Smith firmly into the literary world'[82] as well as allowing her to publish her poems, and a social meeting eventually occurred between Smith and MacNeice in 1939,[83] it is clear that at this time MacNeice knew little

of Smith's poetry, suggesting that Smith's position was ex-centric to, rather than firmly within, the literary mainstream.

When G.M. Stonier reviewed *A Good Time Was Had by All* for the *New Statesman and Nation* in 1937, he approvingly noted that the qualities that were evident in *Novel on Yellow Paper* were to be found in this, her first collection of poems. Her style, he says, 'enables her to say so many things, to be witty, frank, whimsical, ironical, reflective, without change of voice. There is nothing synthetic about Stevie Smith.'[84] As the review continues, however, the reader becomes aware that Stonier's approval derives from the category into which he has placed Smith's poetry. 'Many of the pieces' he notes, 'have the air of successful impromptu which is distinctly lacking in most "light" verse.' Stonier, deceived by Smith's style, has therefore decided that Smith's poetry is neither serious nor high minded, and he judges her to be a rather good exponent of light verse. Although he acknowledges that her topics are not entirely superficial, this does nothing to dissuade him from the categorisation he has chosen:

> One reason why so much professional light verse seems artificial is that the rhyme and the metre are far too inflexible and heavy for what the verse has to say. Stevie Smith continually understates, as it were, her poetic means and thus the verse surprises by being better than its face value. Two poems ... seem to me excellent examples of casual seeming verse which carries unexpected weight.[85]

This, one of the first critical assessments of Smith's poetry, encapsulates the difficulty faced by many when reading Smith's poetry. It does not, apparently, have the serious purpose that is evident in much of the poetry of the Auden group; a seriousness that is evident, for example, in Day Lewis's 'A Carol', a parody of 'Away in a Manger', in which the social critique is undisguised by the simplicity of form and language. But, as Stonier remarks, Smith's work does carry 'unexpected weight'. In the end, for Stonier, the form of the text wins out over the seriousness of the subtext: '*A Good Time Was Had by All*', he concludes, 'is doggerel, doggerel of a particularly attractive and personal sort,

which contains its own poetry.'[86] Despite the apparent praise that Stonier confers on Smith's first collection, then, not only does he judge it to be 'light verse', he removes it from the category of poetry entirely: 'it contains ... poetry' is an odd comment to make of that which *is* poetry.

I have argued that Smith was marginalised by being suburban, female, and a spinster. Moreover, she was a secretary, what she herself called 'the lowest form of gainful employment',[87] a group that was allied with the non-intellectual masses, socially akin to '[t]he typist home at teatime' who 'lays out food in tins.'[88] To this intellectual disadvantage we can add the social disadvantage of women and the prejudice against women poets; the prevailing misogyny of the 1930s; the promotion of masculinity in poetry; and ideas about poetics that excluded women through their patriarchal ideas of prophecy and poetic lineage. Moreover, Stonier's comments point to Smith's exclusion, not only from the dominance of the genre by the masculine world of the Auden group, but from considerations of serious poetry.

6. Smith and Feminism

In her essay on feminism and subjectivity, 'Women's Time' (1979), Julia Kristeva asks:

> *What can be our place in the symbolic contract?* If the social contract, far from being that of equal men, is based on an essentially sacrificial relationship of separation and articulation of differences which in this way produces communicable meaning, what is our place in this order of sacrifice and / or of language? No longer wishing to be excluded or no longer content with the function which has always been demanded of us ... how can we reveal our place ...?[89]

The 'symbolic contract', entered into fully after the Oedipal phase, is the entire cluster of social and cultural institutions, including language, which, in a patriarchal society, is dominated by men. Women consequently lack power and equality, and are, as Kristeva says, 'excluded'. Kristeva identifies three stages of feminism: in the first stage women

demanded equality, while in the second women asserted their difference and refused the limitations of the patriarchal symbolic order. Kristeva's own preferred feminism is that of 'a *third* generation ... now forming',[90] in which the dichotomous categorisation of man and woman is relegated to the realm of metaphysics. This, Kristeva argues, would result not in bisexuality, but in the disintegration of ideas of difference.[91]

Clearly, Kristeva is correct about women's subjectivity, that is both their subjection to men in the patriarchal order and their gaining of subject positions. Her statement on the situation of women within the patriarchal symbolic contract is totally applicable to Smith: poetry, as this chapter has shown and further chapters will corroborate, has been dominated by men to the consequent disadvantage of the woman poet who seeks publication. Moreover, as a secretary she was, in Kristeva's terms, fulfilling the 'function which has always been demanded of us', and one that was subject to male control. What is less relevant, however, is Kristeva's identification of phases of feminism. The growth of the women's movement and consequent increased awareness of women's social and cultural disadvantage only occurred within the last decade of Smith's life, and Kristeva's 'generation ... now forming'[92] was after her death.

Indeed, in his Introduction to *In Search of Stevie Smith* (1991) Sanford Sternlicht argues that:

> Stevie did not identify herself as a feminist ... in her mother's generation she probably would not have been a suffragist ... For much of her life, she tried to play the game according to the sexist rules of the time. She allowed herself to be exploited by the London business world, which was totally male controlled. She knew that her bosses' concept of employable femininity included service and subjugation ... Thus she fought her battle against male control alone ... If she had been more clearly aware of sexual politics, she might have fought back differently.[93]

It is unlikely that Smith would have been a feminist. Her generation was between the suffragette movement and the women's movement: the latter only emerged towards the

end of her life. Sternlicht is probably also correct to say that she 'would not have been a suffragist': Smith was uninterested in politics, moreover she promoted her own eccentric individuality and avoided categorisations that would have resulted from allying herself with groups.

It is surprising, however, that she did not wholeheartedly applaud the new opportunities that became available to women writers in the late 1960s. In her review of *Without Adam: The Femina Anthology of Poetry* in 1968 she took issue with the concept of:

> an anthology of poems by women ... published by a firm whose directors are all women: and they have chosen for their emblem the female sign of circle with pendant cross ... Why have poems by women only? Or any group poems come to that[.][94]

It might be expected that the existence of a women's publishing firm, run by women and carrying the feminist emblem of a circle and cross, publishing an anthology of poetry by women would be welcomed by a woman poet. Smith, however, believes this anthology to be 'awkward, very awkward indeed.'[95] Smith was, perhaps, prejudiced against this publication by the fact that '20 lines have been cut from one of my poems, without the fact being mentioned or permission asked',[96] but her argument focuses on the fact that a poem should be judged on its merits and not by the gender of its writer. An anthology of women's poetry results in its 'awkwardness': 'Why have poems by women only?'[97] Smith overlooks the need, given the difficulties faced by women poets, to have the publishing outlet that the *Femina Anthology* offered. There is also evidence that Smith even colluded (probably unconsciously) in the idea that poetry is a masculine genre: in 'What Poems are Made Of' (1969), an article about subjects that inspire her poetry, she writes: 'I do not know how people can manage to have animals, wives and children and also write.'[98] It is notable that, despite what was by then a thirty year career as a poet, Smith assumes a writer to be male: women writers would have husbands, not wives.

Smith's poetic oeuvre, however, suggests that she was aware of the tension between social expectations of women and her career as a poet. In the self-reflexive 'The Word' (1971), to be examined more fully in a later chapter, Smith writes 'I fear the Word, to speak or write it down'.[99] Similarly, 'Voices About the Princess Anemone' (1950) addresses issues of poetic fulfilment and its incompatibility with a woman's social role. Princess Anemone is described as 'the first who ever wrote / The word of fear, and tied it round her throat.'[100] She can therefore be seen as the originator of poetry. The 'word of fear' clearly represents poetry itself since it is tied 'round her throat' therefore it is connected with the voice, although tying it round her throat also gives it the attributes of a necklace that adorns her, as well as suggesting constriction as much as expression. Anemone gives up other loves for her vocation and vows constancy to it, 'Sighing, Oh my word of fear / You shall be my only dear'. But in order to do this, Anemone leaves society itself, running 'into the forest wild' where 'she lay and never smiled.' The poem is therefore about the split between women's social identity and their artistic practice. Anemone loves the word, but is unhappy and afraid of it. The accompanying drawing, of a female figure with short hair and a fringe, resembling Smith's own hair style, is surely self-referential.

As Cora Kaplan argues, '[p]oetry is a privileged metalanguage in western patriarchal culture'[101] and, as such, is an aspect of public speech. This, however, ensures that it is subject to masculine control:

> public speech is a male privilege and women's speech restricted by custom in mixed sex gatherings, or, if permitted, still characterised by its private nature ... [the] control of high language is a crucial part of the power of dominant groups ... the refusal of access to public language is one of the major forms of the oppression of women[.][102]

As a result of this control of high language, including poetry, 'a very high proportion of women's poems are about the right to speak and write.'[103] 'The Word' and 'Voices About the Princess Anemone' certainly fall into this category, and reveal that Smith was aware of the disadvantage to women arising from the control of high language. It should be remembered, however, that underlying Kaplan's argument is the fact that, despite the knowledge that the genre is at best considered incompatible with the feminine gender and at worse denied to a woman, women have continued to write poetry. Indeed, after Chatto and Windus advised her to write a novel Smith obediently wrote and published *Novel on Yellow Paper*, only to use the novel as a cloak for the poetry she wished to write, casually slipping unpublished poems into the prose, and triumphantly exclaiming '[t]hat's two off my hands.'[104]

What is clear is that language is connected with power. As Kaplan points out '[t]hrough the acquisition of language we become human and social beings: the words we speak situate us in our gender and class.'[105] In a patriarchal society the symbolic contract that we enter with language is one that ensures the position of men. In these terms, literature, and writing itself, is ideologically marked. Terry Eagleton argues that:

> To speak of "literature and ideology" as two separate phenomena which can be interrelated is ... in one sense quite unnecessary. Literature, in the meaning of the word we have inherited, *is* an ideology.[106]

Not only can literature itself carry and contest ideological meanings, but the cluster of ideas and beliefs of what constitutes literature is ideological. The promotion of ideas of the poet who conforms to ideas of intellectual élitism, philosophical and spiritual elevation and linguistic complication is part of an ideology that works to select some writers and exclude others.

Writings about literature are equally vulnerable, indeed, some critical assessments of Smith's work suggest a gender-based prejudice. In 'Frivolous and Vulnerable' (1962) Philip Larkin describes her as 'the "feminine" doodler or jotter who puts down everything that strikes her'[107] therefore simultaneously suggesting that Smith's work is not seriously crafted and that this defect is associated with her femininity. The previous chapter has shown that Seamus Heaney and Philip Larkin found Smith's style problematic. While their reviews of Smith's poems certainly attest to her importance as a poet by the 1970s when these reviews were published, Larkin agues that Smith's poetry is '*fausse naïf*'[108] and Heaney decides that her style is 'not adequate'[109] to the literary task. Moreover, as recently as 2002, in Ian Hamilton's chapter on Smith in *Against Oblivion: Some Lives of the Twentieth Century Poets*, similar ideas emerge. Hamilton argues that '[t]here was always a little-girl-lost air to Smith's verse persona, and it could be very charming.'[110] This recalls the title of Rankin's book (*The Poetry of Stevie Smith: 'Little Girl Lost'*), and similarly diminishes her by associating her poetic voice with that of a lost child, and in this analogy the word 'charming' is somewhat patronising. Hamilton continues to emphasise childishness:

> Her blasphemies were always a shade infantile, somewhat dressed up to be indulged ... The faint air of girlish tantrum ... ensures that we needn't press the question very hard. Stevie Smith would rarely risk not seeming loveable. ... [she had] a naïve style of utterance.[111]

Hamilton therefore devalues Smith's poetry by associating it with the work or behaviour of children: when she takes issue with religion she is simply 'infantile', her engagement with serious issues is akin to a 'girlish tantrum', and again we see the description 'naïve', which connotes that Smith's poetry was not seriously constructed.

A comparison can be drawn between these assessments of Smith and critical ideas of Sylvia Plath who, as Alan Sinfield points out, has been represented as 'a mad genius,

supersensitive to the general horror of the modern world, inspired by a poetic furore that drove her ever onward to desperate depression and death.'[112] Sinfield argues that views of Plath's madness work to disempower her, and therefore conceal the messages of her work:

> The institutions of literary culture want Sylvia Plath to be mad to protect themselves and readers from the implications of her life and work ... often, she is put down as pathological, schizoid, hysterical, so that we need not take seriously her ideas and attitudes.[113]

Sinfield's work on Plath provides a useful explanation for Smith's categorisation as trivial: categorising her as light, non-serious, and even childish prevents her from being taken seriously and allows her often subversive criticism of society and its ideals and beliefs to be ignored. Such assessments as those by Heaney, Larkin and Hamilton that have been quoted above are therefore informed by ideological concerns. It should be added, however, that Smith willingly allied herself with these categories: she was widely read, informed about literature and classically educated, yet she chose not to write in a manner which would ally her work with the serious, élite, and the 'difficult'. Moreover, as further chapters will show, her eccentricity involved the adoption of a child-like appearance. This, together with her poetry's association with children's linguistics and literary forms, deliberately exploited the powerlessness of a child. This worked strategically since it allowed her poetic voice to be heard. In public performances, dressed in a pinafore dress and strap shoes, it also lent an apparent vulnerability that ensured a favourable reception.

If, as I have argued, Smith was aware of the tension between social expectations of femininity and artistic practice, she needed to find a way of becoming accepted as a poet Yet Smith eschewed what Kristeva calls a 'place in the symbolic contract'.[114] Indeed, later chapters will show that Smith seeks the source of her feminine poetic voice in the

pre-Oedipal and pre-linguistic semiotic stage of the infant's close relationship with the figure of the mother. This stage is dominated by the rhythms and echolalia of the *chora* which, in my reading, is both the enclosed space of the womb that holds the unborn child and the arms that encircle the young infant. Indeed, Kristeva argues that on acquisition of symbolic language the semiotic can break through where it is 'particularly evident in poetic language'.[115] The linguistic relationship with the figure of the mother is also important because of Smith's adoption of children's cultural and literary forms, which represent a return to the orally transmitted early linguistic experience of infancy. Not only is this experience largely derived from women carers (mothers and nurses), but it can be seen as a feminine form of poetic activity. As Germaine Greer argues:

> We can know nothing of the women who would have written poetry if they had been taught to write. We do know that for hundreds of years women put their children to sleep with lullabies that nobody thought to write down. Those lullabies were almost certainly traditional, but each mother would have invented her own verses[.][116]

Although Greer is here concerned with lullabies, nursery rhymes and fairy stories are equally feminine in their use and transmission, and, as Helen Kidd argues, '[w]omen have been the custodians of the oral tradition'.[117] Although, as I have shown, Smith was not a feminist, her adoption of these oral forms is an albeit unconscious feminist strategy that allies her work with specifically feminine traditions.

7. Conclusion: Smith's strategy

I have identified two prevailing strands that should be taken into account in an examination of Smith's poetry: the prejudice against women, including that against women poets, and the style which has led to her inclusion within the category of light verse. This term, although vague, has been defined as 'verse which does not aspire to be taken seriously'.[118] However, Smith's work is *not* light verse: it adopts the simple form

of light verse; uses the colloquialisms and vocabulary of the speaking voice; and adapts oral forms of children's literature, but many of her poems refer to the staple themes of serious poetry. Not only does she show the concern with war that has been seen in earlier pages, but death, religion, and metaphysics are recurring themes. Smith's poetry does aspire to be taken seriously. The problem here is that the subjects with which Smith is concerned have, in the poetic tradition to which Day Lewis refers, usually been expressed by men. Gilbert and Gubar identify the view that 'the very nature of lyric poetry is inherently incompatible with the nature or essence of femaleness.'[119] Women poets, they note, are criticised either for their lack of poetic range, or for attempting to engage in profound subjects: '[s]haking a Promethean male fist "against God" is one perfectly reasonable aesthetic strategy, apparently, but stamping a 'tiny' feminine foot is quite another.'[120]

When Smith's second volume of poetry was published in 1938 it was included in a review of new poetry for *The Listener*. In an article entitled 'A Brilliant Puritan' Louis MacNeice considers three volumes: Robert Graves's *Collected Poems*; the *Collected Poems* of Hart Crane; and *Tender Only to One*. It is notable that the title of the article refers to Graves, a consideration of whose work occupies much of the article. MacNeice devotes just one paragraph to Smith's volume:

> Miss Stevie Smith writes as Miss Anita Loos might have written if she had a flair for doggerel and had sat a long time in a graveyard. There is a genuine feeling behind these poems and many of them have a whimsical appeal, for example the poem 'Little Boy Sick' which begins:
>
> I am not God's little lamb,
> I am God's sick tiger.
>
> All the same I distrust Miss Smith's sleight of hand – her way of putting it over with a gesture of conscious *naiveté*. Her method, however, is preferable to a faked masculinity.[121]

Much of this is familiar from other critical assessments of Smith: like many others MacNeice identifies her '*naiveté*', and like Stonier he calls her work 'doggerel'. There is

some faint praise in his acknowledgement of Smith's 'genuine feeling' and 'whimsical appeal', but he fails to see the Blakean influences in 'Little Boy Sick', which is derived from Blake's 'Little Boy Lost', 'The Tyger', and 'The Lamb'. Overall his comments are pejorative: it is unlikely that he would refer to Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* as 'whimsical'. What is of interest to this examination, however, is the way that MacNeice, alluding to Smith's style, or 'sleight of hand', identifies it as feminine, and gives the accolade that it is 'preferable to a faked masculinity'. It can be deduced that were Smith to have attempted the masculine diction that he himself admired she would have suffered further castigation.

What has emerged from this study of the social and literary context of the 1930s is what Smith described as 'this hysteria of a masculine *agape* that runs through our English literature and through our life too':[122] the domination of the period and its poetry by the masculine poets of the Auden group, with its attendant promotion of its own poetry and poetics, renders other poets (including women) inferior by comparison. Smith's assessment of this shared brotherly love and friendship as 'hysteria' delightfully undercuts the idea, suggesting that it is an excitement that is entirely in the mind. Yet there is no doubt that a woman attempting to enter this male dominated genre had to find her own voice, one that would both allow her work to be published, and avoid accusations of 'faked masculinity'. In Smith's case, the strategy is to use forms associated with light verse, despite the fact that light verse is an inappropriate medium for the ideas which she wishes to convey, and to privilege orality with its reproduction of the talking voice as well as oral literary forms. Later chapters will therefore examine Smith's style as an aspect of her femininity, and consider the ways in which her engagement with the serious topics of birth and death can be seen as a search for the feminine linguistic source.

Notes

1. Smith first began to publish in 1935 (see Frances Spalding, *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography* (1988; rpt. London: Faber, 1990 p. 111) however she began to write in the 1920s (Spalding p. 59).

2. Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (1976; rpt. London: Pimlico, 1992), p. 9.

3. *Poetry of the Thirties*, ed. by Robin Skelton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), p. 14.

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

5. Peter Childs, *The Twentieth Century in Poetry: A Critical Survey* (London: Routledge, 1999) p. 102.

6. Adrian Caesar, *Dividing Lines: Poetry, Class and Ideology in the 1930s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), p. 8.

7. Janet Montefiore, *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The Dangerous Flood of History* (London: Routledge, 1996) pp. 21-2.

8. Ibid.

9. Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 151.

10. George Orwell, 'Inside the Whale', in *'Inside the Whale' and Other Essays* (London: Gollancz, 1940), p. 152.

11. Virginia Woolf, 'The Leaning Tower', in *Collected Essays II* (London: Hogarth, 1966), p. 170.

12. Stephen Spender, *World Within World* (1951; rpt. London: Faber, 1997) p. 135.

13. W.H. Auden, *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writing 1927-1939*, ed. by Edward Mendelson (London: Faber, 1977), p. 155.

14. Orwell (1940) p. 159.

15. *New Country: Prose and Poetry by the Authors of New Signatures*, ed. by Michael Roberts (London: Hogarth, 1933), pp. 9 - 10.

16. Ibid p. 15.

17. Louis MacNeice, *Autumn Journal* (London: Faber, 1939), p. 7.

18. Ibid p. 17.

19. Ibid pp. 16-17.

20. *The English Auden* p. 159.

21. See note 2 above.

22. *The English Auden* p. 107.

23. Virginia Woolf, 'Women and Nationalism', in *Literature in the Modern World: Critical Essays and Documents*, ed. by Dennis Walder, (1990; rpt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 196-200 (p. 197).

24. Stevie Smith, 'Mosaic' in *Me Again: Uncollected Writings*, ed. by Jack Barbera and William McBrien (1981; rpt. London: Virago, 1988), pp. 105-107 (p. 107).

25. *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes*, ed. by Iona and Peter Opie (1951; rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1952) p. 63.

26. Stevie Smith, *The Collected Poems*, ed. by James MacGibbon (1975; rpt. London: Penguin, 1985) p. 144.

27. Elizabeth Maslen, *Political and Social Issues in British Women's Fiction 1928-1968* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001) p. 39.

28. Ibid p. 155.

29. Stevie Smith, *Over the Frontier* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1938) p. 16.

30. Montefiore (1996) p. 120.

31. Cunningham (1988) p. 49.

32. Smith, *The Collected Poems* p. 142.

33. Siegfried Sassoon, *Collected Poems 1908-1956* (London: Faber, 1968), p. 104.

34. Ibid p. 75.

35. Theodor Adorno, 'Commitment', in *Literature in the Modern World: Critical Essays and Documents* p. 95.

36. Catherine A. Civello, *Patterns of Ambivalence: The Poetry and Fiction of Stevie Smith* (Columbia: Camden House, 1997), p. 13.

37. *Me Again* pp. 257-8.

38. Stephen Spender, *The Thirties and After: Poetry, Politics, People 1933-75* (London: Macmillan 1978) p. 19.

39. C. Day Lewis, *A Hope for Poetry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1934), [p. i].

40. Ibid.

41. See note 13 above.

42. Louis MacNeice, *Modern Poetry: A Personal Essay* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 89.

43. Ibid p. 1.

44. Day Lewis (1934) p. 75.

45. Ibid.

46. Ezra Pound, 'The Teacher's Mission', in *Literary Essays* ed. by T.S. Eliot (London: Faber, 1954), pp. 58-63 (p. 58).

47. Day Lewis (1934) pp. 14-15.

48. Nora Chadwick, *Poetry and Prophecy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1942) p. 14.

49. Bede, *A History of the English Church and People,* trans. by Leo Sherley-Price (1955; rpt. London: Penguin, 1988) p. 251.

50. *The Romance and Prophecies of Thomas of Erceldoune*, ed. by James Murray (London: Early English Text Society, 1875), p. xxiii.

51. William Blake, *Selected Poems*, ed. by P.H. Butter (1982; rpt. London: Dent, 1989) p. 24.

52. William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: or Growth of a Poet's Mind*, text of 1805, ed. by Ernest de Selincourt (1970; rpt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 84.

53. Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry', in *Romantic Criticism*, ed. by W.R. Owens (1984; rpt. Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990) pp. 66-77 (p. 68).

54. Ibid.

55. Exceptions to this were the female prophets of the 17th century. However they were alternately accepted and imprisoned, or like, Eleanor Davies, suffered spells in Bedlam. See Christina Berg and Philippa Berry, 'Spiritual Whoredom: An Essay on Female Prophets of the Seventeenth Century', in *1642: Literature and Power in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. by Francis Barker (Colchster: University of Essex, 1980) pp. 37-54.

56. Day Lewis (1934) pp. 3-4.

57. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973) p. 25.

58. Day Lewis (1934) p. 1.

59. MacNeice (1938) p. 151-2.

60. Ibid p. 198.

61. See Cora Kaplan, 'Language and Gender', in *Literature in the Modern World,* pp. 310-316.

62. See Hélène Cixous, 'Sorties', in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1981) pp. 90-98.

63. Montefiore (1996) pp. 23-4.

64. Frances Spalding, *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography* (1988; rpt. London: Faber, 1990), p. 43.

65. Deirdre Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty: Women Between the Wars 1918-1939* (London: Pandora, 1989), p. 57.

66. Ibid p. 61.

67. Ibid p. 60.

68. John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia 1880-1939* (London: Faber, 1992) p. 81.

69. Clive Bell, *Civilization* (1928; rpt. London: University of Chicago Press, 1973) pp. 167 - 8.

70. Beddoe (1989) pp. 26 - 7.

71. *The English Auden* p. 214,

72. John Fuller, *A Reader's Guide to W.H. Auden* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970), p. 117.

73. W.H. Auden, 'Memorable Speech', *Literature in the Modern World* pp.178-180 (pp. 179 - 80).

74. John Willett, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic* (1964; rpt. London: Methuen, 1974), p. 37.

75. Childs p. 113.

76. See note 71 above.

77. Cunningham (1988) p. 151.

78. A.M. Ludovici, *Woman: A Vindication* (London: Constable, 1923) p. 231.

79. MacNeice (1938) p. 93.

80. Jack Barbera and William McBrien, *Stevie: A Biography of Stevie Smith* (London: Heinemann, 1985) p. 107.

81. MacNeice p. 187.

82. Spalding (1988) p. 126.

83. Louis MacNeice, *The Strings are False: An Unfinished Autobiography* (London: Faber, 1965), p. 210.

84. G.M. Stonier, 'The Music Goes Round and Round', *New Statesman and Nation*, 13 (1937) 641 - 642 (p. 641).

85. Ibid p. 642

86. Ibid.

87. Spalding (1988) p. 43.

88. T.S. Eliot, *'The Waste Land' and Other Poems* (1972; rpt. London: Faber, 1990) p. 31.

89. Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', in *The Kristeva Reader* ed. by Toril Moi (1986; rpt. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) pp. 187 – 213 (p. 199).

90. Ibid p. 209.

91. Ibid.

92. See note 90.

93. Sanford Sternlicht, 'Introduction', *In Search of Stevie Smith*, ed. by Sanford Sternlicht (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991) pp. 1 – 27 (p. 24).

94. Stevie Smith, 'Poems in Petticoats', in *Me Again: Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith*, ed. by Jack Barbera and William McBrien (1981; rpt. London: Virago, 1988) pp. 180 – 181 (p. 180).

95. Ibid.

96. Ibid.

97. Ibid.

98. Stevie Smith, 'What Poems are Made Of', in *Me Again* pp. 127 – 129 (p. 128).

99. Smith, *The Collected Poems*, p. 452

100. Ibid p. 295.

101. Cora Kaplan, 'Language and Gender', in *Literature in the Modern World* pp. 285 – 291 (p. 285).

102. Ibid pp. 286 – 7.

103. Ibid p. 287.

104. Stevie Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper or Work it out for Yourself* 1980; rpt. London: Virago, 1993) p. 23.

105. See note 103.

106. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983; rpt. Oxford: Blackwell, 1993) p. 22.

107. Philip Larkin, 'Frivolous and Vulnerable', in *In Search of Stevie Smith*, pp. 75 – 81 (p. 76).

108. Philip Larkin, 'Stevie, Good-bye', in *In Search of Stevie Smith*, pp. 114 – 116 (p. 114).

109. Seamus Heaney, 'A Memorable Voice: Stevie Smith', in *In Search of Stevie Smith*, pp. 211 – 213 (p. 213).

110. Ian Hamilton, *Against Oblivion: Some Lives of the Twentieth-Century Poets* (London: Viking, 2002) p. 139.

111. Ibid.

112. Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989) p. 209.

113. Ibid.

114. See note 89.

115. Julia Kristeva, 'Revolution in Poetic Language', in *The Kristeva Reader* pp. 89 – 136 (113).

116. Germaine Greer, *Slip-Shod Sibyls: Recognition, Rejection and the Woman Poet* (London: Viking, 1995) pp. xiii – xiv.

117. Helen Kidd, 'Writing Near the Fault Line: Scottish Women Poets and the Topography of Tongues', in *Kicking Daffodils: Twentieth-Century Women Poets*, ed. by Vicki Bertram (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997) pp. 95 – 110 (p. 101).

118. Martin Gray, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 2nd ed. (Harlow: Longman York Press, 1992), p. 160.

119. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, 'Women Poets' in *Literature in the Modern World* pp. 27 - 33 (p. 28).

120. Ibid p. 29.

121. Louis MacNeice, 'A Brilliant Puritan', *Listener*, 20 (1938) viii.

122. Stevie Smith, *The Holiday* (1979; rpt. London: Virago, 1993), p. 67.

CHAPTER 2: ECCENTRICITY, THE SUBURBS AND THE PASTORAL

1. Introduction

Debates about Smith have frequently concentrated on ideas of eccentricity and on location. This chapter will show that she is regarded as literally ex-centric in that she is categorised as a poet of the suburbs, therefore outside or on the fringes of the literary and metropolitan centre; moreover she is regarded as eccentric partly because she continued to live in the suburbs, as a spinster in the company of her aunt, and used the suburb in which she lived as inspiration for her poems and prose. In these texts she engaged with the debates that surrounded ideas of the suburban during the 1920s to 1940s, but at the same time attempted to establish herself as not being part of this social group. Moreover, her literary re-writings of the suburbs engage with a non-suburban aesthetic, that of the pastoral tradition.

According to Alan Sinfield, literature does not transcend political and social circumstances. Because it is influenced by the material world it becomes the site of a contest of cultural and ideological values, and therein lies its importance:

> Societies have to reproduce themselves culturally as well as materially, and this is done in part by putting into circulation stories of how the world goes. Diverse institutions are involved in this ... texts designated 'literary', and the processes of that designation, contribute ... Literary texts raise complex questions of cultural affiliation and appropriation, while engaging with the most sensitive issues of our time.[1]

In this chapter I will be taking a similarly materialist approach, that is, one that assumes that social ideas and ideologies have an influence on and can be disseminated by literary texts. I will consider ideas of Smith's eccentricity and ex-centricity, as well as the importance of the suburbs both in her work and in critical perceptions, and her use of the pastoral tradition. Because Smith began to write poetry in the 1920s, was first published

in the 1930s, and became established in her literary career in the 1940s, I will examine texts from those decades, including novels and prose works by J.B. Priestley and George Orwell, as well as interpretations by recent critics.

Geographically ex-centric, but still attached to the urban centre, the suburbs were the site of a contest of cultural and national ideologies. Indeed, John Carey has shown that the European population explosion in the years leading up to 1914, itself accompanied by a new mass culture, gave rise to concerns about overcrowding, intrusion and social power.[2] These ideas were readily transferred to the large scale building projects in the newly-built suburbs that housed white-collar workers:

> The massive expansion of suburbia, and the antagonisms, divisions and sense of irrecoverable loss it generated, were the major shaping factors in twentieth-century English culture. They exacerbated the intellectual's feelings of isolation from what he conceived of as philistine hordes, variously designated the middle classes or the bourgeoisie, whose dullness and small-mindedness the intellectual delights in portraying (that is inventing). Hostility to the suburbs as ecologically destructive quickly fused with contempt for those who lived in them.[3]

This is significant for a consideration of Smith's work because, as Carey shows, the suburbs were in the intellectual view 'philistine', that is uncultured. In these terms the suburbs become associated with popular rather than high culture, leading to the idea that mass culture and poetry are antithetical. Smith's poetry is difficult to classify; it was more readily categorised as light verse than serious poetry and therefore associated with popular culture rather than intellectual ideas. However, in her 'suburbs' poems and prose she frequently takes a stance that can be identified as intellectual in that she illustrates suburban mores, attempts to distance herself from the suburb dwellers, and allies herself with the intellectuals. Despite this, the suburbs continued to inspire her work, albeit in a manner that both expresses the sense of loss resulting from large-scale building works, particularly in her identification of surviving rural pockets within suburbia.

In her essay, 'Outside History? Stevie Smith, Women Poets and the National Voice' (1994) Alison Light argues that 'debates about Englishness ... have concerned themselves almost exclusively with male writers.'[4] Light therefore seeks to centralise Smith within these debates by placing her within another, domestic, private and suburban, version of Englishness:

> If this is not the Englishness of Grantchester or Adlestrop or the Whitsun Weddings, it is the Englishness of the girl from the good school who doesn't go to university, it is the thriving unconscious of the shopping parade and the outpatients department, of the linguistic reaches of respectable English home life and the enormously rich reservoir of repression which the small empire of home can create; the 'jungle' which is always on the edges of Avondale Road or Palmers Green, a place where one longs to escape and where one goes at one's peril.[5]

Light's perspective is that of the late twentieth century, proposing that Smith can both speak for the nation and can be seen as a part of national identity, despite her sex and her use of suburban rather than national themes. She is correct to argue for a validation of the suburban in ideas of national identity, although she sees this as a different and less orthodox version of Englishness than the three (male) poets to whom she refers: Larkin, Thomas, and Brooke. But it is of interest that she selects two of these poems, 'The Old Vicarage, Grantchester' and 'Adlestrop', as examples of Englishness, since they both take a nostalgic view of an area of English countryside. Light therefore shows that Englishness, in the orthodox view, resides in the rural, while arguing for a version that is undeniably urban.

Light does not address ideas about the suburbs that were prevalent in earlier decades, such as those identified by Carey, nor does she consider that Smith's poems and prose engage with pastoralism as an unorthodox aspect of the suburbs. In following up ideas of ex-centricity I will therefore examine ways in which the suburban, in popular imagination and literary texts, was considered essentially marginal to the mainstream of

English society and culture; and consider ways in which Smith's treatment of the suburbs renders her an outsider in cultural terms. I will also show, however, that Smith's concern with the survival of the pastoral within a suburban context concurs with concepts of Englishness that constitute ideas of national identity.

2. Eccentricity and ex-centricity

Critical perceptions of Smith's eccentricity have frequently concentrated on her aberrant poetic style, as well as her personality. In his 1976 essay on Smith's poetry, Seamus Heaney praises her for 'variety and inventiveness ... understanding [and] poignancy'. Heaney, however, clearly cannot reconcile the disjunction between that which Smith intends to convey, and her mode of conveying it, which is associated with light or non-serious poetry, or what Heaney characterises as 'nonsense'. In the end he decides 'the adjective has to be "eccentric". She looks at the world with a mental squint, there is a disconcerting wobble in the mirror she holds up to nature.'[6]

The charge of eccentricity has also been brought by other critics. When Mary Gordon wrote a preface to the New York edition of *Novel on Yellow Paper* she opened it with the statement, '[l]ike all genuine eccentrics Stevie Smith believed herself to be ordinary ... she lived in the suburbs with her aunt.'[7] This assumes Smith's eccentricity to be so well known as to render explanation unnecessary, as well as totally authentic. Similarly, Calvin Bedient describes Smith as 'that eccentric jauntily named after a popular jockey',[8] again associating Smith with eccentricity so closely that justification is unnecessary, although Bedient does suggest that the acquisition of her somewhat masculine name contributes to the label. While Heaney connects eccentricity with Smith's style, Gordon and Bedient suggest that it is an inherent personal characteristic and is not necessarily associated with her poetry.

Heaney, Gordon and Bedient imply that biography and style are imbued, and that personal difference is connected with her difference as a poet. Romana Huk criticises this tendency to explain Smith's poetry by means of biographical contextualisation which results in an equation of biography and eccentricity. Huk argues that the critical tendency to interpret Smith's ventriloquy, or reproduction of multiple voices, biographically has been read as evidence of eccentricity:

> the overwhelming tendency has been to read her speakers' often contradictory utterances as confessionalistic evidence of her own 'peculiar' sort of eccentricity.[9]

As Huk shows, such critical attention tends to ignore 'much of what goes on in her poetry at the level of language' and results in a biographical search to find 'the "real" it is implied' Stevie Smith.[10] Despite this argument, Huk is in danger of falling into the same trap when she remarks that Smith has often been 'thought of as the eccentric old British match-up for spinster-poet Emily Dickinson'.[11] Smith is therefore matched with Dickinson because both were spinsters, but Huk also decides that Smith is eccentric as regards poetic style which, in an echo of Heaney, is 'too apt to run eccentrically offkey or lapse into doggerel'.[12] Huk decides that Smith's eccentricity can be read as evidence of her '"ex-centricism" [Smith is] an "exilic", indeed multiply marginalized ... with regard to language.'[13] This brings eccentricity, or what Huk terms ex-centricity, back to the poetic style that Heaney finds problematic, and which is, indeed, marginal since it does not conform to conventional ideas of serious poetry. This nonconformity, however, can contest dominant ideas, as Kristin Bluemel (1998) shows. Bluemel is concerned with Smith's illustrations as much as her poetry, but relates eccentricity to ex-centricity as regards Smith's gender in order to argue that such eccentric-ness is 'dangerous' in that it challenges notions of cultural centrality.[14]

Despite Huk's warnings, some biographical contextualisation is necessary as regards Smith's eccentricity. Indeed, those critics who assume that Smith's personal eccentricity is both imbued and a part of her poetic style are correct: further chapters will argue that her poetic style and eccentric persona were equally strategic. According to Frances Spalding, at Newnes in the post-war period Smith became:

> a middle aged spinster of increasingly eccentric appearance ... [who] was the butt of office jokes. The slightest eccentricity, even a glimpse of her greying pink bloomers, became a subject for mirth. Odd views were expected of her, for she was all too obviously now a person who did not fit in.[15]

However, Spalding also records that Smith's appearance was intentionally bizarre: she bought hats 'at church jumble sales or Help the Aged shops ... dresses in C and A [sic] children's departments'.[16] While her small stature probably led her to the children's departments, from this emerged the style that became distinctive at her public poetry readings in the 1960s: childlike pinafore dresses and blouses with Peter Pan collars, white lace stockings and strap shoes. According to Spalding, one witness to her performance in 1962, Lilian Carpenter, thought that 'it seemed ... impossible that the mouse-like creature, seated with her skirt above her knees and wearing ... white lace stockings, would be able to hold the attention of the audience.'[17] However, it was precisely this unexpected appearance which did hold the audience's attention. It should be remembered that during the 1960s, as Laura Severin argues, 'a leather-jacketed "tough" [was] the most common persona of the oral poetry movement'.[18] Smith's appearance, simultaneously a child and an elderly woman, was both eccentric and aberrant. Fitting both extreme stereotypes of powerlessness, it posed no challenge either as a poet or as a woman, and allowed her to assume a public voice without threatening the literary establishment. In a later chapter I will examine Smith's personal eccentricity in relation to her literary eccentricity together with the ideas of performance that are relevant to both.

Equally important, and related to Smith's eccentricity, is her position outside the literary mainstream, which I designate as ex-centric. In her full length study of Smith, Laura Severin questions Smith's ex-centric reputation, arguing that 'acknowledging that Smith worked in the publishing industry requires fundamentally re-thinking her reputation as a literary outsider among contemporaries.'[19] Smith, however, worked as a secretary in a publishing house, which can hardly be seen to be within the literary mainstream. Nor did the fact that some of her friends were writers place her in the same situation as, for example, the Auden set, in which literary production flourished in an atmosphere of shared interest and mutual recognition,[20] or Virginia Woolf, whose association with other writers and artists known as the Bloomsbury Group ensured that she was not a literary outsider. Barbera and McBrien point out that when Smith became a published writer 'the Georgian poets were yielding to the Auden generation and to Dylan Thomas ... She had virtually no social or artistic links with these poets'.[21]

Smith corroborates her literary ex-centricity in a letter to Hermon Ould in 1941, in which she makes it plain that she found it difficult to make literary contacts:

> it is no good being a penurious author unless you are also a foreign author ... I think it is awfully sad for us hard up English writers because we not only have to stew in beastly offices all day to pay our bills but we cannot ever have any contact with other writers unless they happen to come our way casual like! Now I know you can have too much literary gaddings, but I also believe you can have too little and get right out of touch; that is why I should like to belong to P.E.N., but it is so expensive ... It is really only for rich and middling well-to-do people. Then there is the other point ... I can almost never get the time to come to the luncheons ... Now couldn't you be kind to poor English writers and arrange an associate membership for them...?[22]

Smith's letter to Ould, the secretary of P.E.N., an international association of poets, playwrights, editors, essayists and novelists, complains about the isolation suffered by 'hard up English writers', as opposed to foreign writers who, her letter implies, pay lower associate membership rates. However, this letter emphasises Smith's difference

from those whom Samuel Hynes calls the 'principal writers'[23] of the 'thirties, mainly the Auden group: she worked in an office rather than supporting herself by her writing, and could not, when she wrote this letter, afford either the time or the money to join the group that would have allowed her greater contact with the literary world. Smith's tone is light, and her main point is about her finances, but her comment that 'you ... can get right out of touch' highlights her ex-centric literary status, a position that was rendered more marginal by virtue of her gender. As Valentine Cunningham notes, 'Stevie Smith is perhaps the only woman poet of the period to write constantly strong poems and even she, characteristically, found it hard to get her poems into print.'[24]

Smith's peripheral literary situation was compounded by location: living in Palmers Green, a suburb in North London now part of the borough of Enfield, was both eccentric and geographically ex-centric. Moreover, the association of Smith with Palmers Green continues to dominate criticism and representations of the poet. It has been seen that Alison Light identifies Smith with Avondale Road and Palmers Green;[25] and Smith's entry in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* describes her as a poet and novelist who was 'brought up in Palmers Green ... where she spent most of her adult life with an aunt.'[26] Once again we see that Smith's position is regarded as literally ex-centric since she lived outside the centre of London, but eccentricity is also suggested by her spinsterhood, living with an elderly aunt. Hugh Whitemore's *Stevie: A Play* (1977) also focuses on these aspects of Smith's life. Smith's aunt is a main character, it is located in Palmers Green, and has such stage directions as 'Stevie enters ... wearing ankle socks and sandals'[27] to emphasise her eccentric appearance. When the BBC made a television programme about Smith in 1997 it was filmed almost entirely in Palmers Green, thus further linking Smith inextricably with the suburb in which she spent her life from the age of four.

Palmers Green is about eight miles from central London, and when Smith moved there from Hull it still resembled a country village, surrounded by field and woods.[28] By the 1930s, however, private enterprise was encroaching on this land with housing developments that were, as David Pam argues 'designed and priced to meet the needs of the middle class.'[29] Frances Spalding suggests that Smith's 'refusal to leave this remote suburb ... tried her friends, for after parties she demanded lifts home. One who knew her less well thought she said Parsons Green and was dismayed at the mileage he had to cover to reach Palmers Green.'[30] What is conveyed by this anecdote is the literal ex-centricity of Palmers Green: although it is geographically close to London Spalding calls it a 'remote suburb' and it is clear that a sense of distance and remoteness dominated the perceptions of Smith's urban friends and acquaintances as well as her biographer. The former quotation from Spalding also shows that Smith's apparent (if not literal) 'refusal' to move from the suburb to a more central location was perceived by her metropolitan friends to be an awkward and stubborn eccentricity.

Smith's inspiration from this location, either writing of Palmers Green in its own name or thinly disguised as Bottle Green or Syler's Green, compounded both her eccentricity and her (lack of) status as a non-serious poet. As Carey argues:

> The rejection by intellectuals of the clerks and the suburbs meant that writers intent on finding an eccentric voice could do so by colonising this abandoned territory. ... For Smith, suburbs do not need to be embalmed in nostalgia to make them poetically acceptable. Her taste for suburban sensations is keen and immediate ... her response to Palmers Green was rapt.[31]

Certainly Carey is correct that writing about the suburbs was against the intellectual mainstream. Carey's categorisation of Smith as a writer of the suburbs, however, should not suggest that Smith's position was entirely in opposition to the intellectual élite. According to Spalding, the magazine *Night and Day* 'had a fear of the highbrow and at first rejected the poems [that Smith] submitted'[32] in 1937. Although they later accepted

them, the initial rejection suggests that her work was considered 'highbrow', notwithstanding the fact that it has been perceived as lacking seriousness, and she herself emphasised lightness and humour. Indeed, she took the title of her first collection, *A Good Time Was Had by All*, from parish magazines' reports of social events, therefore exploiting connotations of the mundane and familiar, the suburban, in fact, thus establishing what Carey calls her 'eccentric voice'. Acknowledgement of this, however, should not overlook Smith's own position, which was closer to that of the intellectual than the suburb dweller. Neither does Carey consider Smith's attitude towards the suburbs, which, as this chapter will show, is ambivalent, veering between disgust and warmth.

Carey emphasises that in Smith's hands the suburbs becomes a fit subject for poetry: what he describes as Smith's 'rapt' and 'keen' response to Palmers Green indicates an almost Romantic sensibility, although he is wrong to say that nostalgia is not a necessary part of Smith's poetic recreation: further pages will show that the inspiration that Smith derived from Palmers Green was frequently nostalgic. Carey also relates the suburban poems to Smith's wish to 'find an eccentric voice', by which he means a distinctive poetic persona. In these terms it is important that Smith appropriated the 'abandoned territory' of the suburbs which was rejected by the literary and intellectual mainstream, allowing her to use this eccentricity or difference as a means of entering the genre of poetry. Carey relates Smith's suburban experience to her 'eccentric voice' and her gender:

> There is a parallel to be drawn between the suburban experience and the features that distinguish Stevie Smith's poetic voice. She evolved a model of writing that avoids and undercuts the kind of dignity and authority that males have appropriated. Her poems are unnerving and uncategorisable, wavering between joke and pain. They have the unpretentiousness and irreverence of the suburbs, and are constructed of well-worn materials – fairy-tales, nonsense verse, conversational turns of phrase. They achieve cultural significance because they are entirely

> careless of cultural significance. Emerging from a nation area (suburban women) that has been ridiculed and condemned, they invite ridicule and contempt. In this way they occupy the territory – or part of it – left vacant by anti-suburban disdain.[33]

Carey is right that Smith's poems are 'entirely careless of cultural significance', although I would add that this is only an *apparent* carelessness. While Smith does not follow the forms of traditional and serious poetry, the frequent references to canonical poetry show an ambivalence about literary culture and her own place within it rather than carelessness. Carey is not referring here to Smith's suburb poems, but to her oeuvre as a whole, which he likens to the suburbs because of her style of writing, thus the poems, as well as the suburbs, are unpretentious and irreverent. This is questionable when ideas of suburban conformity are considered, although Carey's view derives from his argument that ideas of the 'dullness and small-mindedness' of the suburbs were an invention of intellectuals.[34] However he makes a valuable point when he argues that 'suburban women' were a 'nation area ... that has been ridiculed and condemned'. This incorporates the category of suburban women into ideas of nation, as Light also proposes, while simultaneously showing their position to be marginal. Carey thus associates Smith's 'model of writing' with a female subversion of male authority, and his identification of fairy-tales and 'conversational turns of phrase' also draws attention to her use of oral forms. Ideas of subversion and orality are crucial to my examination of Smith's work, however the close connection that Carey makes between Smith (as a 'suburban woman') and the suburbs, and thus with an area that was identified 'not just [with] triviality but of specifically female triviality',[35] causes concern. Smith could become further entrenched into pejorative categorisations of the trivial that are specifically associated with femininity.

Despite the ways in which Smith has been linked with the suburbs, Carey's consideration of this area in his full-length study of the first half of the twentieth century is exceptional, and critical focus on her work has paid little attention to this aspect. Arthur Rankin, for example, avoids the suburban poems, preferring to concentrate on Smith's 'purely lyrical poems and passages of prose, many of them having their roots in the countryside which she knew ... the country around Hertford so easily accessible from her home in Palmers Green.'[36] By omitting the influence of Smith's immediate geographical surroundings, and ignoring the ways in which Smith treated those surroundings as an aspect of the pastoral, Rankin (perhaps unwittingly) reveals the view that the suburbs are incompatible with literariness and poetic inspiration. Similarly, Catherine A. Civello's description of Palmers Green as an 'out-of-the-way suburb'[37] identifies Smith's ex-centric position, but otherwise does not consider the suburbs as a specific aspect of Smith's work. Laura Severin's cultural and historical investigation also neglects to consider the significance of the suburbs in Smith's work.[38]

The above critics have therefore produced partial assessments of Smith's work which ignore the context of much of her poetry and prose, as well as being essentially ahistorical. In the 1930s the suburbs were central to emergent ideologies of nation and became an important vehicle for national obsessions, including ideas about class and loss of nature. The following pages will therefore examine Smith's work in the context of contemporary ideas about the suburban together with her own use of the suburbs. In order to give a focus to the discussion of these ideas the period of Smith's earliest writing, the 1930s and early 1940s, will be specifically considered.

3. Writing about the suburbs and writing the suburbs

Many writers during the 1930s were preoccupied by the suburbs, which were invariably associated with uniformity, both of houses and of people. These ideas are addressed in George Orwell's 1939 novel, *Coming Up for Air*, which focuses on the life of one of the suburban clerks. In a direct address to the reader, George Bowling, the first person narrator, describes the suburb in which he lives:

> Do you know the road I live in – Ellesmere Road, West Bletchley? Even if you don't, you know fifty others exactly like it.
>
> You know how these streets fester all over the inner-outer suburbs. Always the same. Long, long rows of little semi-detached houses ... as much alike as council houses and generally uglier. The stucco front, the creosoted gate, the privet hedge, the green front door. The Laurels, the Myrtles, the Hawthorns, Mon Abri, Mon Repos, Belle Vue. At perhaps one house in fifty some anti-social type who'll probably end in the workhouse has painted his front door blue instead of green.[39]

Uniformity is emphasised, the houses within this specific suburb are the same, and this suburb is the same as many others. Uniformity extends to the mentality of those who live there: the design of the houses may be a given, but all choose to paint their front doors a uniform green and give them pretentious and similar names, paradoxically attempting uniqueness while simultaneously undermining such aspiration. Any deviation from the norm which might be seen as imagination is associated, in an ironic reference to suburban attitudes, with being 'anti-social', or worse, with undesirable qualities of lack of thrift and indolence, so that the perpetrator 'will probably end in the workhouse'. Although this street is of the 'inner-outer suburbs' the street that is described is typical of all suburbs containing (like Palmers Green) uniform semi-detached houses, and, in Bowling's address, such streets are seen as a poison or infection in contemporary society, since they 'fester'.

Bowling goes on to describe himself. Orwell renders the individual into a type or stereotype which would have been recognisable in the nineteen-thirties by making Bowling scrutinise his self-image:

> It was almost as if I could stand at a distance and watch myself coming down the road, with my fat, red face and my false teeth and my vulgar clothes. A chap like me is incapable of looking like a gentleman. Even if you saw me at two hundred yards distance you'd know immediately ... The clothes I was wearing were practically the uniform of the tribe. Grey herringbone suit a bit the worse for wear, blue overcoat costing fifty shillings, bowler hat and no gloves ... Economically and socially I'm about at the average level of Ellesmere Road.[40]

Clearly, in these extracts, Orwell displays the 'rejection by intellectuals of the clerks and the suburbs' that Carey identifies.[41] Indeed, Lynette Hunter argues that although Orwell 'wrote scathingly of intellectuals' he was in 'the position of the intellectual'[42] moreover, in this novel Bowling's 'domestic voice ... gives way for a grass-roots intellectual voice'.[43] Similarly, Alison Light refers to Orwell's 'vitriol [and] paranoia' in this novel.[44] Ostensibly, then, Bowling's words reveal his self-contempt, but Orwell's contempt for his type underlies the words. Bowling is seen as a lower middle class suburban stereotype: those who live in the suburbs are referred to derogatorily as a 'tribe' with a common, indeed vulgar, 'uniform' of cheap and worn clothes. Individuality is therefore denied them, and their difference from the higher classes is identified in Bowling's physical and sartorial difference. Bowling is 'incapable of looking like a gentleman', suggesting that the implied class boundaries cannot be broached.

Similar ideas about the suburbs are to be found in J.B. Priestley's *English Journey*, written in 1934. Although his factual report is kinder than Orwell's fictional account, he, too, describes the North London suburbs in terms of mediocrity and uniformity:

> If the fog had lifted I knew that I should have seen this England all around me at the northern entrance to London, where the smooth wide road passes between miles of semi-detached bungalows, all with their little garages, their wireless sets, their periodicals about film stars, their swimming costumes and tennis rackets and dancing shoes.[45]

Priestley suggests that this is a historical and cultural transition, in which 'the new post-war England' had its 'real birthplace' in America.[46] This visual and material manifestation of modernity therefore has its roots in another nation, and it lacks the authenticity of the traditional England of the heritage industry, the 'Old England, the country of the cathedrals and minsters ... Parson and Squire ... and quaint highways and byways England.'[47] What is noticeable about Priestley's account of suburban modernity is his concentration on consumer goods such as wireless sets and motor cars, and the leisure activities of popular culture, such as the cinema. What might otherwise be seen as a fairly affluent existence is flawed in Priestley's eyes because it 'is lacking in character, in zest, gusto, flavour, bite, drive, originality'. This, he decides, 'is a serious weakness.'[48] While Priestley's view of the suburbs acknowledges the material comfort of their inhabitants, then, it also identifies and condemns a concomitant dullness, encapsulating the prevailing intellectual view of the suburbs.

It is clear that the views expressed by Priestley and Orwell were part of a widespread concern with the nature of the masses, which, in intellectuals' eyes, were linked with mass culture. The critics at the Frankfurt School of Social Research in the late twenties and early thirties, who moved to the United States in 1933, believed that mass culture and the mass media, particularly radio, cinema, newspapers and cheap books were a form of capitalist production that was responsible for a lack of individuality. In 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception' Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argue that '[f]ilms, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part.' Horkheimer and Adorno associate this uniformity of culture with new-built uniform dwellings, such as 'the new bungalows on the outskirts'.[49] For the critics of the Frankfurt School the problem lay in the vulnerability of the masses to

ideology disseminated by capitalist production: 'the deceived masses are today captivated by the myth of success ... Immovably, they insist on the very ideology which enslaves them'.[50] In a state of acquiescence to the material culture that they both produce and consume, the consumers of mass culture, that is the masses themselves, do not realise that they are conforming to an ideology that is against their own interests. They are in a state of false consciousness. In a similar vein, in 'The Lion and the Unicorn' (1941) Orwell wrote:

> However much one may hate to admit it, it is almost certain that between 1931 and 1940 the National Government represented the will of the mass of the people. It tolerated slums, unemployment and a cowardly foreign policy. Yes, but so did public opinion.[51]

This corroborates Carey's view that, to Orwell as to the critics of the Frankfurt School, 'the masses are a disappointment.'[52] As a socialist Orwell wanted to believe in the revolutionary potential of the masses, yet, as his essay shows, the masses tolerated the situation they were in.

Although writing in different genres, Orwell and Priestley both express a dislike of the suburbs in a manner typical of the time, and it is clear from both extracts that intellectual and social snobbery prevailed. Bowling is a typical suburban man who lacks the attributes of a gentleman, while Priestley reduces the (unseen) inhabitants of the suburb to a simple liking for un-intellectual pleasure. The suburbs became a visible sign of the modern world; however, as the extracts from the above texts have shown, there were two recurring anxieties about this version of modernity. Firstly, that the visual uniformity of the suburbs is reflected in their inhabitants. Combined with their relative affluence, uniformity reduces ambition and political awareness so that the suburbs not only produce people who lack 'any real desire to think and act for themselves', but also creates 'the

perfect subjects for an iron autocracy'.[53] Simon Dentith shows the second anxiety: that the suburbs do not lend themselves to literary treatment:

> What is an appropriate manner for writing about the suburbs? – a question of genre that intrudes itself especially awkwardly for poets ... where the landscape of suburbia is not offered as exemplary of the horrors of contemporaneity, it appears simply as the doggedly mundane, the plain dull ordinariness of the contemporary world which greets us on all our travels.[54]

Despite Priestley's complaint, novelists did find ways to use, or indeed, abuse the suburbs, as the extract from Orwell's text shows. Poets, however, mainly ignored a place and its people that were considered inauthentic, mundane, and unliterary. Traditional poetic styles, associated with grandeur and noble inspiration, seemed inappropriate for the ordinariness of the suburbs and their inhabitants so that, as Dentith observes, there are 'difficulties ... about the level of seriousness with which the topic should be treated.'[55]

Unlike Priestley and Orwell, Smith was not a traveller or visitor to the suburbs. She spent most of her life in the same North London suburb, watching it grow from the green and largely rural suburb of the pre-First World War period, to the built-up area in the 1930s of which Priestley writes. Given the ambivalences and anxieties attached to the suburbs, it is unsurprising that Smith's attitudes encompassed poetic idealisation as well as descriptions and accusations of mundanity and problematic modernity. It is unlikely that her use of humour can be regarded as a response to the suburban problem because humour was an essential and characteristic response to many topics throughout Smith's oeuvre. But what is striking about Smith's version of the suburbs is her use of ventriloquy, which enables her to write the suburbs (as well as writing about the suburbs) by transcribing the voice and speech of the suburb-dwellers. Thus, in 'A London Suburb' (1949), she describes a near neighbour, specifically the 'woman from the next house but one' talking about her dog:

'Seven years old 'e is.
Ever so sweet 'e is.
Ever such a neat coat 'e's got.
Ever so fond of kiddies.
But a dog likes to know oo's going to 'it 'im and oo isn't.'[56]

Smith apparently replicates the speech of the suburb dweller faithfully, down to the lack of aspirates, vernacular repetition of 'ever so' and slang of 'kiddies'. The transcription of apparently Cockney speech, however, is surprising in what was a middle-class area,[57] revealing either Smith's own snobbish attitude to her neighbours or her wish to render the piece more comic. But what is notable about this otherwise unremarkable, even prosaic, piece of conversation is that Smith sets it out in the form of a poem, since she believes that it is an 'unconscious poem that happens sometimes when people are talking'.[58] Therefore the very characteristics that are believed by Priestley to be not conducive to creativity become the raw material for her literary creation. It is this that provides the greatest difference to Priestley's and Orwell's stance: while those writers looked at suburbs from the outside, Smith speaks from the inside.

Notwithstanding this, in her heavily autobiographical *Novel on Yellow Paper* Smith, in the character of Pompey, claims that she isn't an insider, revealing her ambivalence towards the suburbs. Here, Smith's own suburb is disguised with the name Bottle Green:

> Bottle Green, Bottle Green, Reader, have you ever seen Bottle Green ... I have wandered about having a *nostalgie* for this suburb but no means of getting into the inside-of it. And I have burned to know this suburb from top to bottom and round and about and within. And Freddy has been my guide, my Virgil, in these regions ... They are very kind and solid the people are, and they are very nice for a visit, say you come in from a walk and you are invited to tea. And there is a kind lady that is his mother. And there are scones for tea. And they draw up to the fire and talk about how awfully common the other people in Bottle Green are being all the time. And how they have their dinners in the kitchen, or sit in their shirt-sleeves.[59]

Pompey, Smith's autobiographical protagonist, claims to know little of the suburb, despite living there. Betraying her snobbish refusal to be a part of what Orwell calls 'the

tribe', she emphasises her difference from the suburb-dwellers by having 'no means of getting into the inside-of it' and relying on Freddy, her fiancé, to guide her as Virgil guided Dante through hell and purgatory. By associating her environment with that of *The Divine Comedy*, Pompey's literary treatment of Bottle Green simultaneously and ironically likens the suburb to hell.

Like Orwell, Smith describes a recognisable social class. In the extract about 'Bottle Green' her focus on 'the people' generalises in order to extend this anecdote beyond the apparent subject, which is Freddy's mother and her house: the reader is therefore invited to believe that this house and family are typical. Smith's representation is altogether more gentle and affectionate than Orwell's account: there are scones and tea by the fire, hospitality and conversation. However, Smith also shows negative characteristics: there is a pervading snobbery and belief that they are better than the other 'common' neighbours. Indeed, the emotional warmth itself can become suffocating, as Pompey explains: 'I cannot always be in that atmosphere, it is warm, but by and by it is too warm and too close.'[60]

I have argued that Smith / Pompey, a suburb-dweller herself, claims to need a guide, therefore she believes herself, in this text, to be disassociated from the suburbs. This attitude, however, is itself typical of suburbia, as the next paragraph reveals:

> It is funny that all the time in suburbs people are being ashamed of being in suburbs, and they are having to show that they are not like that themselves, not that way at all, you know. And there will be some courteous deprecating laughter.[61]

This can be seen as an example of Smith's privileged knowledge of the suburbs and her understanding of the psychology of the group. She also reveals that the prevailing attitudes that stigmatised the suburbs in the 1930s affected the suburb-dwellers themselves, or at least those with intellectual or social aspirations. They believe that they

do not conform to the stereotype, and Smith identifies the linguistic characteristics as well as the pretensions of people who are 'not like that themselves, not that way at all, you know.' *Novel on Yellow Paper* does not simply reproduce the ideas of the intellectual class that produced the work, as was the case in the extracts given from Orwell's and Priestley's texts, but also represents the ideas and voices of the marginalised suburb-dwellers. Smith's own position remains ambivalent. She writes from the privileged knowledge of the insider, but the manner in which she writes of Bottle Green, akin to the anthropological 'manners and customs' portrait, removes her from being entirely of the suburbs: she, too, is 'not that way at all'.

Ideas of the rural have dominated and continue to dominate perceptions of an English identity. A Gallop survey conducted in August 2000 reached the same conclusions as a similar survey held in 1939: the majority of the people questioned wished to live in the countryside. Anthony King's *Daily Telegraph* article carried the headline 'Britons Hold on to Dream of Rural Idyll', and continued:

> Certainly, people's image of Britain as a whole is heavily influenced by their feeling for the countryside. Despite more than a century of overwhelming urban dominance, almost half the population ... 'associate Britain more with the countryside than cities'.[62]

The popular conception of Englishness is frequently seen in the images which are derived from the work of English landscape artists and poets in the pastoral tradition. Behind this mode of thought lies an ideology which promotes the rural as the location of harmony, and focuses on ideas of a small community set in a verdant landscape. Yet, during the 1930s, changes to that landscape were brought about by rapid building work. As Simon Dentith notes:

> It is worth recalling just how extraordinary was the transformation of the landscape effected by suburban growth between the wars – four million houses built between 1918 and 1939; the surface area of London doubling in the same period; around London alone, at the height of the building boom in the early thirties, houses were

> being built at the rate of 65,000 and 70,000 a year.[63]

Much of the opposition to the suburbs can therefore be attributed to the massive house building of the 'thirties, and a perception of Englishness based on the idealisation of the rural. If Englishness resides in villages and green woodland, suburbs which swallow up the villages are seen to be responsible for the loss of a cherished national identity, as John Carey affirms:

> The massive expansion of suburbia, and the antagonisms, divisions and sense of irrecoverable loss it generated, were the major shaping factors in twentieth-century English culture[.][64]

The people who lived in the suburbs, predominately 'white collar workers, collectively designated clerks',[65] were despised because they were seen to be responsible for the encroachment of buildings into the countryside, itself invested with ideas that the 'true' England resided there. I have argued that Carey identifies a gulf between intellectuals and the suburban middle-class, in which the latter were 'conceived of as philistine hordes'[66] bringing out ideas of a mass populace which was believed to lack cultural discernment and intellect. At the same time, Carey argues, there was a 'determined effort' on the part of the intelligentsia to 'exclude the masses from culture'.[67] There is a sense, then, that the intellectual élite, which would include the first-person narrator of *Novel on Yellow Paper* and, indeed, Smith herself, bolstered its own sense of cultural superiority by associating the suburban middle-class with philistinism, dullness, mediocrity and narrow-mindedness.

In these terms, Smith's categorisation as a poet of the suburbs becomes problematic. Can her use of ventriloquy, which apparently reproduces suburban manners and mores, be seen as an accurate reflection, or is her portrayal an invention based on her own perceptions? Moreover, in *Novel on Yellow Paper* she claims not to be a part of that which she describes. Elsewhere, however, she places herself firmly within the suburban

location. In 'Suburb' (1937), Palmers Green is explicitly named and not concealed by the pseudonym of Bottle Green. The speaker is clearly familiar with the area described, and does not need the guide that Pompey required in *Novel on Yellow Paper*. Instead, the assertive 'I' who takes us on a tour of Palmers Green, giving thoughts and reactions, might be taken to be the poet herself:

> Round about the streets I slink
> Suburbs are not so bad I think
> When the inhabitants can not be seen,
> Even Palmers Green.
> Nobody loves the hissing rain as I
> And round about I slink ... [.][68]

The repetition of 'slink' conveys stealth so as to imply that the progress through the streets is secret and unnoticed: guilt at being within the despised location might be inferred from this, however the suburb is described with a gentle affection. Thus the masonry of the suburb's pavements is personified in a pathetic fallacy that attributes the poet's own feelings to inanimate constructions rather than nature:

> Each paving stone sardonic
> Grins to its fellow citizens masonic:
> 'Thank God they've gone,' each to the other cries
> 'Now there is nothing between us and the skies'.

The paving stones are therefore described with a sympathetic fellow-feeling: they are perceived to be in a secret fraternity of (Free)masonry which, like the poetic voice, dislikes the inhabitants rather than the fabric of the environment.

Within 'Suburb', however, there are conflicting attitudes which can be seen to relate to the change in the suburban landscape. The paving stones belong to an earlier suburb which was closer to nature. It is the rapid erection of cheap housing which the speaker despises:

> Nobody loves the hissing rain as I
> And round about I slink
> And presently

Turn from the sleek wet pavements to the utter slime
Where jerrybuilders building against time
Pursue their storied way,
Foundations and a pram,
Four walls and a pot of jam,
They have their sentries now
Upon a hundred hillocks.

With the word 'turn', Smith moves from a description of the suburban streets at night to an angry denunciation of house building and the buildings' inhabitants: the innocent and desirable dampness of earlier lines gives way to 'utter slime', and Smith's compressed description conflates the builders with those who will live in the houses which stand like 'sentries'. Thus the description takes on an inexorable mechanical momentum with the foundations giving way to storeys, soon to be inhabited by families that are reduced to the monosyllabic single nouns of 'pram' and 'jam', indicators of a life that is focused upon child-bearing and the eating of cheap food. What is unspoken but assumed is the inferior social class of the suburb's inhabitants, who are, in Carey's terms, blamed for the destruction of the green suburb and deemed to be as uniform and dull as '[f]our walls and a pot of jam'. It is of interest, too, that Smith signals this twist in her argument and subsequent change of mood with the word '[t]urn', foregrounding her knowledge of poetics and its terms. Yet 'Suburb' is neither a sonnet nor a Pindaric ode, both of which traditionally employ a formal turn. Smith therefore shows her knowledge of poetic traditions through the use of the term, while rejecting those forms.

In 'Suburb' the rural is alluded to by a direct address to the reader which moves the poem towards its conclusion in a lyrical evocation of an unpopulated place. Here the birth which was implied by 'pram' in the lines quoted earlier is transferred to the rebirth of leaves:

Do you see that pub between the trees
Which advertises gin and cyclists' teas?
Down there I know a lane

Under the padding rain
Where leaves are born again
Every night
And reach maturity
In a remote futurity
Before dawn's light.
I have never seen
Anything quite so green
So close so dark so bright
As the green leaves at night.

Here Smith's attachment is revealed to be to an earlier Palmers Green, a rural scene of the pre-First World War period which is described in her essay 'Syler's Green', to be discussed later. In Carey's terms, Palmers Green was an 'old-style green outer suburb'[69] at the beginning of the twentieth century; these, too, were greeted with dismay, but still retained elements of the countryside. By 1937, when 'Suburb' was first published, the environment had been eroded by a large scale house building programme which had altered the rural scenery.

Dentith argues that 'Suburb' measures the inauthenticity of the lives and architecture 'by invoking the forms of the natural world – in this case even the greenery of a suburban wood'.[70] A contrast is therefore drawn in the poem between the natural and the artificial, or the authentic and the inauthentic. However, Dentith argues that the natural world which is evoked is a fantasy: the leaves' 'particular intensity of greenness is produced as an act of the imagination, since of course they can't actually be seen at night.' This is, perhaps, to take the literary too literally. In these lines Smith moves from the 'dross' of the built-up streets to an intimation of the magical and mystical, in which leaves are 'born again', therefore reincarnated in the darkness and 'reach maturity' in an unspecified future time. The 'lane' itself is not described, since it is simply a location for the magical reincarnation of natural forms, but it is seen in terms of fertility and intense greenness which is simultaneously 'bright' and 'dark'. A secret place is implied, the

sharing of which is a gift that must not be squandered: 'I will not show you yet / Lest you should forget'.

The lane is adjacent to a pub which 'advertises gin and cyclists' teas'. Advertisement boards are both signs and symbols: they draw attention to the consumption of mass produced goods and are therefore placed where they will be seen by a large number of people. They thus symbolise the mass consumption and materialism of modernity. In Smith's poem the boards are at the edge of the built up part of the suburb, serving as a boundary between the occupied and inauthentic streets and the authentic and unpopulated lane. Moreover, these advertisements are for 'gin and cyclists' teas'. They therefore allude to and are aimed at the suburban middle-class consumers of gin and the members of the cycling clubs which proliferated during the 1930s in order for the urban lower-middle and working classes to enjoy and explore rural England.[71] Simon Dentith believes that the first two lines quoted above show 'that pervasive comic irony at the suburbs' expense, its tone inviting shared humour at the pub which offers gin and cyclists' teas'.[72] According to Dentith, then, Smith adopts humour as an appropriate way of writing about the suburbs. In this case gin and the popular pastime of cycling are seen as precise indicators of class, with Smith's references becoming a squib at those classes which will be understood and shared by the reader.

What is equally important is the pastoral. A genre that originated with Greek and Roman poetry, the pastoral tends to idealise rural life, and present the country as an Arcadian refuge from town, with later poets such as Wordsworth adopting the pastoral with the intention of promoting a rustic reality. Smith's pastoral image is of a small and easily overlooked surviving piece of rural England which is encroached upon yet refuses to submit to suburban sprawl and the modernity of metal advertisement boards for gin. It is

this projected image or imagined magical place which is significant in this poem, for the image itself ensures that the rural survives, and is not totally lost.

The poem once again shows that Smith's position as regards the suburbs is ambiguous. 'Suburb' exhibits the intellectual's disdain for the inhabitants of the suburb, but shows an attachment to the (uninhabited) location. 'The Suburban Classes' (1937) goes even further in showing that it is the class of people whom the speaker believes to inhabit the suburbs that is disliked. In this poem Smith engages with contemporary social concerns and specifically mocks suburban attitudes and the people who hold them. The opening lines make it clear that the narrative voice refers to those who are considered to be suburban, or rather those who conform to ideas that comply with the derogatory associations of the words 'suburban' and 'suburbia':

> There is far too much of the suburban classes
> Spiritually not geographically speaking.[73]

The poem differentiates between a place and a state of mind. It is also written as a direct address. The reader is therefore established as the addressee of a speech act which resembles an angry denunciation of the suburban classes and proposes a plan to eliminate them. 'Now I have a plan', the speaker announces, and further engages the listener with the question 'You see the idea?' The speaker therefore claims (or declaims) that:

> ... They're asses,
> Menacing the greatness of our beloved England, they lie
> Propagating their kind in an eightroomed style.

Two ideas are set up in these lines: love of nation, and the threat to England's greatness which is posed by the suburban classes. These people are described as 'asses', therefore pilloried for their stupidity as much as for the uniformity that causes them to live in 'an eightroomed style.' In 1937, when this poem was written, preparations for war were being made, with air raid wardens recruited and an air raid precaution scheme underway

in the North London suburbs.[74] Smith's poem refers to imminent war, while showing middle-class mores to be an aspect of the suburban classes' stupidity. They are unthinkingly patriotic, respectful of their duty to King and country and susceptible to the suggestions of the mass media:

> Then tell them their country's in mortal peril
> They believed it before and will not cavil
> Put it in caption form firm and slick
> If they see it in print it is bound to stick:
> 'Your King and your Country need you Dead'
> You see the idea? Well, let it spread.
> Have a suitable drug under string and label
> Free for every Registered Reader's table.

Smith extends the idea of dying in action for one's country to dying by one's own hand for one's country: the suburban classes are shown to be so obedient to the idea that they can be led to suicide and the elimination of the entire class. This takes the intellectual's scorn for the suburban middle class to an unprecedented degree in that it suggests eradication. If, in Orwell's terms, the suburban classes are a 'tribe', this is a plan for tribal genocide. Smith, the champion of the talking voice, makes it clear that the people who are held in such contempt are those who are swayed by the print culture: if 'they see it in print' the message will be believed and remembered, moreover 'caption form firm and slick' suggests the popular press. This reiterates Horkheimer's and Adorno's warnings about the susceptibility of the mass reading public to the media.[75]

The trivia of suburban life is exposed and ridiculed in this poem, the uniformity of attitudes as well as houses, the hint of dishonesty which comes from the ambiguous enjambment of 'lie' at the end of the third line, and the concern with aping fashion and social climbing, for 'Tell them its smart to be dead and won't hurt / And they'll gobble up drugs as they gobble up dirt.' The casual cruelty of this poem is mirrored by John Betjeman's 'Slough', published in the same year:

Come, bombs, and blow to smithereens
Those air-conditioned, bright canteens,
Tinned fruit, tinned meat, tinned milk, tinned beans
Tinned minds, tinned breath.[76]

The conformity that Smith attributes to the suburban classes is here related to the artifice of modernity: food, air and attitudes are all produced, sealed, and 'tinned'. 'In the intellectual's conceptual vocabulary', Carey argues, 'tinned food becomes a mass symbol because it offends against what the intellectual designates as nature: it is mechanical and soulless.'[77] As in Smith's poem, Betjeman wishes for the destruction of a specific class: the bombs are told to 'spare the bald young clerks', but 'get that man with double chin / Who'll always cheat and always win', therefore aiming at a type which Betjeman believes to embody moral decline. Smith's 'The Suburban Classes' is similarly 'menacing', and this word which begins the third line takes on a menacing aspect of its own so that the poem is removed from any association with the light and humorous and becomes a threat of enforced euthanasia.

The inability of the inhabitants of the suburbs to think for themselves is shown in Smith's angry denunciation of them as 'asses' who 'lie', who therefore speak without believing what they unthinkingly mouth. They are easily led, so susceptible to the media and current fashion that they could be told 'it's smart to be dead ... they'll gobble up drugs as they gobble up dirt.' While there is no evidence that Smith was politically motivated, it is clear that 'The Suburban Classes' corroborates the ideas of George Orwell and the Frankfurt School critics regarding the gullibility of the mass population, and reiterates Priestley's fear that they are 'the perfect subject for an iron autocracy',[78] or fascism. Within this poem, then, lies a contest for nation. The speaker's 'beloved England' is menaced by 'the suburban classes', yet that class's own patriotism is shown up as an aspect of the middle-class suburban mores which are despised. Moreover, my

reading so far supports the idea that they are despised at least in part because they would be unable to resist a threat from fascism.

The problem with 'The Suburban Classes', however, is to discover the identity of the speaker. Frances Spalding attributes the sentiments within the poem to the poet, arguing that Smith liked the environment but not the residents of suburbia. It was this, Spalding argues, that caused the end of Smith's engagement:

> Though geographically Stevie felt an affinity with the landscape of Avenues, Rises and Crescents, spiritually she on occasion viewed it with intense dislike, regarding 'the suburban classes' in her poem of that name [as] a menace to England's ... greatness ... Mentally, but not physically, she wanted to escape. What finally separated Stevie and Eric Armitage was their differing attitudes to suburbia: for Armitage it was a setting in which he was content to find a niche: Stevie, on the other hand, never surrendered her own mental landscape and remained always an alien.[79]

Spalding thus assumes that the voice of the speaker is Smith's own. However, if the poem is taken as an aspect of Smith's ventriloquy the issue is made more problematic. Indeed, Dentith believes that the voice is 'an irony against ... a Lord Rothermere-type newspaper proprietor'.[80] If the voice does ventriloquise that of a known type it may also belong to a member of the intellectual élite in order to reproduce and therefore satirise specific anti-suburban ideologies. Yet the menacing tone which pervades the poem prevents the irony from being immediately understood: does the poem attack the suburban classes, or those who attack them? This poem does, however, expose contemporary ideas of opposing kinds. It can be seen to show the middle-class mores which are said to be held by the suburban classes while simultaneously exposing the attitudes of the intelligentsia. The threat that is posed is not from the (unnamed) fascism, but from the speaker who has a fascist wish to eliminate undesirable sections of society.

In 'Freddy' (1937) Smith's ventriloquy is clear, and this gives an authentic reproduction of the suburban voice. *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936), although fictional, gives an account of her engagement to Eric Armitage, disguising him with the name Freddy to her own Pompey. The poem entitled 'Freddy' can be assumed to be as autobiographical as the novel, with the narrative voice belonging to the poet herself. In this poem Smith refers to the two spheres occupied by herself and Eric Armitage: her own is metropolitan, a world of restaurants and pubs in the company of friends, while Freddy's is that of the suburbs. Smith mimics the accents of the North London suburban middle class in a comic and conscious reproduction of the talking voice:

> But all the same I don't care much for his meelyoo I mean
> I don't anheimate mich in the ha-ha well-off suburban scene
> Where men are few and hearts go tumptytum
> In the tennis club lub lights poet very dumb.[81]

The words 'well-off suburban scene' are clearly those of the occupants of that scene, and the reference to the 'tennis club' affirms that the scene is middle class.[82] The self-conscious and self-satisfied laughter, or what Pompey in *Novel on Yellow Paper* calls 'courteous deprecating laughter'[83] gives ironic emphasis to the words that are reproduced. The transcription of middle-class speech, extending the vowels of 'milieu' to 'meelyoo' and 'animate' to 'anheimate', while compressing the 'u' of 'much' into 'mich', renders the holders of those accents ridiculous and laughable, at least to those who do not possess the accents.

Beneath the mimicry, however, is a clear message. Smith is deadened by the suburban social scene, failing to 'anheimate', and becoming 'very dumb', therefore both speechless and lacking in wit, in the milieu of the tennis club. Despite its humour and references to a recognisable and everyday 1930s' world of pubs, restaurants and tennis clubs, the poem reveals that there are fundamental differences associated with class.

Freddy is clearly of the suburban middle class, 'the ha-ha well-off suburban scene' which 'The Suburban Classes' associates with mass culture. Smith's own choice of language, however, reveals that she affiliated herself with a cultured or intellectual class, for the speaker's opening protestation of love for Freddy employs Latin to indicate the eternal nature of that love:

> Nobody knows what I feel about Freddy
> I cannot make anyone understand
> I love him sub specie aeternitatis
> I love him out of hand.

At the end the Latin phrase referring to the cloak of eternity is reworked to remove the relationship from the spiritual to the physical and carnal:

> But there never was a boy like Freddy
> For a haystack's ivory tower of bliss
> Where speaking sub specie humanitatis
> Freddy and me can kiss.

While Barbera and McBrien argue that Smith's 'use of Latin phrases ... emphasises the timelessness to which ... love aspire[s]',[84] clearly her use of Latin establishes her own social position to be an educated one which is outside mass culture. The people who are mimicked in 'Freddy' and pilloried in 'The Suburban Classes' would not have a knowledge of Latin. As a poet deriving inspiration from the suburbs, then, Smith was able to write with familiarity and knowledge of the suburbs. But in allowing those who lived in the suburbs to speak for themselves through her ventriloquy of their voices and attitudes she engages with contemporary debates about the suburbs, while maintaining her own difference from what had become a despised class.

4. The suburbs and the pastoral

In *Pastoral* Peter V. Marinelli shows how poets have both adopted the pastoral and adapted it to changing circumstances. Marinelli argues that the pastoral has:

> a capacity to move out of old haunts in Arcadian pastures, and to inhabit the ordinary country landscapes of the modern world, daily contracted by the encroachment of civilisation and as a consequence more precious as a projection of our desires for simplicity ... All that is necessary is that memory and imagination should conspire to render a not too distant past of comparative innocence as more pleasurable than a harsh present[.][85]

Marinelli makes two significant points about the use of pastoral. First, it can be seen as a response to the loss of the countryside. Although he doesn't mention the encroachment of the suburbs this can clearly be included in his category of 'landscapes ... contracted by the encroachment of civilisation' that become the subject for poetry. Secondly, Marinelli argues that a nostalgic recollection is important in that the recent past is imaginatively transformed and seen as innocent.

The ideas that Marinelli identifies are specifically addressed by Smith in an essay entitled 'Syler's Green: a return journey' which was broadcast as a reading by Flora Robson for BBC Radio in 1947. The essay covers significant events in Smith's own life, and is another piece that renames Palmers Green, the suburb in which Smith still lived when she wrote this essay. The 'return journey' is a journey into the recollected past, for the suburb is a memory, a 'dear suburb of my infancy'.[86] A tone of nostalgia and loss dominates this essay, in which the suburb is described as a lost rural idyll, a place of childhood happiness:

> Now the whole of Syler's Green when we first went there was a very beautiful place to live in ... There were fields to play in and shady country lanes, and farmhouses with their cows and the pigs ... It was a long time ago you know, and a ripe September time with the autumn sunshine in the air and the rich smell of acorns and damp mould and the michaelmas daisies ... Of course it wasn't always September or always sunny but that is how one is apt to remember past times, it is always a sunny day. This sunny time of a happy childhood seems like a golden age, a time untouched by war, a dream of innocent quiet happenings, a dream in which people go quietly about their blameless business, bringing their garden marrows to Harvest Festival, believing in God, believing in peace, believing in Progress.[87]

Syler's Green is seen as a 'beautiful place' because it conformed to ideas of the countryside: in those pre-First World War days there were 'fields ... country lanes ... and farmhouses', and in this setting children played and the sun shone. In this extract the countryside in which Smith's childhood was spent is associated with a prevailing innocence. This innocence is not confined to children alone, but is transferred to the adult population who 'go quietly about their blameless business'. This 'golden age' is a time that is 'untouched' by the war that began when Smith was twelve.

Smith's memory of Syler's Green conforms to other ideas by writers of her generation. In his Preface to *New Country: Prose and Poetry by the Authors of New Signatures* published in 1933, Michael Roberts writes in a similar vein that '[t]o me, "pre-war" means only one sunny market-day at Sturminster Newton, the day I boldly bought a goat for 1s9d'.[88] Again, ideas of a remote and idyllic rural place and time filled with sunshine are evoked, but when Roberts goes on to speak for his generation it is clear that he speaks for men alone:

> Sergeants of our school O.T.C.s, admirers of our elder brothers, we grew up under the shadow of war: we have no memory of pre-war prosperity and a settled Europe.[89]

Like Roberts, Smith was born in 1902. Both are therefore of the pre-First World War generation, that which Samuel Hynes calls the Auden generation: 'one generation of writers, the men and women born in England between 1900 and the First World War, who came of age in the 'twenties and lived through their early maturity during the Depression.'[90] Hynes makes the further point that the First World War dominated the lives of those who were children as much as adults:

> Perhaps more so, for the young had no real experience of the Edwardian world before the war; for them, awareness of the real world and awareness of war came at the same time ...It was the first English war to make much of the Home Front and of the role of civilians, including children. At school, boys learned to drill and to march and girls to bandage ... It also meant the absence of fathers and

brothers.[91]

Such ideas are readily found in the extract from Roberts's Preface: his awareness of the world occurs simultaneously with his awareness of the war; the only pre-war memory he has is, daringly, buying a goat. The Great War casts a shadow over the youth of boys who are aware of a military imperative: they admire the older brothers who are old enough to fight, and train in the Officers' Training Corps at school. But this shadow can also be seen to have included boys within ideas of nation, since their drill was to train them and their destiny to fight for their country.

Contrastingly, throughout 'Syler's Green' war is alluded to only briefly. Smith concentrates instead on a pastoral depiction of peace, the peacetime in which she played in her country paradise, the peace in which people believed. Women, however, were what Virginia Woolf called 'outsiders', prohibited from participating in national establishments such as military service[92] and the Officers Training Corps that instilled militarism into boys of her generation. Smith's self-exclusion concurs with Woolf's view that women largely disengage themselves from the ideas of war that marked the male writers of her generation.

Although Smith did not share the inter-war concerns of the masculine Auden generation, she shared with male poets a concern for the encroachment of suburbs on the countryside. I have argued that the desecration of the countryside was a familiar theme in the 1930s, when Smith published her first collection of poems. According to John Carey, many writers in the 1930s had grown up in the old-style green suburbs, which preceded newer developments and were perceived to be rural:

> a concomitant of suburban growth that caused additional dismay in Britain was the spoiling of the suburbs. This was the process by which established and largely green middle-class suburbs were engulfed by new developments, with rows of houses being fitted on to adjacent meadow land ... the ruined childhood

paradise becomes a familiar refrain in writers' biographies and autobiographies.[93]

If 'Syler's Green' is taken as a memoir it can be seen to agree with Carey's assessment. Smith's essay resembles an autobiographical fragment in which the countryside of her childhood is seen as a paradise. The change that was wrought on that paradise came early, as Smith describes:

> And now, if you will please picture my schooldays against a background of new houses sprouting up, of muddy roads, with the drain pipes being laid, of tall brick stacks and curb stones at crazy angles at the roadside.[94]

By this stage in the essay nature is replaced by the manufactured: where once there were fields, flowers and farm animals there are now roads, houses, bricks and curb stones. The sensual evocation of 'rich smells' and 'warm sunshine' is entirely absent. Yet Smith paradoxically defends her suburb as being 'a quiet place that has the appearance of going on being the same really for ever'.[95] This continuity and stability is valued by Smith, writing in 1947, when homelessness and hunger are commonplace in Europe, and 'ruins are your home, and ... persons unrelated to you ... are to direct your lives'.[96]

Orwell's novel, *Coming Up for Air*, was first published in 1939. It precedes 'Syler's Green', but both share the theme of the ruined rural paradise. Orwell's character Bowling, aware that war is about to break out and attempting to find the peace and security of his pre-war childhood, resolves to return to the Thames Valley countryside where he had been happy, certain that he would find 'the beech woods ... and the towpath down by Burford Weir, and the horse-trough in the market-place.'[97] When he gets there he finds that the village is unrecognisable:

> All I could see was an enormous river of brand-new houses which flowed along the valley in both directions and half-way up the hills on either side. Over to the right there were what looked like several acres of bright red roofs all exactly alike ... But where was Lower Binfield? Where was the town I used to know? It might have been anywhere. All I knew was that it was buried somewhere in the middle of that sea of bricks ... It occurred to me that the population of this place (it used to be about two thousand in the old days) must be a good twenty-

> five thousand ... As I looked a fleet of black bombing planes came over the hill and zoomed across the town.[98]

The small village is shown to be lost to the large town which replaced it. The rural scenery has given way to 'a sea of bricks' housing a large new population. The loss is like a death, for the village that Bowling remembers is 'buried' there, and over all hangs the threat of imminent war, foreshadowed by the 'black bombing planes' which become a metaphor for destruction and loss.

In *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The Dangerous Flood of History*, Janet Montefiore argues that writers of the Auden generation, including Orwell:

> invoke the English pastoral tradition in order to mourn its loss. Nothing follows from [Orwell's] story, whose point is simply that the memory is *all* that the writer possesses of life before the Great War. The experience thus becomes a synecdoche for the dispossession of a generation; it explains why young men ... feel they have little or no stake in English tradition.[99]

Although Smith, like other writers of her generation, invoked the pastoral tradition and depicted pre-1914 England as a rural idyll, she does not do so 'in order to mourn its loss'. Not only does Palmers Green have 'the appearance of going on being the same for ever'[100] it retains sufficient rural elements to allow Smith to idealise it, and in this way to transform her environment poetically. Thus the lane 'by that pub between the trees'[101] becomes a magical and mysterious place for the rebirth of leaves. In Smith's writing, the rural idyll, rather than being lost or simply a memory, remains present in her environment. In one poem the suburban street where Smith lived, Avondale Road, becomes a dale called 'Avondale' in which 'the birds ... / Do swoop and swing and call'.[102] Similarly, in 'Syler's Green', Smith's reference to 'the vast deep lake that is in Scapelands Park',[103] transforms the actual Grovelands Park with a name derived from landscapes, and carrying similar connotations of space and natural scenery. However, Grovelands was a house with a garden that was landscaped by Humphrey Repton in

1797,[104] and its lake was man-made. Indeed, Smith argues that beneath the suburb an earlier, uncontaminated emanation of natural forms survives. At the end of 'Syler's Green' she confesses:

> But do you know sometimes in a black-dog moment I wish that the great trees that I remember in my childhood and the even greater trees and the dense forests that were in these parts long before I was born, would come again ... and that once again it could be all forest land and dangerous thickets where only the wolves and the wild boars had their homes. And there in the green depths of Scapelands Lake lay the body of Grendel with her arm torn off. She is mourning her son, the Monster, slain by Beowulf.[105]

Here Smith draws on three versions of the past: the rural environment of her childhood before the First World War, the hunting forests of the twelfth century,[106] and the mythical past. In the latter version Smith draws upon legend and places it within a factual essay about a real and recognisable place. Smith shifts easily from praise for the suburb that has retained the park and lake at Scapelands to an imaginative recreation that locates it within the characters and events in the Anglo-Saxon poem. Smith therefore moves away from the present place and, rather than celebrating her suburb as a place in which the community can live in continuity and security, she wishes for the return of an earlier mythic age. This version differs from Orwell's 'buried' village, since it goes further back in time and imaginatively resurrects the past. Moreover, this strategy effectively depopulates the suburb, removing humanity, including the writer herself, for the past for which she longs did not actually exist, and Beowulf and Grendel are the imaginary products of a legend. However, in so doing, Smith implies a continuity and therefore a survival of nature. Moreover, in placing the characters of the Old English work within the framework of her own environment, she is relating her own work to that of the earlier unknown poet. An English poetic continuity is implied, stretching from *Beowulf* to Smith herself, although this falls short of the masculine interaction with the tradition that was noted in the previous chapter. Smith uses neither the words nor the

form of the original text, and relies on shared knowledge between writer and reader to understand the significance of the allusion.

5. Conclusion

At the beginning of her biography of Smith, Frances Spalding claims that Smith's friends were surprised that 'living with her aunt in Palmers Green [she] could find material for poetry in such restricted circumstances'.[107] This chapter has shown that Smith found material for her poetry partly by engaging with contemporary debates about the suburbs. In allowing those who lived in the suburbs to speak for themselves through her ventriloquy of their voices and attitudes, her very familiarity with the suburbs allows her to engage with some of those debates while also maintaining her own difference from what had become a despised class. But I have also shown that Palmers Green served as an inspiration because it was the location of the memory of her childhood paradise, and retained pockets of countryside which were transformed by her poetic imagination. Smith took the lake in a municipal park and imagined it to have existed in an age of great forests inhabited by wolves, wild boars, monsters and heroes. In 'Suburb' and 'Syler's Green' the rural is shown to be an essential and surviving aspect of the suburbs, particularly Palmers Green. What she likes about the suburbs is the way in which pockets of countryside remain 'in the lane ... where leaves are born again' or are replicated in municipal parks, and in this way Smith shows that the suburban environment, which was deemed unsuitable for literary treatment by Priestley and castigated for mundanity by Orwell, can be rendered valid as a subject for poetry.

By placing elements of *Beowulf* within a constructed and suburban landscape, Smith also creates a link between writing about the suburbs and the literature of the past, validating the former by reference to the latter. This also has the effect of avoiding the problems

posed by the populated area, since Grendel belongs in a time before the 'suburban classes' existed. Similarly, the 'lane ... where leaves are born again' remains unoccupied, even the 'you' who is addressed will not be shown it. This, together with the savage treatment of 'The Suburban Classes', engages with contemporary ideas, such as Orwell's, that it was the class which inhabited the suburbs that was the problem. There is an obvious ambivalence here, for Smith was one of the suburb-dwellers herself. Her texts therefore reveal the ways in which she affiliated herself with the intellectual élite, while the ventriloquised voices of the suburb dwellers, and the act of writing itself, represents the marginalised areas of the despised class and the ex-centric suburban woman writer. In this way her texts offer an intervention into the centrality of male and urban voices.

It will be remembered that Alison Light argued that Smith presents a different version of Englishness, one that resides in the feminine, domestic and suburban and is 'not the Englishness of Grantchester or Adlestrop',[108] therefore not a pastoral version of nation. Yet Smith, as I have shown, is both of the suburbs and different to the suburban classes, rendering her categorisation as a poet of the suburbs, even if those suburbs form a version of nation, problematic. Moreover, Smith's 'lane ... [w]here leaves are born again'[109] *is* both rural and English, therefore similar to Thomas's railway station with its 'willows, willow-herb, and grass'[110] or Brooke's hedge where '[a]n English unofficial rose' [111] blooms. Certainly it is less orthodox than Brooke's or Thomas's versions, since Smith melds the despised suburbs with the rural idyll, yet Smith's pastoralism, as seen in the suburb-writings, approximates the ideas of pastoral Englishness that are present in the poems by Brooke and Thomas. Such similarity enables reassessments of Smith's ex-centricity vis-à-vis ideas of nation, since, as I have argued, images of the rural dominated and continue to dominate ideas of English identity. Even Virginia Woolf, who argued

that ideas of English nationhood excluded women, and claimed that 'as a woman, I have no country'[112] admitted that:

> still some obstinate emotion remains, some love of England dropped into a child's ears by the cawing of rooks in an elm-tree, by the splash of waves on a beach, or by English voices murmuring nursery rhymes.[113]

There are two connected ideas in this sentence: firstly, Woolf betrays a belief that the pastoral is associated with Englishness; and secondly she shows that this version of nation can give rise to feelings of patriotism. This version of Englishness can include women, for even those who are otherwise excluded from national establishments can participate in the pastoral 'cawing of rooks in an elm-tree' and the sound of nursery rhymes spoken in English accents. Smith adopts the pastoral tradition, a central motif in literature and national obsessions, in order to replicate ideas of Englishness that associates national identity with the rural. Ironically, this places the despised suburbs themselves within concepts central to national identity. This, together with the nursery rhymes which, as the next chapter will show, are an inherent part of Smith's work, firmly brings her, albeit in a her own heterodox way, within ideologies of nation.

Notes

1. Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Post-War Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) p. 2.

2. John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (London: Faber,1992) p. 3.

3. Ibid pp. 50-1.

4. Alison Light, 'Outside History? Stevie Smith, Women Poets and National Voice', *English*, 43 (1994) 237-259 (p. 237).

5. Ibid p. 246.

6. Seamus Heaney, 'A Memorable Voice: Stevie Smith', in *In Search of Stevie Smith*, ed. by Sanford Sternlicht (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991) pp. 211-3 (p. 213).

7. Mary Gordon, 'Preface to *Novel on Yellow Paper*', in *In Search of Stevie Smith* pp. 57-61 (p. 57).

8. Calvin Bedient, 'Horace and Modernism' in *In Search of Stevie Smith* pp. 166-168 (p. 166).

9. Romana Huk, 'Eccentric Concentrism: Traditional Poetic Forms and Refracted Discourse in Stevie Smith's Poetry', *Contemporary Literature*, 34 (1993) 240-265 (p. 243).

10. Ibid p. 241.

11. See note 9 above.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Kristin Bluemel, 'The Dangers of Eccentricity: Stevie Smith's Doodles and Poetry', *Mosaic*, 31 (1998) 111-132 (p. 113).

15. Frances Spalding, *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography* (1988; rpt. London: Faber, 1990) p. 181.

16. Ibid p. 246.

17. Ibid p. 264.

18. Laura Severin, *Stevie Smith's Resistant Antics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997) p. 117.

19. Ibid p. 4.

20. Hynes notes that 'the writers [in the Auden set] themselves helped a good deal in identifying the narrowest circle of the group by dedicating their books to each other: Auden dedicated *Paid on Both Sides* to Day Lewis, *Poems* to Isherwood, and *The Orators* to Spender; Day Lewis dedicated his *Poems* to Isherwood; Warner dedicated his *Poems* to Day Lewis; Isherwood's *All the Conspirators* is dedicated to Upward.' Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (1976; rpt. London: Faber, 1979) p. 85.

21. Jack Barbera and William McBrien, *Stevie: A Biography of Stevie Smith* (London: Heinemann, 1985) p. 101.

22. *Me Again: Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith*, ed. by Jack Barbera and William McBrien (London: Virago, 1988) p. 275. As late as 28 April 1953 Smith wrote to Kay Dick: '[t]he PEN is really for sellers, dear not me' indicating that she remained

aware of her ex-centric position. (Washington University Libraries, St Louis, Florence Margaret (Stevie) Smith Papers Correspondence, Box 1 folder 5).

23. Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930s* (1976; rpt. London: Faber, 1979) p. 10.

24. Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) p. 26.

25. See note 4 above.

26. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature,* 5th edn. Ed. by Margaret Drabble (1985; rpt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) p. 914.

27. Hugh Whitemore, *Stevie: A Play* (London: Samuel French, 1977) p. 29.

28. Barbera and McBrien p. 11.

29. David Pam, *A Desirable Neighbourhood: A History of Enfield vol. 3 1914-1939* (Enfield: Enfield Preservation Society, 1994) p. 190.

30. Spalding p. 217.

31. Carey pp. 66-7.

32. Spalding p. 127.

33. Carey p. 69

34. Ibid p. 35.

35. Ibid p. 52.

36. Arthur C. Rankin, *The Poetry of Stevie Smith 'Little Girl Lost'* (Gerards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1985) p. 98.

37. Catherine A. Civello, *Patterns of Ambivalence: The Fiction and Poetry of Stevie Smith* (Columbia: Campden House, 1997) p. 12.

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

39. George Orwell, *Coming Up for Air* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1939) p. 13.

40. Ibid pp. 13-4.

41. See note 31 above.

42. Lynette Hunter, 'Blood and Marmalade: Negotiations between the State and the Domestic in George Orwell's Early Novels', in *Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism and After*, ed. by Keith Williams and Steven Matthews (London: Longman, 1997) pp. 202-216 (p. 202).

43. Ibid p. 211.

44. Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991) p. 78.

45. J.B. Priestley, *English Journey* (London: Heinemann, 1934) p. 401.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid p. 397.

48. Ibid p. 405.

49. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception' in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, tr. by John Cumming (1944; rpt. London: Allen Lane, 1973) pp. 120-167 (p. 120).

50. Ibid p. 133.

51. George Orwell, 'The Lion and the Unicorn' in *Literature in the Modern World* pp. 180-189 (p. 188).

52. Carey p. 44.

53. See note 47.

54. Simon Dentith, 'Thirties Poetry and the Landscape of Suburbia', in *Rewriting the Thirties: Modernism and After*, ed. by Keith Williams and Steven Matthews (London: Longman, 1997) pp. 108-123 (pp. 109-110).

55. Ibid p. 116.

56. Stevie Smith 'A London Suburb' in *Me Again* pp. 100-104. (p. 104).

57. See note 29 above.

58. See note 56 above.

59. Stevie Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper: or Work it Out for Yourself* (1936; rpt. London: Virago, 1993) pp. 233-4.

60. Ibid p. 234.

61. See note 59 above.

62. Anthony King, 'Britons Hold on to Dream of Rural Idyll', *Daily Telegraph,* 28 August 2000, p. 5.

63. Dentith p. 111.

64. Carey p. 50.

65. Ibid p. 46.

66. See note 54 above.

67. Carey pp. 16-17.

68. Stevie Smith, *The Collected Poems,* ed. by James MacGibbon (1975; rpt. London: Penguin, 1985) p. 81.

69. Carey p. 47.

70. Dentith p. 120.

71. *Writing Englishness 1900-1950: An Introductory Sourcebook on National Identity* ed. by Judy Giles and Tim Middleton (London: Routledge, 1995) p. 8.

72. See note 70 above.

73. *The Collected Poems* p. 26.

74. Pam p. 271.

75. See note 50 above.

76. John Betjeman, *Collected Poems,* ed. by The Earl of Birkenhead (London: Murray, 1988) p. 20.

77. Carey p. 22.

78. See note 47 above.

79. Spalding pp. 95-6.

80. Dentith p. 121.

81. *The Collected Poems* p. 65.

82. Pam p. 226.

83. See note 59 above.

84. Barbera and McBrien p. 61.

85. Peter V. Marinelli, *Pastoral* (London: Methuen, 1971) p. 3.

86. Stevie Smith, 'Sylers Green: A Return Journey' in *Me Again* pp. 83-99 (p. 83).

87. Ibid p. 84.

88. *New Country: Prose and Poetry by the Authors of New Signatures,* preface by Michael Roberts (London: Hogarth, 1933) p. 9.

89. Ibid.

90. Hynes p. 9.

91. Ibid pp. 17-18.

92. Virginia Woolf, 'Three Guineas' in *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas* ed. by Morag Shiach (1992; rpt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) pp.153-414 (pp. 309-310). Addressing the possibility of war in 1938 Woolf writes 'the Army Council have no intention of opening recruitment for any women's corps.'

93. Carey pp. 46-7.

94. *Me Again* p. 88.

95. Ibid p. 96.

96. Ibid.

97. Orwell p. 171.

98. Ibid p. 180.

99. Janet Montefiore, *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The Dangerous Flood of History* (London: Routledge, 1966) p. 48.

100. See note 95.

101. See note 68.

102. *Collected Poems* p. 445.

103. *Me Again* p. 97.

104.Steven Daniels, *Humphrey Repton: Landscape Gardening and the Geography of Georgian England* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) p. 263.

105. See note 103.

106. 'Grovelands Park was originally a heavily wooded area close to the southern border of Enfield Chace (a hunting forest formed in the 12th and 13th centuries) up until 1777.' http://www.enfield.gov.uk/parkgrov.htm

107. Spalding p. 1.

108. See note 5.

109. See note 68.

110. *Literature in the Modern World: The Poetry Anthology* ed. by W.R. Owens (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 1991) p. 46.

111. Rupert Brooke, *The Poetical Works* ed. by Geoffrey Keynes (1956; rpt. London: Faber, 1963) p. 67.

112. Woolf p. 313.

113. Ibid.

CHAPTER 3

FEMININE POETICS I: THE INFLUENCE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE AND NURSERY RHYMES

1. Introduction: children's culture, performativity and the carnivalesque

Previous chapters have shown that Smith's poetry was frequently categorised as light verse; both Louis MacNeice[1] and G.M. Stonier[2] called it 'doggerel', while Stonier was reluctant even to consider Smith's work as poetry.[3] Admittedly, the brief and inconsequential verses that Smith wrote throughout her career, such as 'Our Office Cat', published in 1950, can be seen to invite such disapprobation:

> Our Office cat is a happy cat
> She has had two hundred kittens
> And every one has been adopted into happy homes
> By our cat-loving Britons.[4]

Lines like these certainly deserve the label of light verse. Its brevity and straightforward language ensure that it has no meaning other than that which is immediately apparent. However, it should be noted that W.H. Auden also wrote several short and humorous verses printed under the title of 'Shorts' which might come under the same category. Yet these poems did not dent the reputation and eminence that Auden enjoyed. Indeed, Seamus Heaney, writing about the 'Shorts' in *Hibernia* in 1976, argued that '[a] hundred years from now Auden's work will certainly be in permanent and outstanding profile'.[5] Auden's avoidance of accusations of triviality can partly be ascribed to his oeuvre as a whole, which, unlike Smith's, contained epic poems and verse dramas; and in which the less serious poems represent a small part of a large output. More significantly, however, Auden's work was taken seriously because of prevailing literary judgements which, it has been seen, accorded high status to Auden and his group and privileged the male poet over the female.

While it would be difficult to defend 'Our Office Cat' from accusations of triviality, other poems by Smith could be seen to come under the category of light verse because of their similarity to, and derivation from, children's language, literary forms and word games. Martin Pumphrey points out that these forms are allied with play, and as such, the debates which surround seriousness do not apply to them:

> Smith's poetry not only draws on children's culture ... but knowingly exploits the interrogative play signal to challenge conventional literary and cultural frames and unsettle the reader's assumptions about the relationship with the text ... If, on the other hand, the reader pursues the destabilising effects of the question, 'Is this play?' then he / she is forced to consider the nature of the complicity the poems invite and to recognise the ambivalent, carnivalesque quality of their laughter that is at once challenging, self-mocking, and subversive.[6]

According to Bakhtin in his *Rabelais and his World*:

> The present-day analysis of laughter explains it either as purely negative satire ... or else as gay, fanciful, recreational drollery deprived of philosophical content. The important point ... that folk humour is ambivalent, is usually ignored.[7]

As Pumphrey shows, Smith's occasional flippancy, her 'childishness', use of children's literary forms and other oral literatures, 'all signal that her writing is nonserious, verse not poetry, fun not Literature.'[8] There is therefore a danger that her work can be seen as droll, and is thus, as Bakhtin argues in the earlier quote, 'deprived of philosophical content.' However, if her work is seen as ambivalent and approached with the aim of uncovering that which the laughter, play and childishness conceals, her deeper engagement with social and philosophical issues can be found, moreover her subversion of established ideas becomes clear.

Judith Butler's ideas of performativity are also relevant here, since they can go towards explaining Smith's assumption of childishness. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler argues against assumptions made in feminist theory that there is 'some existing identity, understood through the category of women'.[9] According to Butler, gender identities are

not biologically determined but constructed, and the construction of the category of women acts as a reinforcement of the binary view of gender relations:

> In this sense *gender* is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes ... gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be ... There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results.[10]

In Butler's terms, then, there is no fixed identity which can be attributed to gender. Gender is a performance: the traditional femininity assumed by (and expected of) a woman is just as acquired and performative as that which is assumed by a man in drag. This can extend ideas of carnival in that the traditional hierarchies that Bakhtin noted as being undermined during carnival[11] are, in Butler's terms, no more fixed than the carnival performance which replaces them.

The problem with using Butler's theories for a consideration of Smith's work is that Butler is primarily concerned with offering a critique of what she sees as 'a pervasive heterosexual assumption in feminist literary theory'[12] and with questioning the idea that sex produces gender identity which in itself causes desire for the opposite sex. In Butler's terms, this is compulsory heterosexuality. My examination of Smith's work, however, is not concerned with Smith's sexuality, but with her linguistic search and mode of expression. Nor am I concerned with offering a paradigm of sexual relations but with considering how socio-historical circumstances may have led Smith to assume her specific idiosyncratic style. Butler admits, however, that her theory 'waffles between understanding performativity as linguistic and casting it as theatrical ... the speech act is at once performed ... and linguistic, inducing a set of effects through its implied relation to linguistic conventions.'[13] This gives me the justification for extending Butler's ideas so as to consider literary style as an aspect of performance. In these terms, Smith could have chosen to assume a performance of masculinity and adopted the overtly serious

purpose shown in the poetry of the Auden group. This, however, would have openly encroached upon what was perceived to be a masculine field. It will be remembered that MacNeice's only praise for Smith's poetry was that she avoided a 'faked masculinity'.[14] Nor was this masculinist view restricted to the 1930s. Writing in 1961, a quarter of a century after Smith first began to publish poetry, Robert Graves conceded reluctantly that a woman may write poetry, but opined that 'she should write as a woman, not as if she were an honorary man'.[15] In these terms, a woman is doubly disadvantaged: to write is to transgress the code which allots public speech to men, to imitate a masculine style in her writing is, as Graves says, to give 'a false ring'[16] to her work.

Those of Smith's poems which are derived from children's culture certainly do not imitate a masculine style: these poems are apparently innocent in style and content, leading to the much used description *faux-naïve*, and in this sense they appear to offer little challenge, either to the patriarchal appropriation of poetry or to established ideas and conventions. If Butler's ideas on performance are extended so as to see specific types of gender identity as chosen, Smith's choice of language is as much a performative assumption of gendered characteristics as her preferred style of clothing that included childlike pinafore dresses and strap shoes. Both poems and poet are equally unthreatening; neither a girl / child, nor a poem derived from a nursery rhyme, poses a threat to patriarchy. This chapter will therefore examine Smith's derivations from children's language, word games and nursery rhymes, and draw on Bakhtin's ideas of carnival, together with Judith Butler's theories of performance, in order to uncover her engagement with themes that are the prerogative of serious poetry and to see them as part of her subversive poetics.

2. 'The Hound of Ulster': influences and warnings

'The Hound of Ulster' (1937) which opens Smith's first volume of poetry, *A Good Time Was Had By All* as well as *The Collected Poems*, is emblematic of much of her work. In this poem a child is stopped and invited to look inside a 'puppy shop'. A 'courteous stranger' describes the dogs so as to emphasise their appeal and to lure the child into the shop:

> Dogs blue and liver
> Noses aquiver
> Little dogs big dogs
> Dogs for sport and pleasure
> Fat dogs meagre dogs
> Dogs for lap and leisure.
> Do you see that wire-haired terrier?
> Could anything be merrier?[17]

The child, however, wants to know what is half hidden in the 'gray / Cold shadows at the back of the shop', and the answer is given by a different voice which warns him 'do not stop / Come away from the puppy shop.' The stranger's reply reveals that the shop is not, after all, a place of harmless fun for children, because danger lies within: 'For the Hound of Ulster lies tethered there / Cuchulain tethered by his golden hair'.

Three voices can be identified in this poem. The stranger, whose words open the poem, can be identified by his or her prescience to be an adult, yet speaks in a manner modified to the language of a child:

> Little boy
> Will you stop
> And take a look
> In the puppy shop –

In these four short lines which open the poem the language is simple with few words exceeding one syllable, and the description of 'puppy shop' not only suggests that the poem is a verse for children but further identifies the addressee as a child. It is therefore the adult who can be seen to use the language of childhood, and when the little boy

responds to the invitation his speech is formal and correct, with line endings marked by commas. These create mature pauses in contrast to the unstopped enjambements of the first ten lines which are akin to the unpaused rhythmic expressions of children's games and rhymes:

> Thank you courteous stranger, said the child,
> By your words I am beguiled,
> But tell me I pray
> What lurks in the gray
> Cold shadows at the back of the shop?

In the above lines the child uses the elevated language of literary text-based verse: 'By your words I am beguiled, / But tell me I pray'; the adult, however, uses the language of orally transmitted nursery rhymes and popular verse. Smith, then, overturns the convention: it is the child who speaks as an adult, and does so in order to question the dark and hidden; the adult speaks as a child in order to render the contents of the shop harmless.

In 'The Hound of Ulster' the stranger describes the dogs in a piling up of adjectives which emphasises their playfulness: the puppy's noses are 'aquiver', the dogs are for 'sport and pleasure', 'lap and leisure.' These lines, which are quoted fully in the first extract shown above, clearly allude to earlier, canonical poems for children, such as Robert Browning's 'The Pied Piper of Hamelin: A Child's Story':

> Great rats, small rats, lean rats, brawny rats,
> Brown rats, black rats, grey rats, tawny rats,
> Grave old plodders, gay young friskers,
> Fathers, mothers, uncles, cousins,
> Cocking tails and pricking whiskers...[.][18]

In a similar extract from "Goblin Market" Christina Rossetti, like Smith, throws her reader into a sequence of short, metrically irregular lines listing the tempting appeal of the goblin's magical fruit:

> Apples and quinces,

Lemons and oranges,
Plump unpecked cherries,
Melons and raspberries,
Bloom-down-cheeked peaches,
Swart-headed mulberries,
Wild free-born cranberries,
Crab-apples, dewberries,
Pine-apples, blackberries,
Apricots, strawberries...[.][19]

Both 'The Pied Piper' and 'Goblin Market' describe the inherent danger of enchantment and allure. 'The Hound of Ulster', which draws upon the language of children and the genre of children's narrative poetry, alludes to the earlier poems and therefore refers to their shared motif: the puppies which are described are, like the Piper's luring of rats and the goblins' proffered fruit, a preliminary to concealed danger. The 'Dogs for sport and pleasure ... Dogs for lap and leisure' which the stranger describes resemble Smith's poems in that they are apparently harmless and amusing. Lying within this poem, however, is the half-hidden figure of the Hound of Ulster: Cuchulain who is 'tethered there'.

In the Ulster cycle of Irish mythology, recorded from oral tradition between the eighth and eleventh centuries, Cuchulain was a hero who killed a fierce watch-dog, thus earning the name which meant 'the hound of Culain'. It is of greater significance to Smith's poem, however, that Cuchulain was a poet.[20] In Smith's poem Cuchulain, the hound / poet, hides behind the harmless puppies, representing a danger that could be unleashed if he is awakened: 'His eyes are closed and his lips are pale / Hurry little boy he is not for sale.' Furthermore Cuchulain, the Hound of Ulster, can be likened to the poet herself: the allusion to ancient Irish oral literature confirms her identification with the oral tradition through her use of legends, ballads, fairy tales and nursery rhymes, while her use of the trope of Cuchulain establishes her relationship to the poetry genre and poetic traditions. In these terms Smith, like Cuchulain, threatens danger because (as

examination of further poems will show) she poses resistance to and transgression from accepted literary forms and social structures. In this poem Smith assumes the performance of childhood, moving in this poem from the childlike language and simple form of the first four lines to the allusion to canonical children's poetry in the following eight lines. Smith therefore transgresses from the seriousness which marks ideas of the literary and from accepted literary discourse itself. This poem can clearly be interpreted as simply droll. Opening a volume whose title recalls reports of church social events (*A Good Time Was Had By All*) and similarly promising 'a good time', or fun, it does not demand of the reader the serious interpretation that I have given. Under this mask of drollery or, in Bakhtinian terms, carnival, Smith nonetheless warns the attentive reader of this volume of that which underlies the performance in many of her poems: an interrogation of the structures which permeated her society such as religion and defined roles for women.

3. Uncovering influences: nursery rhymes, children's speech and nonsense

'Sooner or later', remarks Mark Storey, 'the reader of Stevie Smith's poetry comes up against the problem of simplicity.'[21] This is a problem, Storey argues, because, unlike Blake and Wordsworth whose 'progression seemed to be a deliberate moving away from its claims and limitations'[22] Smith remained with simplicity, and Storey implies that she, unlike her predecessors, failed to progress. Moreover, Storey suggests that it is 'important to acknowledge' what he calls 'a slightness' about some of Smith's poems.[23] While this is in agreement with other critical assessments that have been noted earlier, Storey does not consider that impressions of 'simplicity' and 'slightness' often derive from Smith's use of children's culture and from her discursive strategy. Indeed, Storey ignores the clear allusion in 'Heber' (1937) to the nursery rhyme which begins 'I love little pussy'. A comparison of the first two lines of 'Heber' with the version of the

nursery rhyme given in *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* reveals the derivation of Smith's poem:

> I love little Heber
> His coat is so warm[24]
>
> I love little pussy,
> Her coat is so warm...[.][25]

The metre and language of the first two lines of Smith's poem are clearly taken from the nursery rhyme, but with a change of gender: the cat in the nursery rhyme is gendered female while Heber who, as Storey remarks, has an 'indeterminate nature ... hovering between the human and the animal'[26] is male. The fourth line in the first stanza similarly repeats the nursery rhyme with changed gender: 'He'll do me no harm' rather than the 'she'll do me no harm' of the original. As the preceding quotations show, Smith's poem is largely unpunctuated, whereas the traditional rhyme is end-stopped. This reflects different concerns: whereas Smith's version resembles the unstopped and un-paused sound of spoken verse, Iona and Peter Opie's version in *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* traces what was essentially an orally transmitted rhyme to its printed sources. The printed version of 'I love little pussy' in *The Oxford Dictionary* is taken from a chapbook printed in London not later than 1845, and the Boston *Only True Mother Goose* of around 1843. However, as Iona and Peter Opie point out, the original source is unconfirmed. While it is attributed to Jane Taylor (1783-1824) it is not found in the verse collections of her and her sister.[27] Smith's adoption and adaptation, then, can be seen as an act of association with an orally derived and transmitted literary form, and her revision, with its minimal use of punctuation, emphasises the inherent orality of the genre.

There are few critical analyses of 'Heber', however Mark Storey does engage with this poem in order to argue that it is derived from Blake's 'The Chimney Sweeper':

> ... the Blakean echoes are obviously deliberate, and the paradox is that such echoes point up the distance between Blake's world of Innocence and Stevie Smith's world of Experience. In 'Heber' Stevie Smith takes up the implicit challenge of Blake's "Chimney Sweeper" in *Songs of Innocence*, which has worried readers with its apparently naïve and simplistic morality.[28]

Storey bases this argument on the rhyming of 'warm' and 'harm' in the first stanza of 'Heber', which he considers to be derived from the last couplet of Blake's 'The Chimney Sweeper':

> Tho' the morning was cold, Tom was happy and warm;
> So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.[29]

While Smith certainly derived much inspiration from Blake, as the following chapter will show, Storey's remarks overlook the important and obvious derivation from the nursery rhyme which similarly rhymes 'warm' and 'harm'. Moreover he bases his comments on a misreading of Blake's poem. The 'naïve and simplistic morality' is that of the child who narrates the poem. P.H. Butter glosses the lines thus:

> The conventional moral is the boy's, not the poet's ... Tom can be happy because he still has the capacity for vision, not because he does his duty in the sense the older boy may intend.[30]

The child who speaks in the poem is also clearly alluding to a conventional Christian aphorism and thereby pointing to the absurdity of 'mind forg'd manacles',[31] the socially structured manifestations of religion which allows such harm to come to children. In these terms, then, the lines are ironic, and offer no 'implicit challenge' for Smith to take up.

In the second stanza 'He'll stay by my side' is clearly drawn from the line 'She'll sit by my side' in the nursery rhyme. But, as Mark Storey argues, this also echoes 'But stay by my side' in 'Away in a Manger'.[32] This also affirms the closeness of the poem to children's culture, since it is a carol for young and usually pre-literate children. Moreover, Heber will:

...sit by my window
And stare in the street
And pull up a hassock for the comfort of his feet.

The extended line which ends the first stanza is surprising and unsettling: the metre changes, and Heber, who was apparently a pet like the original 'little pussy', assumes human characteristics in order to 'pull up a hassock', an item of furniture usually found in churches, although this hassock is not to be knelt on for prayer as one might expect.

In 'Heber' attributes of the pet of 'I love little pussy' are transposed: this pet doesn't repay care and kindness with loyalty. Instead the narrator's silence is found to be necessary and is imposed as a condition of Heber's loyalty and passivity, so that '... if I don't speak to him / He'll stay by my side.' A poet's role, however, is to speak rather than to remain silent, and the speaker finds that the imposed silence brings unbearable anxiety: 'But oh in this silence / I find but suspense'. The impulse to speak is uncontrollable, but can only bring alienation and a cry of pain: 'I must speak have spoken have driven him hence.' In this line which ends the poem the tenses are conflated to indicate the immediacy of the act of speaking, the realisation that [s]he has spoken, and the consequences of speaking, which is separation from Heber, or what he represents.

It is significant that Smith appears to have chosen the name of the subject of this poem from *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, with which she was familiar.[33] Reginald Heber (1783-1826) was a writer of hymns, including 'Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!'[34] It is of interest, too, that Smith later gave the name to Uncle Heber in *The Holiday*, who is a priest. The religious connotations of the name lend weight to the reference to a 'hassock' in the first stanza so that Heber can be seen to represent religion, or religious authority.

Smith's relationship with religion was problematic. The heavily autobiographical character of Pompey in *Novel on Yellow Paper* states that 'I am not a Christian actively. I mean I am actively not a Christian',[35] however Smith remained deeply involved with the Christian religion. References to the Bible, psalms and *Hymns Ancient and Modern* pervade her work. Her reviews of theological texts, together with a further review of *The New English Bible* in 1970, give evidence for a thorough knowledge of the Bible and the prayer book as well doctrinal debates. This suggests that she could not abandon the religion in which she had been brought up, although she constantly questioned matters of dogma. Her own definition: 'I'm a backslider as a non-believer'[36] neatly encapsulates her vacillation between belief and unbelief, suggesting that she constantly returned to the religion that she criticised. However, Father Gerard Irvine, a friend of Smith's, remarked that '[i]n her at any given moment ... faith and rejection coexisted ... at one and the same time. One might say that she was a believer who did not much like the God revealed by her faith.'[37] 'Heber', with its allusions to religion and the church, therefore addresses Smith's questioning attitude to religion. The speaker can retain a relationship with God only for as long as [s]he retains a quiet and unquestioning passivity akin to Blake's chimney-sweep. To speak, that is to question or protest, or, indeed, to expose the irony in Blake's closing line, is to break the fragility of faith, lose the object of that faith, and suffer alienation as a result.

Smith later used the language of children to question religion in 'Our Bog is Dood' (1950), however, so successfully does she conceal meaning through her representation of children's speech that interpretation can be evasive. In this poem the children, who are questioned by the narrator of the poem, mispronounce the phrase that they hear repeatedly without comprehending its meaning: 'Our Bog is Dood, our Bog is

Dood, / They lisped in accents mild'.[38] When the speaker asks 'How do you know your Bog is dood' the children 'grew a little wild' but assure the questioner that 'We know because we wish it so ... And if you do not think it so / You shall be crucified.' They go on to repeat Christian pieties zealously, showing their conviction that 'Our Bog is ours / And we are wholly his', yet their transliteration of 'our God is good' into 'our Bog is dood' exposes the central tenet to be meaningless to those who accept without understanding. The children also represent the contradictory sectarian schisms within Christianity: 'For what was dood, and what their Bog / They never could agree.'

The reader who approaches 'Our Bog is dood' for the first time might assume that this is nonsense verse, akin to Lewis Carroll's 'Jaberwocky' with its opening lines of 'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves / Did gyre and gimble in the wabe'.[39] Both poets use apparently invented and meaningless words, such as 'Bog', 'dood', 'brillig' and 'slithy'; together with the familiar and grammatically used 'is', 'and the', and 'in the'. In her study of nonsense, Susan Stewart points out that:

> Nonsense poetry takes the traditional division between content and form (technique), with its hierarchical weighing of content *over* form, and inverts statuses to present form over content. The nonsense verse of Lear, Carroll, and Morgenstern is not properly *ungrammatical.* Nonsense results from the juxtaposition of incongruities, from the preservation of form at the expense of content. The result is a dispersal of any univocal meaning.[40]

In these terms 'Our Bog is Dood' cannot be seen to be nonsense poetry. In Carroll's poem the entire content is nonsense, whereas in Smith's poem a majority of the content is, in Stewart's terms, 'common sense',[41] that is, ordered and coherent. It is only the contentious phrase, that which gives the poem its title, which is, or appears to be, nonsense. In this phrase, the consonants in 'bog', and the vowels in 'dood', stand in for other, more expected consonants and vowels. This deliberately obscures the

meaning. Indeed, Catherine A. Civello argues that in this poem the speaker 'notices a group of distraught children and enquires about their dead dog.'[42] This interpretation may result from attempting to read the phrase in terms of more familiar nonsense ploys, such as inversions and reversals of phonemes and morphemes.[43] Thus Civello assumes that 'Bog' represents 'dog' and 'dood' represents 'dead'.

If approaching Smith's poem as nonsense verse presents problems, then, it is better to approach it as a rebus which, as Jane Gallop argues:

> looks like nonsense but, when separated into elements and interpreted, yields sense; it is a sort of writing that cannot be read and yet which becomes intelligible through painstaking interpretation, through another sort of reading.[44]

In my interpretation of Smith's rebus, the significant capitalisation of 'Bog' is the clue to meaning, suggesting that it represents 'God'; 'dood', which can be understood as a childishly lisped 'good' therefore completes the aphorism. However, Civello's reading of the poem confirms Jacqueline Rose's argument that such replication of children's language:

> cannot simply be read, and ... challenges our own. It breaks up the page and demands a special type of attention, inserting its difficulty into the otherwise perfect communication between the adult and the child.[45]

The 'I' in Smith's poem, who addresses the children as 'darling little ones', is adult, yet there is no difficulty in communication between the narrator and the children; rather, Smith's linguistic play on the page impedes communication between poet and reader. Rose argues that such linguistic play on the part of the adult author is the 'other side of language' which poses 'an explicit challenge or threat to adult forms of speech.'[46] In the case of Smith's poem the adult reader is challenged by the carnivalesque linguistic play; if the reader takes it beyond play, however, the challenge to and manipulation of established social values, and the recreation of other ideas, is discovered.

Although 'Heber' was closely adapted from a nursery rhyme, other poems merely contain echoes. 'The True Tyrant or The Spirit of Duty Rebuked' (1962) uses neither the rhyme scheme nor the metre of nursery rhymes, but the opening two lines rely on the reader's familiarity with the genre:

> Oh my darling Goosey-Gander
> Why do you always wish to wander
> Evermore, evermore?[47]

The reader's knowledge of the original 'Goosey, goosey gander, / Whither shall I wander?'[48] is assumed, however, in order for his or her expectations to be overturned. This Goosey-Gander is not the male goose which is implied by 'gander' but a female human, described as 'the lady' in the third stanza, who wishes to wander but is prevented from doing so by the speaker of the first two stanzas:

> Now I have you safe at home
> I will never let you roam
> Ever more.

In the third stanza the lady answers, however Smith eschews the punctuation that would indicate a different speaker, thus playing down elements of printed and written discourse in order to incur an aural response to the unmediated recreation of spoken voices:

> Then cried the lady from her kitchen
> Standing in her chains of grass:
> It is not Duty, it is love
> That will not let me pass
> Evermore, evermore
> Through the grass-enchainèd door, the grassy door.

This poem was first published in 1962, therefore before the impact of the women's movement, and at a time, as Kate Millett argued in 1970, that '[w]hat goes largely unexamined, often even unacknowledged ... in our social order, is the birthright whereby males rule females.'[49] The woman answers 'from her kitchen', the room in the house

which can be seen in the context of socially defined gender roles to be the focus of a woman's domestic duty, the location of cooking, dishwashing and laundry. The woman apparently wishes to escape from her domestic prison, and the first speaker might be seen as the Tyrant of the title who keeps her there. Yet the domestic chains are merely grass, adorning the doorway like the undergrowth surrounding the sleeping beauty in the fairy tale, the conjunction of words and the stressed last syllable in 'grass-enchainèd' lending a note of a medieval ballad. The woman is a heroine in a legend or fairy story, then. She is imprisoned by intangible love rather than the manacles of duty: the chains which detain her can be broken.

Anticipating Millett's argument by some thirty years, Smith explicitly criticised the submissive role of women in *The Holiday*, first published in 1936:

> How can you keep it up, Maria? I ask the women friends, I think you are absolutely marvellous to keep on thinking about them and listening to them and having the children and keeping the house going on turning round the men ... how martyr-like wonderful it is ... But most women, especially in the lower and lower-middle classes, are conditioned early to having 'father' the centre of the home-life, with father's chair, and father's dinner, and father's *Times* and father says, so they are not brought up like me to be this wicked selfish creature, to have no boring old father-talk, to have no papa at all that one attends to ...[.][50]

The reference to *The Times* is perhaps a solecism, for it is unlikely that the 'lower' and 'lower-middle' classes would take *The Times*. However, the strongly autobiographical sentiment is unarguable: Smith, whose father left the family when the author was three,[51] and who was brought up by her mother and aunt, had avoided such conditioning. The irony in the opening sentences should not be overlooked: Smith, speaking as Celia in the novel, does not think her women friends are 'absolutely marvellous', rather that they are 'martyr-like'.

Arthur C. Rankin believes that 'The True Tyrant or The Spirit of Duty Rebuked' addresses Smith's religious concerns. Identifying those of Smith's poems which can

be seen to be 'challenging and ridiculing the codified moralism of Christian orthodoxy,'[52] Rankin argues that this poem 'sets the seal on her liberation in replacing the moralistic judgement with love.'[53] This reading can usefully further a consideration of Smith's relationship with religious faith, but, like Mark Storey's assessment of 'Heber', Rankin's interpretation overlooks the significance of the poem's derivation from a nursery rhyme, and may ignore another meaning indicated by the central metaphor which conflates the woman with a goose, albeit with the gender transposed. Indeed, the similarity of the word 'gander' to 'gender' cannot be overlooked. According to Roman Jakobson, 'the poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection to the axis of combination.'[54] In poetry we make associations with other rhythmically, visually or aurally similar words. 'Gander' therefore alerts us to the equivalence of 'gender' by its phonetic similarity and the visual pattern of letters. The subject is a goose, but unlike the original goosey gander who is male and free to wander, this goose is female and deprived of her freedom. To call a person a goose is also to indicate his or her foolishness or stupidity. It may be 'Love' rather than 'Duty' to the marital bond that keeps her from wandering, but the poetic voice expresses disapprobation of the sacrifice by the central metaphor. In this reading the true tyrant can be seen to be the social conditioning which makes a woman's love and sense of duty lead to a role of submission and domestic sacrifice.

4. Subversion and the feminine

In his work on Rabelais, Bakhtin sought to explain Rabelais' 'nonliterary nature, that is, the nonconformity of his images to the literary norms and canons'.[55] Bakhtin therefore approached Rabelais through the medium of carnival:

> carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges,

> norms and prohibitions ... it was hostile to all that was immortalised and completed ... Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people ... the entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity ... this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives.[56]

While Smith cannot entirely be seen in the context of carnival folk humour, ideas of carnival are useful in a consideration of her work because her use of nursery rhymes and children's linguistics is in opposition to established literary norms and ideas of the canon: children's language, rhymes and games are demotic, they are 'of all the people'. Smith's laughter mocks and derides, while suggesting possibilities of change. Moreover, as a woman poet who used children's language and culture at a time when male poets and poetics dominated the literary scene, her work represents a suspension of the normal masculine / adult hierarchy, giving voice to the otherwise powerless woman / child.

Her use of children's language and literary forms can therefore be seen, in Judith Butler's terms, as performative:

> Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.[57]

Smith's adoption of the image, linguistics, and literary genres of a child are 'manufactured' through discourse and the identity which she fabricated. This is strategic. Poems written (and, indeed, literally performed, as Smith did in the 1960s) in this vein can be dismissed as harmless, amusing, and essentially innocent. The innocence, however, is deceptive and, like the puppies in 'The Hound of Ulster', serves to conceal something more threatening: a critique of established social norms. Thus 'Our Bog is Dood' attacks those whose insincere piety and lip service to the Christian faith is exposed by the children's misunderstanding and consequent transposition of the familiar

devotional phrase. The poem's closing wish that the sea 'soon should drown them all' is vicious only in as much as we understand the central metaphor to stand for Christianity, but the poem's linguistic ambiguity – what is the Bog? And what does 'dood' mean? – conceals the bite. The targets in 'Heber' are those who prevent the questioning of doctrine, therefore the seeking after truth, which results in separation.

The poems which have been discussed continue to place emphasis on the oral participation which is implicit in dialogue and in the reproduction of the linguistic forms of childhood. Throughout this discussion I have made reference to the printed form of specific nursery rhymes; the authority of the printed text, however, should not privilege the printed form over orality since nursery rhymes owe their survival to oral transmission. According to Iona and Peter Opie:

> An oft-doubted fact attested by the study of nursery rhymes is the vitality of the oral tradition. This vitality is particularly noticeable where children are concerned, for, as Jane Austen shows in *Emma*, and as V.Sackville-West has put it, children say 'tell it again, tell it just the same', and will tenaciously correct the teller who varies in the slightest particular from the oral recital ... The infrequency with which the rhymes were recorded before the nineteenth century establishes that the written word can have had very little to do with their survival ... a rhyme [does not] necessarily cease to be passed on by word of mouth when it is written down.[58]

That the oral transmission was predominately female is confirmed by Felix Summerly, who prefaced his collection of *Traditional Nursery Songs of England*, published in 1843, with the following dedication:

> It is to mothers, sisters, kind-hearted aunts and *even fathers* ... and to all having the charge of young children ... that I offer the first part of a collection of Traditional Nursery Songs.[59] [my italics]

The composition of nursery rhymes can be further related to other oral traditions. Iona and Peter Opie point out that 'a majority of nursery rhymes were not in the first place composed for children ... they are fragments of ballads or folk songs'[60] and remnants of other aspects of oral culture. Their transmission, as the earlier quotation from *The*

Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes shows, owes little to printed sources: a mother will resort to a nursery rhyme remembered from her own childhood to soothe and amuse her child without thinking about its origin. This also points to the significance of nursery rhymes in the linguistic development of the young child, and the role of the physical mother in language acquisition.

In Smith's work, then, we see the influence of oral traditions which are associated with the domestic and the feminine. This is an appropriate strategy since it is an area that offers no overt threat to patriarchy. The nursery rhyme poems, like nursery rhymes themselves, apparently amuse; like nursery rhymes they have the characteristics of children's literature that Roderick McGillis identifies as 'brevity ... bounce, and ... bumptious fun'.[61] However, McGillis goes on to say that, in nursery rhymes, '[n]othing complicated lurks between the lines; nothing polysemous calls out to us ...[.]'[62] In Smith's case, complication does lurk between the lines, and many meanings call out to us, however Smith's carnivalesque laughter conceals these meanings that are not intended to soothe. To categorise these poems as light verse, therefore, is to be insensitive to the ways in which their forms and influences mask the meanings, emotions and ideas that the poems seek to convey. When these meanings are uncovered Smith's work can be rehabilitated from categorisations of light, or nonserious poetry.

Notes

1. Louis MacNeice, 'A Brilliant Puritan', *Listener,* 20 (1938) viii.
2. G.M. Stonier, 'The Music Goes Round and Round', *New Statesman and Nation* (13) (1937) 641-642 (p. 642).
3. See my discussion of Stonier's review on pages 37 – 38.
4. Stevie Smith, *The Collected Poems*, ed. by James MacGibbon (1975; rpt. London: Penguin, 1985) p. 279.

5. Seamus Heaney, 'Shorts', in *W.H. Auden: The Critical Heritage,* ed. by John Haffenden (London: Routledge, 1983) pp. 493-6 (p. 496).

6. Martin Pumphrey, 'Play, Fantasy and Strange Laughter: Stevie Smith's Uncomfortable Poetry', in *In Search of Stevie Smith,* ed. by Sanford Sternlicht (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991) pp. 97 - 113 (p. 100).

7. M.M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, tr. by Hélène Iswolsky. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) p. 12.

8. See note 6 above.

9. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990; rpt. London: Routledge, 1999) p. 3.

10. Ibid p. 33.

11. Bakhtin p. 10.

12. Butler p. vii.

13. Ibid p. xxv.

14. Louis MacNeice, 'A Brilliant Puritan', *Listener*, 20 (1938) viii.

15. Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth.* Amended and enlarged edition. (London: Faber, 1961) p. 446.

16. Ibid.

17. Stevie Smith, *Collected Poems,* p. 15.

18. Robert Browning, *Poetical Works 1883-1864*, ed. by Ian Jack (London: Oxford University Press, 1970) p. 405.

19. Christina Rossetti, *Poems and Prose* ed. by Jan March (London: Everyman, 1994) p. 162.

20. Graves p. 450.

21. Mark Storey, 'Why Stevie Smith Matters', in *In Search of Stevie Smith,* pp. 175-195 (p. 178).

22. Ibid p. 179.

23. Ibid p. 182.

24. Smith, *The Collected Poems*, p. 20.

25. *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* ed. by. Iona and Peter Opie (1951; rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1952) p. 356.

26. Storey p. 183.

27. See note 25 above.

28. See note 26 above.

29. William Blake, *Selected Poems* ed. by P.H. Butter (1982; rpt. London: Dent, 1989) p. 15.

30. Ibid p. 200.

31. 'London', ibid p. 36.

32. See note 26 above.

33. Frances Spalding, *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography* (1988; rpt. London: Faber, 1990) p. 12.

34. *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, new standard ed. (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1994) no. 95.

35. Stevie Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper: or Work it Out for Yourself* (1936; rpt. London: Virago, 1993) p. 38.

36. *Me Again: The Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith,* ed. by Jack Barbera and William McBrien (1981; rpt. London: Virago, 1988) p. 8.

37. Jack Barbera and William McBrien, *Stevie: A Biography of Stevie Smith* (London: Heinemann, 1985) p. 299.

38. Smith, *The Collected Poems* p. 265.

39. *The Albatross Book of Living Verse: English and American Poetry from the Thirteenth Century to the Present Day,* ed. by Louis Untermeyer (London: Collins, n.d.) p. 466.

40. Susan Stewart, *Nonsense: Aspects of Intertextuality in Folklore and Literature* (London: Johns Hopkins, 1978) p. 76.

41. Ibid p. vii.

42. Catherine A. Civello, *Patterns of Ambivalence: The Fiction and Poetry of Stevie Smith* (Columbia: Camden House, 1997) p. 32.

43. Stewart pp. 68-9.

44. Jane Gallop, *Reading Lacan* (London: Cornell UP, 1985) p. 36.

45. Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan: or, The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1984) p. 40.

46. Ibid p. 41.

47. Smith, *The Collected Poems* p. 419.

48. *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* p. 191.

49. Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (1970; rpt. New York: Virago, 1977) p. 25.

50. Stevie Smith, *The Holiday* (1936; rpt. London: Virago, 1993) p. 28.

51. Spalding p. 7.

52. Arthur C. Rankin, *The Poetry of Stevie Smith: 'Little Girl Lost'* (Gerards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1985) p. 35.

53. Ibid p. 36.

54. Roman Jakobson, 'Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics' in *Style in Language* ed. by Thomas A. Seboek (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1960) p. 358.

55. Bakhtin p. 2.

56. Ibid p. 10 - 12.

57. Butler p. 173.

58. *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* pp. 8 - 9.

59. *The Home Treasury: Traditional Nursery Songs of England* ed. by Felix Summerly (London: Joseph Cundall, 1843) p. iiv.

60. *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* p. 3.

61. Roderick McGillis, *The Nimble Reader: Literary Theory and Children's Literature* (London: Twayne, 1996) p. 1.

62. Ibid.

CHAPTER 4

FEMININE POETICS I: INTERIORITY, INNOCENCE, CREATIVITY AND THE INFLUENCE OF BLAKE AND WORDSWORTH

1. Introduction: interiority and the relevance of children and childhood

The previous chapter has shown that children's language and literary forms are an important part of Smith's poetics, acting as a performative strategy which offered no overt threat to patriarchy during the misogynist decade of the 1930s. Moreover, this performance continued to grant her an unthreatening visibility in the 1960s when she enjoyed popularity as a performance poet. However, while her literal performance and her performative use of children's linguistic and literary forms were certainly strategic, Smith also drew upon the related themes of children and childhood in poems and prose works that are otherwise unconnected with children's literary forms. Examination of these works will reveal that Smith's performance was so deeply imbued with the idea of childhood as to affect her sense of self. In this chapter I will therefore extend the argument of the previous chapter and examine her use of the themes of children and childhood. This will involve a discussion of Romantic ideas of childhood innocence and poetic creativity, together with the influence of specific Romantic poetry.

Catherine A. Civello argues that Smith uses children metaphorically, in order to:

> represent something transitory in her scheme; they 'must be burnt away'. Her poems reinforce this idea with their many portraits of cruel children and cruelty towards children.
>
> Animals, on the other hand, have a more permanent place in Smith's world. If children need to 'grow up' into 'something that seems cold to us,' caged animals fulfil that role ... Using 'the children-idea' to signify youth and animals to represent adulthood, the poet takes the next logical step: she devalues children and elevates animal life[.][1]

It is true that Smith's work contains 'many portraits of cruel children and cruelty towards children', but to argue that children represent 'something transitory in the scheme' is to

overlook her indebtedness to children. More crucially, I will show that the persona of the child is central to her understanding of herself. Smith does devalue children, but it is because she does not see them as being any different from her own adult self. She does not, therefore, romanticise them, believing them instead to be as cruel and as capable of cruelty as adults.

Civello's argument is based on her reading of Smith's essay, 'At School' (1966), from which the quotations in the above extract are taken. Indeed, it appears to be based upon a misreading:

> Those who teach [children] are 'patient'. And one knows it will take a long time. The idea is also this: that human affections and passions, likes and dislikes, are 'young ... and all this must be burnt away, taught and learned away, before the child can 'grow up'.[2]

While Smith's inverted commas indicate her representation of teachers' speech rather than her own, the entire passage refers to the view of those who teach children. That which is 'burnt away', in their view, is that which is childlike. Civello also does not take into account Smith's obvious affinity with childhood and her discomfort with the idea of adulthood: '[w]hat are they supposed to grow up into? Ah that is a mystery – something that seems cold to us, cold with more than a touch of death.'[3] By using the term 'us' to indicate children in the latter sentence, Smith clearly indicates her own identification with children, and reveals a belief that adulthood is a 'mystery' to her, as well as uncongenial since it is 'cold', indeed, Smith's repetition of 'cold' emphasises her repugnance.

In *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority 1790-1930* (1995) Carolyn Steedman argues that since the late eighteenth century the body of technical knowledge about childhood, including Freudian ideas about the influence of childhood continuing in the adult mind, has led to a perception of the adult interior self as the

product of its own childhood, or what Steedman calls 'the idea of the lost child within us all.'[4] Steedman uses the term 'interiority' to denote the 'interiorised subjectivity, a sense of the self *within*'.[5] Thus adults, particularly through the medium of literary texts, have used childhood as a means of understanding and expressing the interiorised self:

> Real children (children observed, children described, children remembered by the adults they became) fuelled the imaginative constructs[.][6]

The idea of childhood, when it acts as inspiration for cultural forms, provides a means of individual and collective understanding: the reader of poems or prose which depict a child can empathise with the common experience of childhood which relates to the writer's interiorised identity. Steedman's work therefore offers a lens through which to analyse and explain Smith's use of the themes of children and childhood in her poetry and prose.

Steedman clarifies that 'the imagination under discussion here is that of the adult ... the adult beliefs, desires and fantasies that are expressed in the figure of the child.'[7] Smith takes this further. While she draws upon the idea of childhood and the figure of the child, this chapter will show that her sense of personal identity merged with that of the child she had been. In this she differs from the Romantic writers, for example, who, as Steedman argues, created a self by 'little portions of the past [which] readily assumed the shape of the child when reverie and memory restored them to the adult.'[8] Rather than remembering the child she had been, Smith continued to regard herself as a child, so that in referring to children as 'us' in 'At School'[9] she reveals her interiorised identity to be that of a child. This idea can be extended to Smith's use of children's culture, and to her performance of childhood: children's literary forms are therefore not merely influences but connected with her understanding of herself; and her child-like performance is an expression of the underlying, interiorised subject.

While Smith differed from the Romantic writers in her identification with children, she was influenced by Romanticism, as several critics point out. Mark Storey sees in Smith's poems 'the simple directness of Blake as he appears in the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*' together with a 'tradition of hymn and song'[10] which is similarly employed by Blake. There is an obvious connection here, for what Storey calls the 'simple directness'[11] of both poets surely derives from the fact that both poets made use of children's literature, in Blake's case the aforementioned eighteenth-century hymns and songs for children. Catherine A. Civello refers to 'echoes'[12] of Blake and Wordsworth in Smith's work, while Romana Huk also chooses to describe the references to Blake's poems in Smith's work as 'echoes'.[13] Echoes, however, are merely repetitions or near quotations of lines and phrases from the original works, and this can, indeed, be seen in the title of Smith's poem, 'Intimation of Immortality'. However, as this chapter will show, 'Little Boy Sick' goes beyond a mere echoing of Blake's original poem or poems; it engages with ideas such as childhood, innocence and religion in ways that revise the original. What is at issue here is Smith's relationship with the canon, her awareness that poets should work with a knowledge of the tradition that precedes them, and her ambivalence as regards her place in that tradition.

Comparisons between Smith and the work of Blake and Wordsworth are also called for because of the ways in which the three poets use the subject of children and childhood in their work, however the Romantic poets linked the topic of childhood with innocence, that is, possessing simplicity and being without sin or guile. This belief was not, of course, restricted to poetics and can be found in social ideas. Indeed, Chris Jenks argues that:

> four contributory themes ... during the last three centuries, have shaped a particular vision of what childhood is: (i) that the child is set apart temporarily as different, through the calculation of age; (ii) that the child is deemed to have a

> special nature, determined by Nature; (iii) that the child is innocent; and (iv) therefore is vulnerably dependent.[14]

It should be clarified that ideas of childhood innocence were not held by everyone in the eighteenth century: the Puritan, and later Evangelical, emphasis on original sin remained. Nonetheless, a recognition both of childhood as a discrete entity and of specific qualities of childhood, such as purity and virtue, emerged at this time. This soon became elevated in the Romantic imagination to what Robert Rosenblum describes as 'Blake-like realms of heavenly, quasi-religious innocence'.[15] According to J.R. de J. Jackson:

> In the latter part of the eighteenth century ... the force of Christ's admonition, "Except ye ... become as little children, ye shall not enter the kingdom of heaven", began to seem less figurative than before. What had been merely a recommendation of innocence, receptiveness and obedience, came to be taken for a general recommendation of the childlike.[16]

Those qualities that were perceived to be childlike were therefore elevated from the earthly into the mystical and philosophical realm, so that the child is offered as a teacher as well as an exemplar. Moreover, childhood became associated with poetic creativity.[17] This cluster of ideas can be seen, for example, in Wordsworth's 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality' which associates poetic vision with the early vision and innocence of the child; and in the 'Introduction' to Blake's *Songs of Innocence* in which a child commands the poet to 'sit thee down to write'.[18]

Children and children's literary forms are essential for Smith's creativity, indeed she is in some ways coming from Romanticism in her celebration of the childlike. However, she differs from her Romantic predecessors in the way she uses the idea of childhood and in her attitudes towards innocence and creativity. The following pages will therefore consider the relations between Smith and Blake and Smith and Wordsworth and look at the 'echoes' of the earlier poets. This discussion will bring out Smith's indebtedness to Blake's own precursor, Isaac Watts. I will also examine Smith's portraits of cruel

children as part of an investigation into her attitudes towards children, and their part in her interiorised identity and performance of childhood. I will show that her perverse attitude towards children can be explained as being due to her identification with children, indeed, this identification leads to feelings of rivalry towards them. Additionally, my reading of Smith's influences will also include considering her ambivalent relationship with the canon.

2 'Little Boy Sick': children and innocence

In Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794) 'The Lamb' is used as a symbol of innocence, one that is created by a gentle and benevolent God of love, while 'The Tyger' is seen to be an aspect of God's strength and power. Smith, however, begins 'Little Boy Sick' (1938) with a negation: 'I am not God's little lamb / I am God's sick tiger.'[19] The speaker of the poem thus refers to the earlier poems while denying that he is either the innocent lamb or the bright and burning Tyger, indeed, in Smith's poem it is God who is 'shining bright', in a re-working of Blake's lines. Other poems in Blake's *Songs* are also alluded to in the title of 'Little Boy Sick': 'The Sick Rose' and 'The Little Boy Lost'. In 'The Sick Rose' a rose is destroyed from within by 'an invisible worm'[20], thus suggesting that the sickness in Smith's poem is an annihilating force rather than illness. 'The Little Boy Lost' appears in both *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*, although the definite article is changed in the *Experience* version so that 'The' specific little boy of the former becomes 'A' non-specific little boy in the latter. In the *Innocence* version of 'The Little Boy Lost', Blake describes the attempt by the child of the title to catch up with his father who eludes him by walking too quickly. Soon the father is not there and the child is lost. If the father represents God (the Father), this poem therefore refers to alienation from God. Smith's conscious reference to the earlier poems in the title of 'Little Boy Sick' thus invites interpretation by comparison with Blake's original

texts: the tiger, which is a metaphor for the little boy of the title, is sick because he is separated from God, who created the strength, beauty and vigour of Blake's Tyger. Moreover, he is sick because he is not innocent: he is 'not God's little lamb'.

In 'Little Boy Sick' the third, fourth and fifth lines lead the reader into expecting the kind of simplistic rhyming scheme that is familiar from her nursery rhyme poems:

> And I prowl about at night
> And what most I love I bite
> And upon the jungle grass I slink[.]

The repeated 'And' opening each line, together with the straightforward, mainly one syllable words and rhyming couplets (the sixth line rhymes 'stink' with the 'slink' of line five) are reminiscent of children's verses, and similarly carry connotations of innocence and play. With the sixth line, however, the tone of the poem changes as it goes on to describe a tiger who has lost the glory, strength and terror of Blake's original, and the couplets and trochaic tetrameters give way to free verse. This ensures that the poem can be neither simple nor what MacNeice termed 'whimsical'[21] just as it loses any element of the songlike and childlike:

> Snuff the aroma of my mental stink
> Taste the salt tang of tears upon the brink
> Of my uncomfortable muzzle.
> My tail my beautiful, my lovely tail,
> Is warped.
> My stripes are matted and my coat once sleek
> Hangs rough and undistinguished on my bones.

This poignant description, with its richly descriptive adjectives and use of alliteration and repetition to emphasise the taste of tears and the tiger's despair at his loss of loveliness, could be seen to convey an image of old age. Indeed, in her analysis of this poem Catherine A. Civello, who believes that Smith uses animals as metaphors for adults[22] argues that the tiger who is the subject of the poem is one who has ceased to be a child.[23] This reading, however, overlooks the significance of the title: it is, after all, a little boy

who is sick, therefore it is his voice which speaks for the tiger in an aspect of Smith's ventriloquy. Moreover the tiger is 'sick' and 'warped' because of perversity, and the poem corroborates this by explaining that the sickness of physical decrepitude derives from his loss of spirituality rather than age:

> O God I was so beautiful when I was well,
> My heart, my lungs, my sinews and my reins
> Consumed a solitary ecstasy,
> And light and pride informed each artery.
> Then I a temple, now a charnel house,
> Then I a high hozannah, now a dirge.
> Then I a recompense of God's endeavour,
> Now a reproach and earnest of lost toil.

The use of 'sinews' in the second line quoted above recalls the third stanza of Blake's 'The Tyger': 'And what shoulder, & what art, / Could twist the sinews of thy heart?'[24] in which a blacksmith's strength and artistry created the animal. The blacksmith in Blake's poem, however, is used as a metaphor for God: 'Did he who made the Lamb make thee?' This refers to 'The Lamb' in the *Innocence* poems, in which the lamb is made by one who 'calls himself a Lamb',[25] therefore the Lamb of God, or Christ. In Smith's poem the image and person of God is absent: the tiger calls on God throughout, but in the manner of a casual exclamation or hopeless prayer rather than as an address to a deity. The two states, being with God and separation from God, are contrasted so that the god-like 'temple' becomes, in his absence a 'charnel-house', or place of death and decay. Similarly, the 'hozannah' of praise is now 'a dirge'. The tiger, then, was once a creature of God and an aspect of God's 'high endeavour'; and the metaphors of 'temple' and 'hozannah' connect the tiger to both praise of God and worship. Now he is 'a reproach and earnest of lost toil'. In this sense 'earnest' means a confirmation of God's wasted effort. The 'reproach', however, is ambiguous: not only does the tiger 'reproach' God for his 'lost toil', but he is himself a reproach in that he brings discredit to God's efforts.

In the *Innocence* poems Blake reiterates ideas of the innocence of children, a belief that can be seen in paired *Innocence* and *Experience* poems to be juxtaposed with, yet unaffected by, the corruption of orthodox religion and society. According to Anne Higonnet, 'the modern, western concept of an ideally innocent childhood' can be dated to around the seventeenth century, before which time children were viewed as 'faulty small adults, in need of correction and discipline ... Christian children were thought to be born in sin.'[26] Jacqueline Rose, however, dates changed attitudes towards children at after the mid-eighteenth century, arguing that the change occurred as a result of the influence of the writings of Locke and Rousseau. At this time the child came to be believed to have a 'direct and unproblematic access to ... the real world ... The child is rendered innocent of all the contradictions which flaw our interaction with the world.'[27] Such ideas are indeed promoted by the Romantic poets, and Blake can be seen to be part of the Romantic movement's concern with the experience and insights that children can offer, ideas which I have outlined previously. However, Zachary Leader argues that Blake's age was one in which 'artists, intellectuals, social reformers, teachers and parents were passionately and sharply divided in their attitudes towards children and education.'[28] Calvinist and Evangelical ideas concentrated on the inherent sinfulness of children, who were therefore in danger of eternal damnation. As J.H.P. Pafford explains:

> the godly writer of books for children in the seventeenth or early eighteenth centuries held that pleasure consisted, or ought to consist – for children or adults – primarily in a sense of pious rectitude; and children were to be brought to this state of bliss largely by frightening, or at least admonishing them by setting out the terrors of this world and the next ... which lay in store for the sinner.[29]

One such 'godly writer' was Isaac Watts, whose 'evangelical mission to "save" children'[30] can be seen in his *Divine Songs Attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children* published in 1715. P.H. Butter argues that Blake's *Songs of Innocence* 'may be compared and contrasted'[31] with Watts's songs as well as being influenced by Charles

Wesley's *Hymns for Children* of 1763 and Anna Laetitia Barbauld's *Hymns and Prose for Children* of 1787, although it should be added that Blake's *Songs of Innocence* was not intended to be a children's book, and 'was, in effect, a children's book for adults.'[32] In Blake's *Songs* children's voices, together with 'themes and conventions ... drawn from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century juvenile literature',[33] are used to teach the adult reader by conveying a childlike vision and portraying not just the innocence of children, but the innocent outlook of children that is shown to be a positive counterpoint to experience. There is none of the sense of children's inherent sinfulness that lay behind Watts's work, thus there is none of the frightening, moralising and admonishing that Pafford identifies as being integral to seventeenth and early eighteenth-century songs for children. This leads Butter to argue that Blake 'uses, transforms, undermines [them]. His songs are more visionary, less moralistic.'[34]

Smith's view of children and of childhood itself was counter to Blake's. My reading of the sick tiger as a 'Little Boy Sick' has shown that Smith did not associate innocence with childhood. Nor did she suggest, either in this poem or in her use of children's voices and literary forms, that children have a vision to impart. Moreover, she contradicts the social ideas outlined by Jenks that children are 'set apart ... temporarily as different', 'innocent' and 'vulnerably dependent'.[35] Indeed, the succession of statutes throughout the twentieth century, starting with the Children Act of 1908, corroborate such ideas of vulnerability and dependence; serving, as Pat Thane argues, to protect children, provide care, and prevent the application of adult forms of punishment should children break the law.[36] It should be added that children are frequently presumed to be innocent of ideas of wrongdoing: a child can only be convicted of a criminal act if it can be proved that (s)he knew it was criminal.[37] Social policy therefore recognises childhood as a discrete period of life in which special treatment is required and deserved.

Not only did Smith not promote ideas of children's innocence, but she agrees with Watts's view of children's inherent sinfulness, as in one of the 'portraits of cruel children'[38] that is noted by Civello, 'Getting Rid of Sadie' (1955). In this short story two children casually decide to extort money and contrive the death of their governess. In the narrative the voice of the adult who recollects the childhood incident reverts to the speech patterns and colloquialisms of childhood:

> Well, after that it really wouldn't have been difficult. We'd stick her up for £400. If she jibbed at writing the cheque (we'd have pinched the cheque book from her bag, she always carried it around with her) ... we'd simply threaten to untie her and push her into the cave, we knew she couldn't swim – and that would be that.[39]

Ultimately the plot fails, the governess survives and is herself convicted of extortion. The closing words of the adult narrator and her brother, however, undermine any suggestion that the children might not have been capable of murder:

> '... she was a cruel beast wasn't she? It would just have been a case of one cruel beast meeting two cruel beasts, too bad. And I don't think we would really have pushed her in.'
> 'I wouldn't count on it,' said Edward glumly.
> 'Well, I don't suppose it would have been *necessary.*
> My brother squinted slightly, pushed to the point.
> 'I wouldn't count on that, either,' he said.[40]

The adults who speak dissemble, but are forced to recognise that they, as children, were 'cruel beasts': a suggestion that dehumanises them. They are effectively savages whose ruthlessness in putting their own interests first could have led them to commit murder. The casual 'too bad', itself relating to the plan to bind, rob and threaten the woman, chills with its cold heartlessness. Smith was writing decades before various child murderers (Mary Bell in 1968 and the killers of James Bulger in 1993) diminished ideas of childhood innocence. She was therefore unaffected by debates around ideas of whether children are capable of evil that have gained currency in the last two decades.[41] Nonetheless, in her story children and adults are shown to be alike in their capacity for

wrongdoing. The portrait of wicked and murderous children thus opposes the Romantic and modern belief, outlined in earlier pages, that children have an innocent purity and virtue.

Smith's belief in children's sinfulness shows a similar attitude to Watts's, however the influence of the earlier writer on Smith's work is also displayed in parody. 'The Wanderer', with its opening lines: 'Twas the voice of the Wanderer, I heard her exclaim, / You have weaned me too soon, you must nurse me again,'[42] is clearly derived from Watts's 'The Sluggard': ''Tis the voice of a sluggard; I hear him complain, / "You have waked me too soon, I must slumber again"'.[43] There are further similarities in that Smith's frequent adoption of simplistic language and forms is like Watts's, although the latter's Prefatory statement that he had 'endeavoured to link the Language to the level of a Child's Understanding'[44] reveals a different motive, since Smith's poems were not written for children. Moreover, Watts's intention that many of his verses were to be set to 'the most usual Psalm Tunes'[45] is echoed in the influence of church music, in the form of hymn tunes, on Smith's work: to give two examples 'Hymn to the Seal' (1962) is subtitled '[t]o the tune 'Soldiers of Christ Arise!'[46] while 'Voice from the Tomb (2)' (1962) is similarly subtitled '[t]o the tune 'From Greenland's icy mountains'.[47]

As Chris Jenks argues, with inverted commas indicating terms in popular currency, '[a]ll "decent" and "right thinking" people know that adults regard childhood as a state of dependency that we relate to through strategies of care.'[48] Such ideas are clearly associated with the view that children are both innocent and 'vulnerably dependent'.[49] Smith's attitudes to children, however, are neither 'decent' nor 'right thinking' in the sense that these words are used to indicate common belief. She admits neither their vulnerability nor their dependency. Such perversity can be seen to have affected her

selection of poems for *The Batsford Book of Children's Verse* in 1970. This volume provided poems which were, as Frances Spalding points out, of 'only questionable use for children'[50] since it included verses and lines on topics such as prostitution and death. As well as Hardy's 'The Ruined Maid', which satirises the Victorian view of prostitutes as ruined women, Smith included the death-song 'Fear no more the heat of the sun' from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*; and the lines arguing that it is best '[n]ot to be born at all' from Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus*. Smith's Preface also recalls the first time she thought about suicide at the age of eight.[51] Her selection of lines from Shelley's 'The Mask of Anarchy: Written on the Occasion of the Massacre at Manchester' (1819) in the same Preface is even more macabre, since it retains the association between children and death, but removes the element of choice. Children, seen here as killed by the Lord Chancellor's rock-like tears, were murdered at Peterloo:

> His big tears, for he wept well
> Turned to mill stones as they fell;
>
> And the little children, who
> Round his feet played to and fro,
> Thinking every tear a gem
> Had their brains knocked out by them.[52]

'Who but she would have prefaced such a collection by giving these lines?'[53] asks Christopher Ricks. Smith, perversely, refuses to conform to normal social ideas that children should be protected from the realities of violence and unnatural death, and it is little wonder that *The Batsford Book of Children's Verse* was reissued as *Favourite Verse*, thus removing the book's association with children.

The casual cruelty of the lines from 'The Mask of Anarchy' is also reminiscent of a passage from *The Holiday*, in which Celia enters the church with Heber, her uncle, and kneels down as if to pray while her uncle occupies himself with the altar cloth. The narrative allows us to enter Cynthia's consciousness:

> and I say: How can we come back to God, to be taken into Him, when we are so hard and so separate and do not grow, after we are fifteen we do not grow or change. And I say, if we are to be taken back, oh why were we sent out, why were we sent away, why were we sent away from God?[54]

There are several strands to Celia's theological enquiry, focusing around reconciliation with God. She questions the need for birth and human life itself, since 'if we are to be taken back, oh why were we sent out'. Life is also separation from God, since it is being 'sent away'. Reconciliation with God is craved, but difficult to achieve in adulthood, 'after we are fifteen'. Children can therefore be seen to be closer to God. This conforms to quasi-Christian and Romantic ideas of childhood and, indeed, might reiterate Wordsworth's view in 'Intimations of Immortality' that 'trailing clouds of glory do we come / From God, who is our home'.[55] However, the words which Celia hears as Heber says the order of service illustrates Smith's ambivalent stance towards faith itself, as well as her attitude towards children:

> Uncle begins to pray out loud and to say the psalms for the evening. It is the twenty-eighth evening of the month. I hear my gentle uncle saying softly the psalms for the evening: "Blessed shall he be that taketh thy children; and throweth them against the stones."[56]

Uncle Heber is 'gentle', but the Biblical words that he reads describe violence in which children are victims and their attackers 'blessed'. The priest's words therefore deny the comfort that Celia might hope to gain from religion: a return to the innocence of childhood is not rewarded by the joy of close association with God, but with savage death.

The preceding analyses of Smith's poems show that, while Smith was clearly textually influenced by Blake, the content as well as the format of her poetry is influenced by the earlier writer, Isaac Watts. Additionally, Smith's prose reveals personal attitudes to

children that are unrelated both to the poetic tradition and to social ideas about childhood. As 'Getting Rid of Sadie', the lines from *The Holiday*, and Smith's own selection for and Preface of *The Batsford Book of Children's Verse* show, not only did Smith not believe that children are innocent, but refused to conform to the common adult instinct to protect them, either from actual harm or from her own dark vision of life. This contravenes ideas of feminine propriety associated with caring and nurturing, as well as universal protectiveness towards children. Further pages will show that this can be attributed to Smith's own interiorised identity, which was that of a child rather than that of an adult.

3 Wordsworth, children and creativity

To writers of poetry, childhood may be significant because of the idea that retaining an element of the child into adult life is connected with an unmediated creativity; indeed in *The Poetry of Stevie Smith 'Little Girl Lost'* (1985) Arthur Rankin argues that '[p]oets and artists in general, when uncorrupted, are those who have retained the unitive vision of childhood.'[57] This view is derived from the Romantic idea of what Rose calls the child's 'direct and unproblematic access to ... the real world',[58] and assumes that children retain a primal and visionary experience of unity with nature, whereas the adult becomes alienated from that instinct. This idea is encapsulated in Wordsworth's 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections in Early Childhood' (1804), in which the poet explores the significance of the intense childhood experience of natural things and recalls the child's visionary experience that is lost to the adult. In this poem Wordsworth's thesis is that a young child, being nearer to its divine origins, enjoys an insight into the nature of things that is denied to the grown man:

> There was a time when every meadow, grove and stream,
> The earth, and every common sight,
> To me did seem

Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore;-
Turn whereso'er I may,
By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.[59]

While the vision is associated with childhood, it is clear that the poet has retained it, despite the sense of desolation in the evenly stressed monosyllables of the last line. There is poetic irony in that the experience which is mourned as lost is, by the act of writing, recovered, for when the poet claims that 'Though nothing can bring back the hour / Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower' the moment of the child's intense empathic concentration on natural forms is, conversely, retrieved.

Since Arthur Rankin argues that Smith retained the 'candid, wide-eyed vision'[60] of the child, her own poem entitled 'Intimation of Immortality' (1937) could be expected to engage with ideas of childhood vision that are contained in Wordsworth's original poem. In Smith's poem, however, only the title is derived from the original text:

Never for ever, for ever never, oh
Say not aeonial I must for ever go
Sib to eternity, to confraternity
Of Time's commensurate multiples a foe.[61]

In this poem, which has been quoted in full, the first line brings together ideas of eternity, or 'for ever', with a simultaneous denial of it, the similarity of the words is emphasised so that 'ever' becomes absorbed by 'never'. Rather than yearning for the 'sight of the immortal sea / Which brought us hither', as does Wordsworth, Smith rejects immortality, regarding it as a fate to which she can only repeat 'never'; her poem begs that she will have no relationship 'to eternity'. Smith thus reverses Wordsworth's wish to reclaim immortality, since her poem laments the idea of eternal life which is the reward for Christian faith. Smith therefore rejects the orthodoxies of faith, as, indeed did Blake.

In *The Anxiety of Influence* Harold Bloom argues that '[p]oetic influence is the sense ... of *other poets*. [sic]'[62] However, that influence, as Bloom's title shows, leads to an anxiety about that relationship. In Wordsworth's case, his 'ode is shadowed by the anxiety of influence, due to the greatness of the precursor-poem, Milton's *Lycidas*'.[63] Although Smith's poem shows an awareness of Wordsworth's original, her revision reveals no anxiety about the influence of the 'Immortality' Ode, since it simultaneously commemorates it and undermines it. Where the title of the earlier work is specifically recalled, the plural 'Intimations', carrying ideas of a complex train of thoughts, becomes singular, a simple announcement suggesting a single idea that simultaneously refers to and undercuts Wordsworth's title. Wordsworth's long and intellectually conceived poem consists of two hundred and four lines in the form of an ode, a poetic form rooted in the Greek and marked by elevated thought. It engages with the idea that children have enjoyed pre-existence, and through this develops a relationship between the human condition and heaven, or immortality. Smith's revision, however, consists of a single four-line verse which proposes a single idea: the narrator's rejection of a place in eternity. Rather than seeking the significant, lost portions of the immortal past through the figure of the child, Smith alludes to childhood through the mode of writing itself; the language may have associations with the diction of high literature with its polysyllabic compressions, but the short verse with its repetitions, pairings and reversals ('Never for ever, for ever never') is related to children's word games. Smith's irreverent adoption of Wordsworth's Ode therefore simultaneously refers to the canonical poem and subverts it by rejecting its forms and emphasising her own difference. What also emerges from this poem is Smith's recurrent concern with death. 'Intimation of Immortality' shows that death, which is courted so ardently in Smith's poetry and prose, is not desired because of the hope of eternal life in the conventional and spiritual sense. Smith's obsession with

death, connected as it is with infancy if not childhood, will be considered in greater depth in a further chapter.

While Smith does not address the Wordsworthian idea of the importance of the child's vision in 'Intimation of Immortality', she uses 'To Carry the Child' (1966) in order to both consider the concept and reject it: 'To carry the child into adult life / Is good? I say it is not'.[64] Wordsworth's poem proposes the importance of trying to recapture and carry the evasive visionary experience of the child into adult life, thus maintaining the mystical union with God. Sadness results from losing that link with the child. For Smith, 'To carry the child into adult life / Is to be handicapped.' Indeed, in 'To Carry the Child' it is death, rather than childhood, that is desired, for Smith voices her preference for death in the infancy that precedes childhood:

> Oh it is not happy, it is never happy,
> To carry the child into adulthood,
> Let children lie down before full growth
> And die in their infanthood.

This relates to and explains the macabre reiteration of images of children and violent death which was seen in Heber's psalm in *The Holiday* and in Smith's selection of Shelley's lines for *The Batsford Book of Children's Verse*: death in infancy kills both the emotional and physical child and prevents the unhappiness of the adult.

I have argued that while Wordsworth mourns the loss of childhood vision, his Ode retrieves it; moreover, the lines: 'Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea / Which brought us hither, / Can in a moment travel thither'[65] suggests that it remains within us and is not entirely lost to the adult. It is also significant that he gives as an epigraph to his Ode the line 'The Child is father of the Man'.[66] In this poem, then, Wordsworth focuses on the importance of overcoming the difference between child and man. In Smith's poem, the two states, childhood and adulthood, are more explicitly stated to be

dichotomous and conflicting; the child is closer to emotion, '[e]asy in feeling' and with 'the tears alive on his cheek', whereas the adult is 'frozen'. In the fourth stanza, in a further undermining of Wordsworth's Ode, Smith reduces the child's intense vision and ability to see beauty into the single metaphor of colour, against which the adult is confined to the negative images of monochrome: 'As the child has colours, and the man sees no / Colours or anything'. Irony lies in the poet's empathic understanding of the adult who carries the child. While neither Smith nor Wordsworth explicitly propose that carrying the child is essential to poetic inspiration, the child's association with emotion and clear vision in both poems implies a relationship between literary creativity and the clear vision and sensation of childhood.

There are further suggestions of creativity in that 'To Carry the Child' carries connotations of pregnancy, and a later chapter will show that the metaphor of pregnancy relates to literary creation, while a woman's search for language, and poetic language itself, is related to the uterus.[67] Yet the poem reveals a problematic relationship with her chosen genre: carrying the child is not yearned for, as in Wordsworth's poem, because poetry itself is simultaneously adopted and rejected. The implied pregnancy and the idea of the [inner] child as an interior identity, both of which are associated with poetic production, leads to the unhappiness and sense of alienation which is familiar from other poems such as 'Fairy Story', in which the narrator is given the gift of poetry, but on returning home finds that 'there is nobody I know.'[68] In 'To Carry the Child' Smith argues that the adult 'looks at the childish part / And despises it' while the child / adult is 'defenceless' and despised, a state which it would be better to have avoided. In this poem, as in 'Little Boy Sick' and 'Intimation of Immortality', Smith refers to the tradition in order to emphasise her own difference to it.

The claim that the child / adult is 'defenceless' is, however, contradicted by the tyrannical power that [s]he has as a result of uncontrolled instinct and emotion. The child is:

> Easy in felling, easily excessive
> And in excess powerful,
> For instance, if you do not speak to the child
> He will make trouble.

The 'trouble' is surely more than childish mischief. If the poet is an adult who has retained certain qualities of childhood, those qualities, in Smith's terms, give the poet power to overturn certain assumptions and cultural norms, as the previous chapter on children's language and nursery rhymes has shown. The last stanza contains a plea for pity with a simultaneous warning of danger:

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

The child within may be 'the poor child, the poor child', trapped and imprisoned in his hard adult shell or 'carapace', but [s]he looks through it as 'an anarchist'. This lends further weight to my argument in the previous chapter that Smith uses the forms of children's literature as well as the language of children to criticise established structures of society such as marriage, the military and the church. The interiorised identity, the child, is not powerless since children are anarchic: they have 'the eye[s] of an anarchist'.

Although Smith refers to the child in the poem in the masculine form, it is important to note that the sensitivity and emotion that are attributed to the child have also been considered to be female characteristics. In 'Sorties' Hélène Cixous lists binary oppositions in which man / woman is the underlying opposition:

> Activity / Passivity
> Sun / Moon

Day / Night
Father / Mother
Head / Emotions
Intelligible / Sensitive
Logos / Pathos.[69]

In Cixous' list, that which is perceived as positive and desirable is on the left, while the undesirable, negative and feminine is on the right. In these terms, Smith's child self, although described as 'he' in the poem, is emotional and sensitive, thus undeniably feminine. 'He' could therefore stand in for the poet herself.

It is no coincidence that many writers have commented on Smith's own childlike quality, yet the resemblance is often to a spoiled child. John Horder, quoted in Barbera and McBrien's biography of Smith, addressed the idea of carrying the child into adult life, specifically relating it to the poet herself:

> The Stevie I knew never lost contact with her child self till the day she died ... Who else but an adult, tyrannised by the omnipotent child, would have dared to have completely rewritten my interview with her for *The Guardian* and Giles Gordon's for *The Scotsman*, and got away with it?[70]

What is clear from this assessment is that what Horder calls Smith's 'child self' was akin to the child who is indulged and accustomed to getting her own way, although Horder's comments suggest that Smith was not responsible for this behaviour, since she was 'tyrannised' by it. If the actions of a tyrannical and powerful child were used by the adult to ensure that interviews were written to her liking, Smith also used the strategy of the helpless child, as Margaret Gardiner recalled:

> "What's the matter, Stevie" I asked. "Why haven't you gone to bed?" "There was nobody to warm my milk," she said plaintively. I was amazed. "But couldn't you do that for yourself?" "No." She shook her head. "Aunt always does it for me."[71]

However, according to Barbera and McBrien, these somewhat undesirable traits were necessarily a part of retaining the spirit of the child, and they argue that 'To Carry the Child' is:

> central to an understanding of Stevie and ... her effort to preserve such qualities of childhood as the originality, freshness and directness she deemed essential for a poet. But carrying the child throughout life often entails the perpetuation of attitudes and behaviour that are painful, isolating, and paralysing.[72]

In these terms the mischievous and indulged child is seen to co-exist with the visionary child. According to her biographers, then, Smith's childish behaviour was the negative aspect of childlike vision, and in itself causes the isolation which is the topic of much of her poetry. Horder's comment also suggests that Smith, the adult, was a helpless tool of Smith, the child, in life, if not in verse. I have argued that Smith's use of childhood can be seen in terms of Carolyn Steedman's ideas of interiority. If, in Steedman's terms, 'the adult beliefs, desires and fantasies ... are expressed in the figure of the child'[73], the child that is depicted in 'To Carry the Child', demanding and anarchic yet sensitive and emotional, refers to aspects of the poet's own behaviour. Smith thus attributes to the imaginary inner child those negative characteristics that are considered undesirable in the adult, yet excused in the child. Smith saw herself as a child and assumed childlike characteristics; both are as much an aspect of performativity as her use of nursery rhymes and children's word games, and can thus be seen as strategic.

Horder's comment that Smith was 'tyrannised by the omnipotent child'[74] is also debatable, since it is clear that in her relationships Smith's child-like persona tyrannised others. Barbera and McBrien relate that:

> She spent a beach holiday in 1961 with a family of her acquaintance. The young son was home from school, and his parents told Stevie she should know, if she joined them, their time would be devoted to the boy and his wishes. She joined them, [and] became annoyed when their attention centred on the boy[.][75]

A similar holiday spent with children resulted in 'Beside the Seaside: A Holiday with Children' (1949) which, according to Spalding, is 'lifted direct from life.'[76] and which caused her friend, Betty Miller (the mother of Jonathan Miller) to end relations with Smith on the grounds that 'you have described ... an episode which upset me

considerably at the time'.[77] In this story the principal character's rage at one of the children, Hughie (based on Jonathan Miller), results in her hitting him, and the enjoyment she derives from this completes the pleasure of the holiday: 'Oh, what a pleasant holiday this was,' recalls Helen, 'how much she had enjoyed today for instance; hitting Hughie had also been quite agreeable.'[78] Smith portrays Helen without censure, indeed, immediately after hitting the child twice and telling him to 'shut up' several times she is 'choking back the laughter ... now rising in hysterical gusts'. In these terms, hitting Hughie is not adult punishment but childish retribution, arising from resentment and resulting in feelings of joy and elation. Hughie has represented a rival to Helen / Smith for her friends' attention: as an actual child, he has prevented her from placing herself in the role of the pampered child. She retaliates as a child would: physically and without control, by verbal and physical attack.

If Steedman's idea of interiority is taken into account, together with Butler's theory of performativity, both of which were considered in the previous chapter, it can be seen that expressions of the 'omnipotent child' on Smith's part are both a choice and a strategy. Smith adopted the performance of a child, whether it was through her appearance, the use of children's literature, or her dealings with others. The strategy granted her visibility, simultaneously a child and an elderly woman, as a performance poet. Colin Amery recalls that at a reading in 1965 Smith, then aged 63, was 'dressed in clothes that were thirty years too young – a red tunic, white stockings and red shoes – dressed like a school girl' but that her 'evident vulnerability' won over her audience.[79] It should be remembered that this was a time when the oral poetry movement was dominated by leather-jacketed men.[80] While Laura Severin argues that Smith used 'her body as a sign ... anticipating contemporary feminist performance art, which interrogates and

deconstructs cultural definitions of womanhood'[81] it should be added that, as I have argued in the previous chapter, the performance of a girl / child did not threaten the male-dominated genre and therefore allowed her to find a place within it.

That this performance became absorbed into her own understanding and expression of herself is evidenced by her childish behaviour with friends. This can certainly explain her attitudes towards children: if she saw herself as a child there was no necessity for her to regard real children as being in need of protection from the ideas of death and cruelty that were evident in her choice of poems for *The Batsford Book of Children's Verse*. It also explains her feelings of rivalry towards children: if she regarded herself as a child, real children usurped that role.

4. Conclusion: creativity and canonical inclusion

The preceding pages have examined ideas connected with childhood in Smith's work. Smith challenged prevailing ideas of children's innocence and did not idealise Romantic ideas about children, even going so far as to see children as capable of cruelty, or, indeed, as inherently sinful, an idea that has more in common with Isaac Watts than with the Romantic poets. Other attitudes are at odds with Romanticism: her belief that 'To carry the child into adult life / Is to be handicapped' conflicts with the Wordsworthian idea that a child, being a 'Mighty Prophet! Seer blest!'[82] can instruct adults. The difference here is that Blake and Wordsworth used children as exemplars, observing them in order to share their qualities.[83] They are clear about the difference between adults and children, whereas Smith's identification with children, and absorption of negative as well as positive childish characteristics, does not recognise any difference. While this can be seen to have facilitated creativity in that she retained a child-like view of the world, it also worked strategically: giving herself, an ageing woman, the eccentric

appearance of an apparently vulnerable child attracted attention and prevented hostility in her public performances.

While it is true that many poems by Smith do contain what Huk and Civello term 'echoes'[84] of works by previous poets, 'Little Boy Sick' marks a wholehearted engagement with the precursor poems, and thus with the canon. Harold Bloom argues that:

> Tradition ... is also a conflict between past genius and present aspiration, in which the prize is literary survival or canonical inclusion ... Poems ... come into being as a response to prior poems ... and that response depends upon acts of reading and interpretation by the later writers, acts that are identical with the new works ... The issue is ... the very nature of strong, original literary imaginings: figurative language and its vicissitudes.[85]

In Bloom's terms, Smith's 'Little Boy Sick' and 'Intimation of Immortality' can be seen as a response to the earlier poems by Blake and Wordsworth. In particular 'Little Boy Sick' results from a creative poetic misprision that reacts to and re-writes Blake's 'The Tyger', so that the central image of beauty and strength created by a powerful God becomes, in Smith's version, sick, weary and melancholy as a result of being separated from God. What has also been seen from my analysis of this poem is Smith's 'strong, literary imaginings' and 'figurative language'. These are attributes that should mark her wholehearted engagement with the tradition in order to claim literary survival, and should ensure that the poem is deserving of greater praise than MacNeice's assessment of 'whimsical appeal'.[86]

Despite the strength of 'Little Boy Sick', however, 'Intimation of Immortality' shows that Smith is ambivalent about her role within the poetic tradition. The latter poem, referring to the precursor poem in the title alone, avoids intellectual engagement with Wordsworth's 'Immortality' Ode. In Bloom's terms this could be seen as acute anxiety of influence resulting in the fear that nothing remains to be written. However, Smith's

brief and pithy reaction to the precursor poem refuses to engage with it on its own terms. Instead its brevity, form, and similarity to children's word games show a rejection of the Wordsworthian original and therefore an irreverent and subversive acknowledgement of the canon. This ambivalent perspective characterises much of her work: Catherine A. Civello, whose study of Smith is titled *Patterns of Ambivalence*, argues that Smith expresses ambivalence 'towards the large ideas – life, love, self, and God'.[87] To this we can add ambivalence towards the literary tradition and any place that might be assumed within it. Yet if, as I have argued in previous chapters, the belief that a woman should not write poetry was widespread in the decade when Smith began to publish, and remained in evidence throughout her literary career, it is unsurprising that Smith should feel an uncertainty about attempting to enter a literary tradition that has been dominated by male poets. This uncertainty, or ambivalence, therefore leads on the one hand to a confident and assured revision of one of Blake's Songs, on the other to an intimation that poetic immortality is something to which she can only cry 'never'.

Notes

1. Catherine a. Civello, *Patterns of Ambivalence: The Fiction and Poetry of Stevie Smith* (Columbia: Camden House, 1997) p. 29.
2. Stevie Smith, 'At School', in *Me Again: Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith,* ed. by Jack Barbera and William McBrien (1981; rpt London: Virago,1988), pp. 119 - 124 (p. 124).
3. Ibid.
4. Carolyn Steedman, *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority 1780-1930* (London: Virago, 1995) p. 4.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid p. 5.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid p. 10.

9. See note 2 above

10. Mark Storey, 'Why Stevie Smith Matters', in *In Search of Stevie Smith*, ed. by Sanford Sternlicht (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991) pp. 175 - 195 (p. 178)

11. Ibid.

12. Civello, p. 16.

13. Romana Huk, 'Eccentric Concentrism: Traditional Poetic Forms and Refracted Discourse in Stevie Smith's Poetry', *Contemporary Literature*, 34 (1993) pp. 240 - 265 (p. 247).

14. Christopher Jenks, *Childhood* (London: Routledge, 1996) p. 123.

15. Robert Rosenblum, *The Romantic Child: From Runge to Sendak* (Thames and Hudson, 1988) p. 21.

16. J.R. de J. Jackson, *Poetry of the Romantic Period*, Routledge History of English Poetry, 4 (London: Routledge, 1980) p. 3.

17. Arthur Rankin, *The Poetry of Stevie Smith 'Little Girl Lost'* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1985), p. 61.

18. William Blake, *Selected Poems*, ed. by P.H. Butter (1982; rpt. London: Dent, 1989), p. 10.

19. Stevie Smith, *The Collected Poems*, ed. by James MacGibbon (1975; rpt. London: Penguin, 1985) p. 157.

20. Blake p. 31.

21. Louis MacNeice, 'A Brilliant Puritan', *Listener*, 20 (1938) viii.

22. See note 1 above.

23. Civello pp. 35 - 36.

24. Blake, p. 33.

25. Ibid, p. 12.

26. Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998) p. 8.

27. Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan: or The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 8 - 9.

28. Zachary Leader, *Reading Blake's Songs* (London: Routledge, 1981) p. 5.

29. Isaac Watts, *Divine Songs Attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children*, introduction by J.H.P Pafford (1715; facsimile London: Oxford University Press, 1971) p. 6.

30. Ibid, p. 56.

31. Blake p. 198.

32. Leader p. 32.

33. Ibid.

34. See note 31 above.

35. See note 14 above.

36. Pat Thane, 'Childhood in History' in *Childhood, Welfare and Justice: A Critical Examination of Children in the Legal and Childcare Systems*, ed. by Michael King (London: Batsford, 1981) pp. 6-25 (p. 19).

37. Roger Smith, 'Children and their Lawyers in the Juvenile Court' in *Childhood, Welfare and Justice* pp. 26 - 44 (p. 29).

38. See note 1 above.

39. Stevie Smith, *Me Again*, pp. 39 - 43 (p. 41)

40. Ibid, p. 43.

41. See Jenks pp. 116 - 139.

42. Smith, *The Collected Poems*, p. 257.

43. Watts, p. 64.

44. Ibid, p. 147

45. Ibid.

46. Smith, *The Collected Poems*, p. 452

47. Ibid p. 462.

48. Jenks p. 87.

49. See note 14 above.

50. Spalding p. 289.

51. *Favourite Verse*, ed. by Stevie Smith (London: Chancellor, 1970), p. 3.

52. Ibid.

53. Christopher Ricks, 'Stevie Smith: The Art of Sinking in Poetry', in *In Search of Stevie Smith*, ed. by Sanford Sternlicht (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991) pp. 196 - 210 (p. 199).

54. Stevie Smith, *The Holiday* (1979; rpt. London: Virago, 1993), p. 116.

55. William Wordsworth, *Selected Poems,* ed. by Walford Davies (1975; rpt. London: Dent, 1990), p. 108.

56. Smith, *The Holiday*, p. 117.

57. See note 17 above.

58. See note 27 above.

59. Wordsworth, p. 106.

60. Rankin, p. 63.

61. Smith, *The Collected Poems,* p. 33.

62. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973) p. 26.

63. Ibid p. 10.

64. Smith, *The Collected Poems*, p. 436.

65. Wordsworth p. 110.

66. See note 59.

67. Julia Kristeva, 'Revolution in Poetic Language', in *The Kristeva Reader* ed. by Toril Moi (1986; rpt. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) pp. 90 - 136.

68. Smith, *The Collected Poems,* p. 487.

69. Hélène Cixous, 'Sorties', in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1981) pp. 90 - 98 (p. 90)

70. Jack Barbera and William McBrien, *Stevie: A Biography of Stevie Smith* (London: Heinemann, 1985) p. 250.

71. Ibid, p. 108.

72. Ibid, p. 129.

73. Steedman p. 5.

74. See note 70.

75. Smith, *Me Again*, p. 3.

76. Spalding p. 187.

77. Ibid p. 118.

78. Stevie Smith, 'Beside the Seaside: A Holiday with Children' in *Me Again* pp.13 - 25 (p. 25.).

79. Barbera and McBrien p. 251.

80. Severin p. 117.

81. Ibid p. 118.

82. Wordsworth p. 109.

83. See note 15 above.

84. See notes 12 and 13 above.

85. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages* (London: Macmillan, 1994) pp. 8 - 9.

86. See note 21 above.

87. Civello p. 3.

CHAPTER 5

FEMININE POETICS II: FAIRY TALE TRADITIONS

1. Introduction: fairy tales and femininity

According to Martin Pumphrey, Smith drew on the genre of fairy tales to 'confirm her identification with the nursery and children's culture.'[1] In his essay, 'Play, Fantasy and Strange Laughter: Stevie Smith's Uncomfortable Poetry' (1986), Pumphrey argues that Smith's fairy tale poems, like her nursery rhyme poems, exploit their resemblance to playful, non-serious poetry in order to challenge conventional literary frames. He does not, however, consider them as part of a feminist strategy, as I will argue in this chapter. Other critics who have explored Smith's use of fairy tales do so from a feminist perspective, but concentrate on Smith's ambivalence rather than showing the ways in which Smith offered specific criticisms of dominant ideologies of gender. In *Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women's Writing* (1987) Janet Montefiore argues that the fairy tale poems are an aspect of her ventriloquy, and as such do not explicitly challenge social mores: 'instead of explaining [the fairytale], she tells it with the voice of someone inside the story. It is up to the reader ... to decide what the moral is.'[2]

Similarly, in 'Poetic Subject and Voice as Sites of Struggle: Towards a "Postrevisionist" Reading of Stevie Smith's Fairy Tale Poems' (1997) Romana Huk concentrates on Smith's use of different voices, which are often in dialogue with the narrator, but argues that 'Smith's texts, like Stein's disrupt without redefining ... her fairy-tale poems ... destabilize by hybridizing or pluralizing each of her speakers' languages to expose their collusive contradiction in the telling.'[3] Certainly Smith's ventriloquy is evident in many

of her fairy story poems, but I will argue that her speaker's voices are used to uncover patriarchal attitudes and offer a critique of a society that disadvantaged women.

Only Laura Severin reads Smith's fairy tale poems as specifically feminist texts, and in '"The gilt is off the gingerbread": Stevie Smith's revisionary fairy tales' (2003) she argues that Smith exposed the imposition of gender roles, particularly that of domesticity for women, and moved 'beyond a critique of domestic rhetoric in order to create imaginative outside spaces / places where women live out their potential.'[4] The problem with Severin's reading is that she confines herself to the influence of one fairy tale, 'Hansel and Gretel', on Smith's work, and on the ways in which Smith used it to offer alternative lives for woman. Certainly Smith was opposed to defined gender roles and marriage as the natural outcome of women's lives, as I have argued in my analysis of 'The True Tyrant or The Spirit of Duty Rebuked' (1962) and will consolidate in my reading of 'The Afterthought' (1950). However, Smith's use of specific fairy tales and fairy tale motifs offer a broader engagement with the genre of faery than simply retelling one story. This chapter will argue that, as well as offering critiques of existing social and sexual mores, Smith uses the fairy tale poems to engage with recurring concerns about the relations between gender and the genre of poetry.

Fairy tales are certainly associated with children, and may even be, as Hans Dreckmann argues, 'the first and earliest mentally formed cultural product with which the human being comes into contact and assimilates.'[5] Smith's own love of the brothers Grimm's *Fairy Tales* is known, and her biographer, Frances Spalding, records that a copy of the stories in German was found beside her bed in Avondale Road when she died.[6] Throughout Smith's work she draws upon the genre of fairy tales and alludes to the world of enchantment, although her use of faery is often oblique, relying on the reader's

shared knowledge and recognition of certain characters and themes. Occasionally a specific story is evoked, as in Smith's re-telling of 'The Frog Prince' (1962), which is spoken from the viewpoint of a contented frog, and 'The After-thought' (1950), which refers to the original story in an opening line which quotes 'Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair'.[7] More often, however, it is the spirit of fantasy and magic which informs the generation of a poem, and this in itself can place a poem within the genre of fairy tales; as Dick Leith argues, 'fairytales ... involve some supernatural or magical agency ... [they] are not told as true'.[8] My analysis of Smith's fairy tale poems will therefore include those that deal with enchantment, or a 'magical agency', although it should be added that their engagement with faery is signalled by the titles.

Fairy tales in Western Europe become popular in France in the eighteenth century and in Germany by the beginning of the nineteenth century, although Bruno Bettelheim makes the point that they have been retold for centuries, or even millennia.[9] Given Smith's own preference for and derivation from the fairy tales gathered by the Grimm brothers I will confine my enquiry to the German tradition. These are essentially an aspect of folk culture, stories of the people collected from 'farms, villages ... and ... spinning rooms'[10] as well as ancient Folk Books, although the Grimm brothers regarded these stories as the remnants of ancient myth and Old Germanic belief. The original title of Grimm's stories, *Nursery and Household Tales*, confirms the Grimm brothers' categorisation of the stories as folk culture, indeed Wilhelm's Introduction to the second edition of the book is entitled 'On the Nature of Folk Tales'.[11]

Of those feminist critics that engage with the topic of fairy tales, most concentrate on gender stereotypes that the stories represent, and the feminist revisions of those biases. Gilbert and Gubar argue that, in common with other literary genres, fairy tales are

'essentially male – devised by male authors to tell male stories about the world'.[12] It will be seen that attribution to male authorship is debatable, nonetheless the stories do represent ideas relating to gender that can be attributed to the patriarchal culture that informed their generation. For Gilbert and Gubar, therefore, women writers who draw upon fairy tales do so in order to 'make it a more accurate mirror of female experience'.[13] Similarly, in 'Through the Looking Glass: When Women Tell Fairy Tales' (1983), Ellen Cronan Rose looks for ways in which 'women writers have turned to traditional fairy tales to re-view, revise, and re-invent them in the service of women.'[14]

The Grimm brothers transcribed their stories from oral sources, moreover, many of these sources were women, including Frau Katherina Viehmann who, according to Wilhelm Grimm, 'retains fast in mind these old sagas';[15] and Dorothea Wild, who, together with her five sisters had been told the stories by a nurse known as 'die alte Marie'. This confirms Jack Zipes's argument that the middle class and aristocratic women related tales 'that they had heard from their nursemaids, governesses and servants.'[16] Indeed, 'die alte Marie' herself supplied a number of the stories.[17] While the authors of the tales in written form were men, such as the brothers Grimm, then, the tellers from whom the brothers transcribed their stories were frequently women, which Gilbert and Gubar seem to overlook in their assessment that they were 'devised by male authors'.[18] Similarly, Christine Jones makes the point that in the French tradition aristocratic women, rather than Charles Perrault, established the written genre of fairy tales, thus challenging the idea that 'women *tell* and men *write* them down'.[19] This confirms fairy tales as a feminine genre. Indeed, in *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and their Tellers* (1994), Marina Warner argues that 'a salient aspect of the transmission of fairy stories [is] the female character of the story-teller.' The oral tradition of fairy tales,

associated as it is with women, therefore 'conveyed the ancient pure wisdom of the people from the fountainhead – old women, nurses, governesses.'[20]

In these terms fairy tales can be seen as a female tradition that accommodates those modern women writers who adopt and adapt the genre. It is therefore unsurprising that Smith's interest has been shared by other women poets. Indeed, according to Janet Montefiore, 'myth and fairy tale fascinate women poets to the point of obsession'.[21] Montefiore argues that:

> the appeal of such traditional material as myth and fairy-story, especially for feminists, lies not only in its archaic prestige, but in its strong connections with human subjectivity, so that using this material seems to be a way of at once escaping the constricting hierarchies of tradition and gaining access to the power of definition[.][22]

It is of interest that Montefiore concentrates on the ancient tradition of fairy tales and the prestige that this confers rather than their connection with the nursery and children's culture; the genre is therefore lent a status that children's culture lacks, and represents an alternative tradition in which women can gain distinction and prominence.

Montefiore also identifies the opportunities given by fairy tales for re-defining subjectivity. In this she is reiterating Gilbert and Gubar's and Rose's ideas that have been outlined above, and referring to the ways in which poets such as Liz Lochhead and Anne Sexton criticise and transform the male cultural myths that are to be found in fairy tales. In *The Grimm Sisters* (1981) Lochhead, whose 'Storyteller' is a woman sitting at the kitchen table, takes the premises of fairy stories, together with some recognisable re-workings such as 'Rumpelstiltskin', and translates them into a modern day situation; while in 'Transformations' (1971) Anne Sexton retells specific fairy tales, but undermines the social conventions associated with femininity that the originals endorse, revealing them to be rooted in patriarchal ideas that perceive women as objects. Thus we

see that, in Sexton's reinterpretation, Snow White is a 'dumb bunny' whose happy ending lies in holding court, 'rolling her china blue doll eyes open and shut / and sometimes referring to her mirror as women do.'[23] Sexton also subverts the traditional morality of the genre by revealing other stories. In 'Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)', Briar Rose is portrayed as an insomniac, afraid of the lack of power and subsequent abuse that results from falling asleep:

> I was passed from hand to hand
> like a bowl of fruit.
> Each night I am nailed in place
> and I forget who I am.
> Daddy?
> That's another kind of prison.
>
> It's not my prince at all,
> but my father
> drunkenly bent over my bed.[24]

Sexton therefore takes the traditional stories and subjects them to psychoanalytic and social reinterpretation. However, she also continues the tradition of female origining, since her poems are told in the voice of a middle-aged witch.

Smith's own use of fairy tales preceded Lochhead's and Sexton's, often by decades, and she differs from the latter poet in that she doesn't always confine herself to specific retellings. It is the world of faery rather than specific stories which opens possibilities for Smith, and in this she was closer to her predecessor Rossetti's use of faery in 'Goblin Market' (1859) than to later women poets who have used the genre by conscious reference to the Grimm brothers' tales. It is clear, however, that in using this aspect of children's literature Smith was further allying herself with oral and feminine literary traditions. Smith herself simply believed that the role of the Grimm brothers' stories is to 'carry our hopes and fears and be exciting'.[25] For the reader of Smith's poems, however, it is what the faery poems reveal about Smith's attitudes to

social ideas and to poetry itself that is of interest. As in much of her work the frequently naive or childlike quality, together with the association with children's culture, obscures the underlying concerns of these poems. Close examination, however, reveals her undermining of the ideas carried by the traditional versions, as well as the 'hopes and fears' regarding the nature of poetry, that can be found in her re-workings of fairy tales and poems dealing with the world of faery. The following pages, then, will examine some of the fairy tale poems in order to show how they deal with ideas such as defined gender roles, poetic inspiration and the relationship between gender and the genre of poetry.

2. 'The After-thought': a feminist revision of 'Rapunzel'

In the Grimm brothers' story of Rapunzel, a woman who craves the salad vegetable rampion (also known as rapunzel), steals it from the garden of a sorceress, who punishes her by demanding her unborn child. The child, called Rapunzel, is kept in a chamber in a high tower, where the sorceress reaches her by climbing up her long hair. Rapunzel is rescued by a prince who similarly climbs her hair, and who weaves a ladder for her escape. Smith's 'The After-thought' (1950) begins by alluding to the original story:

> Rapunzel Rapunzel let down your hair
> It is I your beautiful lover who am here
> And when I come up this time I will bring a rope ladder with me
> And then we can both escape into the dark wood immediately.[26]

The 'I' who narrates the poem is therefore the prince of the fairy story who seeks to rescue Rapunzel from her tower. Smith's prince, however, does not stop at the cry to 'let down your hair', but continues to address Rapunzel in a monologue that gives a lengthy succession of inconsequential after-thoughts:

> This must be one of those things, as Edgar Allan Poe says somewhere in a book,
> Just because it is perfectly obvious one is certain to overlook.

> I wonder sometimes by the way if Poe isn't a bit introspective,
> One can stand about getting rather reflective,
> But thinking about the way the mind works, you know,
> Makes one inactive, one simply doesn't know which way to go;
> Like the centipede in the poem who was corrupted by the toad
> And ever after never did anything but lie in the middle of the road,
> Or the old gurus of India I've seen, believe it or not,
> Standing seventy five years on their toes until they dropped.
> Or Titurel for that matter, in his odd doom
> Crying: I rejoice because by the mercy of the Saviour I continue to live in the tomb.

Smith's ventriloquy assumes the voice of a self-centred and verbose man, rambling on a train of thought from Poe to a poem about a centipede, from there to Indian gurus and thence to Titurel. The prince's voice unwittingly shows his words to be ironic: rather than rescuing Rapunzel he himself is 'a bit introspective', 'gets reflective' and is rendered inactive by his train of thought, therefore allowing Rapunzel to remain in her tomb-like tower, like Titurel.

Marcia K. Liebermann makes the point that fairy tale heroines 'are chosen for their beauty ... not for anything they do ... they seem to exist passively until they are seen by the hero ... Marriage ... is the reward.'[27] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar similarly argue that traditional fairy tales reinforce social ideas about gender, such as feminine silence:

> The male child's progress towards adulthood is a growth toward ... self-assertion ... But the girl child must learn the arts of silence either as herself a silent image invented and defined by the magic looking glass of the male-authored text, or as a silent dancer of her own woes, a dancer who enacts rather than articulates.[28]

Smith's version of the Rapunzel story challenges such conventions. In her Rapunzel the passivity identified by Liebermann becomes a deliberate inaction. Bored by her prince she refuses rescue, preferring captivity in the tower to the marriage that should be the outcome of the story, and feigning deafness to her suitor, who asks: 'What is that darling? You cannot hear me? / That's odd. I can hear you quite distinctly.'

Moreover, the 'I' who tells this story reveals another version that inverts the traditional gender roles that Gilbert and Gubar identify: the prince's self-assertion is shown to be empty words, while Rapunzel's silence gives her control.

In the Grimm brothers' original, Rapunzel is powerless in her tower. Unable to choose her own destiny, she passively lets down her long hair to allow her captor and the prince to climb up to reach her. In Bruno Bettelheim's explanation of the story this is an essential part of reaching adulthood:

> The sorceress visits Rapunzel in her tower by climbing up her long tresses – the same tresses which permit Rapunzel to establish a relation to the prince. Thus the transfer from a relationship established to a parent to that of a lover is symbolized.[29]

Bettelheim, who argues that fairy tales 'carry important messages to the conscious, the preconscious, and the unconscious mind',[30] thus encouraging the child's development, sees the sorceress as a mother-figure. Bettelheim therefore sees a woman's relationship with the male lover to be the natural outcome of her separation from the mother.

If Bettelheim's premise is applied to Smith's version, it can be seen that she denies the existence of the mother and the destiny of the lover, for the sorceress is absent or missing. Pierre Macherey argues that 'meaning is in the *relation* between the implicit and the explicit ... What is important in the work is what it does not say.'[31] If the missing mother in 'The After-thought' is read as a Machereyan silence, we can assume that she is implicit but textually absent: Rapunzel does not therefore separate from the mother. If, as I have argued in the last chapter, Smith saw no distinction between the adult and the child, and regarded herself as a child, the separation from the mother that allows an adult relationship and full autonomy would not take place. However, as the following chapter will show, Smith's attitude towards mothers is ambivalent: while some poems, such as 'Human Affection' (1942) depict mother love, others, such as 'I'll have your heart'

(1938) show motherhood in terms of violence and aggression. In another interpretation, then, the sorceress / mother in 'The After-thought' may be absent because the idea of a (real) mother is rejected. Yet Smith did seek the metaphorical mother in a version of the creativity metaphor linked with her search for the feminine source of language. I will examine this further in the next chapter.

Other feminist versions of 'Rapunzel' allow a marriage between Rapunzel and the prince, but question the idea that it is 'the fulcrum and major event'[32] that the traditional tales promise. Sara Henderson Hay's 'Rapunzel' (1982) casts the prince as a faithless philanderer, rather than a rescuer: 'I knew that I was not the first to twist / Her heartstrings to a rope for him to climb. / I might have known that I would not be the last.'[33] In her revision of 'Rapunzel' (1972), Anne Sexton also allows a relationship between Rapunzel and the prince, and refers to the traditional happy ending of marriage between protagonists:

> They lived happily as you might expect
> proving that mother-me-do
> can be outgrown,
> just as fish on Friday,
> just as a tricycle.
> The world, some say,
> is made up of couples.
> The rose must have a stem.[34]

Sexton's tone is as ironic as Smith's. Separation from the mother can be achieved and the relationship 'outgrown', just as other things can be outgrown. But the world does not have to be 'made up of couples', as 'some say' it is. The closing lines of Sexton's feminist version of the story suggests an alternative:

> As for Mother Gothel
> her heart shrank to the size of a pin,
> never again to say: Hold me, my young dear,
> hold me,
> and only as she dreamt of the yellow hair
> did moonlight sift into her mouth.

The poem therefore ends with a sympathetic depiction of the sorceress, left desolate by the loss of Rapunzel, suggesting that love between women is preferable to Rapunzel's fate and therefore to be desired. Smith, who did not regard herself as a feminist, did not offer a radical critique of society in her re-telling of 'Rapunzel' as did Sexton. However 'The After-thought' can be seen in terms of feminist revisions in that it offers a critique of the idea that marriage is the conventional happy ending, which, as Madonna Kolbenschlag points out, involves 'self-forgetfulness, service and sacrifice ... nurturing rather than initiating behaviours'.[35] Moreover, she mimics the male voice, and shows other versions of the active male and passive female stereotypes depicted in the fairy tales: Smith's prince fails to act and her Rapunzel finds power in passivity.

3. The figure of the muse and 'The Fairy Bell'

As Elizabeth Bronfen points out, since ancient Greek culture the idea that the poet's gift is dependent on a higher power has wedded literary creativity with the idea of an inspiring muse:

> As a figure of inspiration, [the muse] is directly addressed, and serves a threefold function in this poetic dialogue. She is simultaneously maieutic producer, object of reference and privileged addressee of the poet's speech. In addition she is always incompletely accessible, always beyond reach.[36]

In 'My Muse' (1962) and 'Who is this Who Howls and Mutters?' (1957) Smith refers to a Muse who is associated with the maieutic production of poetry, but not invoked. Smith uses the figure of the muse to reveal her relationship with poetry rather than simply as a figure of inspiration. According to Spalding, she would 'introduce her poem "My Muse" with the remark: "Always, against being silent and merely looking at things, the Muse nags and mutters."'[37] Smith's muse, therefore, is not beyond reach, for it is a constant presence which is nagging to be heard.

In 'My Muse' Smith depicts a dejected muse, sketched as a woman with long hair and a top hat, underlining the poem's message that the muse is unwelcome:

> My Muse sits forlorn
> She wishes she had not been born
> She sits in the cold
> No word she says is ever told
>
> Why does my Muse only speak when she is unhappy?
> She does not, I only listen when I am unhappy
> When I am happy I live and despise writing
> For my Muse this cannot but be dispiriting.[38]

In the fourth line the Muse apparently speaks, although her words are 'never told' by the poet, suggesting that she is ignored and the inspired words do not end in poetic completion. This is explained in the second verse when the idea that the dispirited Muse will only speak when she is unhappy is quickly amended to the poet's own unhappiness, in which state the poet will listen. Germaine Greer considers that Smith writes 'wryly'[39] in this poem, in that Smith recognises the irony that poetry is her chosen genre, yet it is associated with unhappiness. The rhyming of 'writing' with 'dispiriting' in the last line, however, renders the poem comic rather than wry, suggesting that Smith is parodying the familiar motif of the poet suffering for his art, or indeed, herself as a suffering and melancholy poet.

Despite the humour in 'My Muse', Smith does reiterate the idea that the inspiration that leads to the writing of poetry is alternately rejected and welcomed. In 'Who is this Who Howls and Mutters?' three states are depicted: rejecting the muse, seeking the muse, and finding the muse again. At first the muse 'howls and mutters' to be heard, although 'each word she utters / Is thrown against a shuttered door',[40] signifying the poet's rejection of the muse. This rejection leads the muse to leave, and 'speak no more'. The poet then tries to get the muse back, pleading, weeping and praying: 'Thou, Lord, repent and give her back to me / ... Lord have pity.' The poet is rewarded by the return of the muse, but this

does not bring happiness for the poem ends with the somewhat bleak and ambiguous couplet: 'He did repent. I have her now again / Howling much worse, and oh, the door is open.' The return of the muse, or poetry, does not therefore bring joy or fulfilment, but regret that 'oh the door is open' and the muse still howls insistently.

In 'The Fairy Bell' (1957) Smith uses the fairy tale format to depict a muse that is insistent and unwelcome, but this time it is ultimately destroyed: the epigraph explains that 'a renegade poet, having taken to journalism for money, is rebuked by his Muse in the form of an old gentleman; he cuts her throat.'[41] The narrator is a writer who cannot forget his poetic vocation, despite having taken to journalism, humorously suggested by the epigraph to be a lesser profession than poetry, and one that does not need a muse. The poem opens with the image of a belfry, which acts as a metaphor for the poet's mind:

> A dismal bell hung in the belfry
> And clanged a dismal tune
> And back and forth the bats did fly
> Wherever there was room.

The 'dismal bell' and the bats can be seen to symbolise poetic inspiration: a bell resembles an open mouth with a tongue making the sound, while the bats which simply moan, create 'sad music'.

In 'Revolution in Poetic Language' Julia Kristeva argues that there are two trends in the signifying process: the semiotic and the symbolic. The semiotic corresponds to the pre-Oedipal and pre-linguistic period in which the baby believes itself to be part of its mother, and is marked by sounds, rhythm, music and babblings; and the symbolic to the language which is linked to the Oedipal crisis. Kristeva stresses that both semiotic and symbolic occur in language, however the semiotic alone is a non-verbal signifier:

> the dialectic between them determines the type of discourse ... so-called 'natural'

> language allows for different modes of articulation of the semiotic and the symbolic. On the other hand, there are non-verbal signifying systems that are constructed exclusively on the basis of the semiotic (music, for example).[42]

The music of the bats, which make no linguistic communication but simply moan, is therefore associated with the wordless, non-verbal semiotic form of articulation which Kristeva says 'gives music to literature.'[43] Moreover, the semiotic's association with the primitive connection with the mother makes it a particularly feminine poetry: Toril Moi argues that '[t]o enter into the Symbolic Order means to accept the phallus as the representation of the Law of the Father.'[44]

It should be reiterated that the 'I' of the poem, the speaker, is the 'renegade journalist', described as 'he' in the epigraph. Yet I have argued above that the poetic inspiration emanating from the bats is feminine. The speaker has rejected the purer form of art, poetry, in favour of money, yet he has also attempted to repress the feminine poetic impulse, which the fifth stanza describes as insistent but suppressed:

> Oh, the sad music of the backward and forth
> Flying of the bats, pleading for worth,
> But in this, perhaps, I was wrong
> That there was for him some enchantment in their song.

The bats' plea 'for worth' suggests that they are pleading with the poet to make a worthy poem from their song, but the phrase simultaneously carries connotations that they, rather than the poet, find 'worth' in their rhythmic music. Enchantment is connected with poetic inspiration, but this time the poet has ceased to be enchanted: only the Muse, who is the mediator between the semiotic impulse and the poet, finds 'enchantment' in the bats' music. The roles of the Muse and the poet are reversed in this poem, for it is the Muse rather than the poet who suffers the agony of creation:

> The agony through which I go,
> He said, is something you ought to know
> And something that you will know too
> When I have finished telling you.

Before (s)he can tell, however, the poet kills him (or, as I shall argue, her), thus destroying the source of poetry. Death is seen as a prize, a reward for the Muse: 'Yet I thought Death was the best prize, if he won this.' The capitalized noun and the notion of death as a prize is typical of Smith's obsessive reiteration of the theme of death, and yearning for death itself which, it will be shown in a later chapter, is connected with creativity. But the savagery of the line in which the Muse is carelessly murdered shocks the reader with its violence: 'I took his gullet in my hand and with my knife cut through it.'

In her reading of 'The Fairy Bell', Catherine A. Civello argues that the 'disappointed muse, in fact, cuts the poet's throat and assumes the form of a haunting "fairy bell tolling by waters drowned."'[45] The ambiguity of this poem is furthered by Smith's reference to the Muse as 'he' in the poem, thus leading to Civello's interpretation. However, as the epigraph makes clear, the poet is 'rebuked by *his* muse in the form of an old gentleman; *he* cuts *her* throat' (my italics). Civello therefore assumes that the poet is, in fact, female and the Muse male. Yet the Muse simply takes 'the form of an old gentleman'. A muse, as Bronfen shows, is female:[46] the original muses were Greek goddesses rather than gods, and the poetic tradition has always referred to and called upon a female muse. Indeed, Robert Graves argues that, '[t]here are only a few recorded references in English Literature to a male muse and most of these occur in poems written by homosexuals'.[47] Certainly other poems by Smith ascribe femininity to the muse: both 'Who is this Who Howls and Mutters' and 'my Muse' refer to the muse as 'she'. Underlying Smith's explanatory epigraph, then, is the assumption that the muse is in fact female, thus *she* is killed, despite her disguise.

The appearance of the Muse in 'The Fairy Bell', crossing the genders from femininity into masculinity between epigraph and poem, does, however, complicate the poem: is Smith referring here to the murder of one man by another? However, if the fictive Muse in this poem, as in other poems by Smith, is female, the male poet kills one whom he knows to be female, despite the disguise. The Muse is responsible for poetic inspiration and therefore for the feminine poetry that is derived from the music of the bats. She is savagely murdered by having her throat cut, therefore cutting the source of the voice and preventing the utterance of that which will inspire feminine poetry. The sub-text, then, refers to male oppression of women. Since the words of the epigraph confirm that the 'renegade poet' is male, an analogy can be drawn between the violent murder of a woman and the suppression of women's poetry by masculine and misogynist values, seen here to be equal in their brutality. Killing the Muse thus destroys the source of poetry, and it is significant that the poet is gendered male, allowing him both to take possession of poetry and to end it. He 'cannot trouble to rue' the death of his vocation, but there is an obvious tension in the text: it is about the destruction of poetry, yet it takes the form of a poem. Moreover, the poet cannot kill the feminine semiotic and poetic instinct, for the belfry bats still moan their 'soft tune', and the rhythms of poetry remain in the fairy bell that tolls in the imagination: 'And the ding-dong of that imaginary sound / Is as grateful as a fairy bell tolling by waters drowned.' The compressed language of the last line gives an ambiguous image which allows the bell to continue 'tolling' despite having been 'drowned' by waters, allowing feminine poetry to survive.

These examples of Smith's 'muse' poems suggest an inner and unresolved conflict about the nature of poetry. In Smith's poems the muse, or poetic inspiration, is not welcomed as one might expect, but is associated with guilt and unhappiness, and in my reading of 'The Fairy Bell' that unhappiness results in destruction of the muse. The problem is thus

with the genre of poetry itself, which can be related to her gender and the social prohibition against women poets, which is the subtext of 'The Fairy Bell'. Indeed, in his discussion of the nature of the muse Robert Graves illustrates the prejudice against women writing poetry:

> A woman is not a poet, she is either a Muse or she is nothing. ... A woman who concerns herself with poetry should, I believe, either be a silent Muse and inspire the poets by her womanly presence ... or she should be the Muse in a complete sense ...[.][48]

Graves, writing in 1961, unwittingly shows the attitudes that prevailed towards women poets throughout Smith's literary career. Graves regards the female gender as incompatible with poetry, for 'a woman is not a poet', if, however, she should 'concern herself with poetry' it should be in the role of an inspiring, but 'silent Muse'. Graves's emphasis on silence is significant; women are prohibited from speaking in the language of poetry or about poetry. Yet to contravene that prohibition leads to the suffering to which Smith alludes. Indeed, Germaine Greer argues that:

> The female poet is not presented with the women's magazine standby of a choice between marriage and career, but with the choice to be happy and mute or unhappy and articulate. Happy marriage and motherhood are not the raw material of poetry, let alone poetry of high seriousness. The consequences of this emphasis on suffering as the raw material of poetry are serious; the more literary a young woman's bent, the more insidiously she is inculcated into failure and frustration.[49]

It is of interest that Greer refers to serious poetry, for it has been seen that Smith's use of forms which are, apparently, non-serious, was a strategy to give her a voice as a woman poet. Yet even in an apparently light poem such as 'My Muse' the suffering is evident, and this, as Greer confirms, can be attributed the literary institutions of poetry and criticism that frustrate the woman poet's attempts to be heard and condemn her to failure once she is heard.

4. 'Fairy Story: enchantment and poetic inspiration

In 'Fairy Story' (1962) Smith draws upon the world of faery and the reader's familiarity with the genre of fairy stories, and signals the poem's intention to recreate another story by its title. It takes as a theme the idea of the innocent lost in a wood, a motif which is familiar from 'Hansel and Gretel' and 'Little Snow-White', both stories from *Grimm's Fairy Tales*:

> I went into the woods one day
> And there I walked and lost my way
>
> When it was so dark I could not see
> A little creature came to me
>
> He said if I would sing a song
> The time would not be very long
>
> But first I must let him hold my hand tight
> Or else the wood would give me a fright
>
> I sang a song, he let me go
> But now I am home again there is nobody I know.[50]

Ostensibly the poem tells the story of being lost and finding courage by singing in the presence of another. In their biography of Smith, Jack Barbera and William McBrien assume that the poetic voice is that of a child, and point out that the move from iambic tetrameters to the alexandrine metre in the last line reinforces the sense of isolation that the 'girl' feels.[51] Certainly the long and somewhat unwieldy last line conveys a sense of awkwardness and being out of step with the rest of the poem, and this can be seen to parallel the narrator's experience of being out of place and alone, despite being 'home again'. To assume that the speaker is a girl, however, is either to ascribe immaturity and triviality to the poetic voice or to be misled by the simple and somewhat childlike tone. Frances Spalding also concentrates on the isolation with which this poems ends, and argues that this is a part of artistic production which is 'achieved at the expense of self'.[52] A reading of this poem which takes both the subject and the significance of the title into

account, however, can extend this reading of artistic production and isolation and show its relevance to women's poetics, as well as noting its intertextual relationship to earlier works.

The 'little creature' is unidentified and probably unseen because of the dark, but clearly of the faery world. This is corroborated by the Grimm brothers' tales, in which 'little' usually denotes faery associations: 'The Three Little Men in the Wood' have the power to cast good and bad spells; 'Rumpelstilskin' is a 'little man'[53] who spins straw into gold; and the 'Little Folks' Presents' similarly confirms their faery status. Smith's 'little creature', however, assumes the role of a muse, since he commands the speaker to 'sing a song'. It is significant, too, that the narrator of 'Fairy Story' goes into a wood, for in Smith's 'Voices about the Princess Anemone' (1950), Anemone 'ran into the forest wild'[54] to find poetic inspiration. Laura Severin argues that, in Smith's poems, 'women's flight into the woods' represents an 'escape from the cultural oppression of domesticity'.[55] Yet in neither of these poems is domesticity mentioned, therefore the flight is for another purpose, one that can be related to poetry. Indeed, Bruno Bettelheim has shown that the symbol of the wood is enshrined in poetic tradition[56] and, it can be added, in the idea of the muse, for the image of the 'dark wood, / Where the right road was wholly lost and gone,'[57] opens *The Divine Comedy* in which Dante is later guided by the supernatural, ghostly figure of the poet Virgil. The wood is therefore an appropriate symbol for Smith to appropriate in order further to engage with ideas of poetic inspiration.

The song which the 'little creature' bids the narrator to sing is to prevent the fear which the speaker feels in the wood and also to pass the time; however, according to theories

which arose out of the wish to explain fairies or the belief in fairies, a faery creature may signify death, or rather, life after death:

> The most common theory equates fairies with the souls of the dead ... and Fairyland with the place where the souls wait ... for the Last Judgement, at which time all souls will be reunited with their bodies.[58]

Smith's obsession with death has been mentioned in the discussion of 'The Fairy Bell', in which death is a 'prize'.[59] In 'Why Do I...' (1962), she reiterates the idea that she regarded 'Death as a friend',[60] and she wrote two poems titled 'Come Death' in 1938 and 1971. Given the association of fairies with death and Smith's recurrent belief that death was to be desired 'the time would not be very long' might be glossed as 'the time [on earth] would not be very long' in order to carry connotations of living and its opposite, death. In this reading the 'little creature' could be seen as a visitor from the realm of the dead who reassures the narrator. According to this interpretation poetry, or singing a song, can be seen as a way of enduring life until death, for which Smith longed, arrives. However, the 'little creature' who tells the speaker to sing is, in fact, giving the narrator the song, therefore death is connected with poetic production. The significance of death in Smith's work, together with its connection with Smith's search for a voice, will be considered in a later chapter.

In this poem the influence of two literary genres are equally significant. Spalding links Smith's love of fairy stories with her love of ballads, which 'not only stirred echoes of childhood singing games, they promoted values she admired: faithfulness, wiliness and courage.'[61] Despite its obvious allusions to fairy tales, 'Fairy Story' is also clearly derived from the ballad of Thomas the Rhymer, which Smith knew.[62] Thomas the Rhymer, a poet of the thirteenth century, was known as a soothsayer, and the orally transmitted ballads which purport to be his work tell the story of his meeting with the Queen of Elfland. At the moment of parting Thomas is said to have requested a gift as

proof of his story, and was given the gift of prophetic insight which became the source of his poetic powers.[63] While 'Fairy Story' is, compositionally, far from being a ballad, thematically it has links with the earlier work, and therefore with the oral genre of ballad-telling as well as fairy tales. It should be noted that ballad-telling was equally associated with women. While the ballads of Thomas the Rhymer purport to have been composed by the eponymous poet in the thirteenth century, their oral transmission was due to women. According to James A.H. Murray, both Jamieson's and Scott's version of the ballad came from the same source:

> Mr Jamieson visited Mrs Brown ... and obtained from her recollection five or six ballads and a fragment ... It is remarkable that Mrs Brown never saw any of the ballads she has transmitted here, either in print or in manuscript, but learned them all as a child by hearing them sung by her mother and an old maidservant.[64]

Murray attests that the ballad's transmission was entirely oral until the ballad collectors of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century transcribed them. Moreover a feminine tradition is implied here: Mrs Brown learned them from a mother and a female servant, both of whom could have learned them in the same way.

Like the Thomas the Rhymer ballads, then, 'Fairy Story' is connected with the gift of poetry itself. The poet sings the song when so instructed by the fairy, and so long as he accompanies the speaker and will 'hold my hand tight', [s]he can sing. When he leaves, the speaker returns home to a sense of alienation and loneliness, for 'there is nobody I know.' Alienation is also the theme of the canonical poem by John Keats, 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' (1819), which, as Robert Graves has shown, is similarly derived from the Thomas the Rhymer ballad.[65] The similarities between the latter, Smith's poem, and the original ballad are striking: in Keats's text a 'faery's child' enchants the knight, sings him a song, and leaves him 'Alone and palely loitering'[66] in a hostile and deserted landscape. Smith, however, eschews the ballad form which was used

by Keats and which would have confirmed her poem's identification with a form of oral culture whose literary respectability has been established since the eighteenth century. Instead she uses rhyming couplets and simple rhymes, thereby giving it associations with the nursery through its poetic form as well as through its associations with the fairy tale genre. Again we see the performance of childhood that has been noted in previous chapters, allowing her a voice: children's culture, being domestic rather than public, poses few threats to men and can be readily regarded as being compatible with a woman's social place.

Poetic inspiration is related to enchantment in all three poems: the Thomas the Rhymer ballad, 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', and 'Fairy Story'. The muse takes the form of a faery creature who first enchants then grants the gift of song, poetry, or story-telling: even Keats's knight is a story-teller or poet who recounts his experiences. A similar theme can be detected in Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market' (1859), thus further placing Smith's poem in the context of earlier works. In 'Goblin Market' two sisters encounter faery people. In this poem, although Lizzie counsels caution ('Laura, Laura, / You should not peep at goblin men'[67]) Laura meets the faery people and eats their 'fruit forbidden'.[68] The poem ends with Laura retelling the story to her children. In his essay, 'Simple Surfaces: Christina Rossetti's Work for Children', Roderick McGillies asks rhetorically: 'why does Laura, not Lizzie, become a story-teller? ... Answers are stubbornly irretrievable'.[69] It can be argued, however, that Laura becomes the teller of the fairy story because it is she who has been enchanted by the goblins' fruit.

What has come out of this examination of 'Fairy Story' is the poem's derivation from two genres. This poem takes the form of a fairy story, but its allusions to the Thomas the Rhymer ballad (and, further, to 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci') clearly relates it to the

stories, if not the form, of ballads, both genres that are associated with women. 'Fairy Story' also engages with poetic inspiration and the problems posed by gender to genre: the muse is welcomed, yet isolation from society follows, which can be attributed to the conflict between her art and her social identity.[70] Indeed, the theme of gender and its relation to poetry is reiterated in both 'Voices about the Princess Anemone' (1950)[71] and 'The Word' (1971).[72] If a woman poet is aware of the prohibition against her choice of genre, and works in the knowledge that 'a woman is not a poet'[73] the word, that is the poetic word or poetry itself, becomes 'the word of fear'.[74]

5. 'Alternative truths' and feminine poetics

It has been seen that feminist theories regarding fairy tales and their influence on women poets have concentrated on two main areas: the necessity for a revision of the male cultural myths embedded in the traditional tales; and the way that the fairy tale genre, carrying as it does ideas of tradition and prestige, offers specific opportunities for the woman poet. The reader of Smith's poems, or, indeed Lochhead's and Sexton's, is therefore aware of the ideas that the Grimm brothers promote as familiar motifs: the male hero is active, while the passive heroine waits for the expected 'other' to complete her life. Smith's 'The After-thought' is essentially a humorous poem rather than a polemic in the manner of Sexton's 'Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)', but Smith relies on her reader's knowledge of the original story in order to portray her tedious and comic prince and wearied Rapunzel. The humour does not, however, impede Smith's social comment: this Rapunzel does not seek completion in the other, and thus undermines the traditional idea of a happy ending resulting from the uniting of a heterosexual couple.

Referring to Smith's fairy tale poems, Martin Pumphrey argues that:

> Certainly the alternative truths that fairy magic reveals are not 'pretty' any more than the harsh laughter of the trickster or the howling of the liberated muse.

> Their effects are often painful and dislocating. Ruthlessly, without warning, they cut through the euphemisms and hypocrisies of genteel society to shatter conventional assumptions.[75]

Pumphrey does not consider 'The Fairy Bell' in his essay, but his argument clearly applies. The poem reveals the uncomfortable and painful truth about the masculine domination of poetry, revealing the undermining of women poets and their silencing to be comparable with a more violent form of preventing utterance. The speaker in 'Fairy Story' shows that appropriation of the word is achieved at great cost, for when the muse has left and the song sung, 'there is nobody I know': the poet is alone and placed apart from a society that assumes femininity to be incompatible with poetry.

Janet Montefiore points out that 'the world of fairy stories seems to attract those poets whose tradition is closest to ordinary speech',[76] pointing to the relationship between fairy tales and oral transmission, a relationship that may be forgotten when it is claimed, as Gilbert and Gubar have, that they are 'male authored'.[77] Madonna Kolbenschlag calls fairy stories 'the bedtime stories of the collective consciousness',[78] drawing attention to the fact that most people's experience of these stories derives from hearing them in childhood, rather than reading them, and underlining their cultural familiarity. Women poets such as Smith can refer to a traditional fairy tale, assured of its familiarity for most people brought up in the Western and European culture. However, the fact that most people's experience of fairy tales is within childhood confirms that Smith's interest in the genre is associated with her wider identification with children and their culture. Her revision of specific stories, together with her less specific use of the world of faery as a poetic theme, can therefore be related to her performance of childhood that has been examined in previous chapters. It is equally significant, however, that fairy tales, like nursery rhymes, are part of the young child's early experience of language. The role of

the mother in language acquisition, and the relevance of the maternal figure to Smith's feminine poetics, will be the focus of the following chapter.

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CHAPTER 6

FEMININE POETICS II: THE SEARCH FOR THE MOTHER

1. Introduction: *écriture féminine* and the creativity metaphor

The previous chapters have shown that during the period in which Smith was writing, from the 1930s to the 1970s, society was marked by the belief that poetry should be a male prerogative. Smith's conscious or unconscious awareness of this can be traced in what might be seen as a socially appropriate poetics: the use of children's culture, which appears not to take itself seriously, and an association with traditionally feminine genres such as fairy tales. These pose no explicit threat to male poets and poetics because they are associated with the domestic sphere. However, as I have argued in the previous chapter, for Smith, poetry is desired yet simultaneously feared. This anxiety about the genre of poetry itself, together with her attempt to appropriate it, also manifests itself in a search for the feminine source of language.

This chapter will therefore take a psychoanalytic approach to some of Smith's poems, drawing on the theories of Hélène Cixous and Julia Kristeva, in order to interrogate Smith's anxieties about the genre of poetry, her search for the mother, and her use of what has become known as *écriture féminine.* Smith died before the publication of either Kristeva's 'Revolution in Poetic Language' and 'About Chinese Women' in 1974, or Cixous' 'The Laugh of the Medusa' in 1975. Yet, although she rarely theorised her craft, unlike the members of the Auden set, her work anticipates Cixous' and Kristeva's arguments regarding the source of a feminine relationship to language, albeit through the medium of poetry rather than philosophical or polemic text. According to Susan Sellers, 'the concept of *écriture féminine* – or feminine writing – derives from the work of Hélène Cixous, though it also has links with that of other French feminists.'[1] When

Cixous wrote 'The Laugh of the Medusa' in 1975, however, she clearly considered that a specifically feminine writing had yet to be done:

> I shall speak about women's writing: about *what it will do*. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their own bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text ...
> The future must no longer be determined by the past. I do not deny that the effects of the past are still with us. But I refuse to strengthen them by repeating them, to confer upon them an irremovability the equivalent of destiny, to confuse the biological and the cultural.[2]

It is significant that in the act of writing Cixous claims to be speaking, since her text foregrounds the importance of voice and implicitly assumes that voice is present in writing. The implication for a consideration of Smith's chosen discourse is clear, even though Cixous is not looking at what women had written in the past but proposes instead *'what it will do'*, and Cixous' italics add emphasis to her point. In this essay Cixous is concerned with 'the past', which was marked by ideas of the patriarchal appropriation of writing, and 'the future', in which a woman writer will 'write her self'. Cixous sees the time in which she wrote this essay as a time of change: 'the new breaks from the old, and, more precisely, the (feminine) new from the old'. It is this shift that will create the possibilities for establishing a feminine discourse which will 'break up ... destroy ... foresee the unforeseeable'.[3]

Cixous does not define language which can be said to be feminine or masculine, partly because definition itself could be regarded as part of the hierarchy of masculine logic and reason, and:

> the entire history of writing is encoded with the history of reason ... it is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing ... for this practice can never be theorised, enclosed, coded.[4]

However, she does maintain that in men there is a 'division made ... between the logic of oral speech and the logic of the text.'[5] Whereas men will be aware of two

discourses, spoken and written, and will make a distinction between the two in speech and writing, language which can be said to be feminine makes no such division between speech and written or printed writing. Morag Shiach argues that Cixous' claim that feminine language is close to the voice:

> is done in order to disrupt the opposition between speech and writing, by suggesting not only the presence of writing in speech, but also the presence of living speech in writing. It is also done in order to produce both individual and social change. Speaking, Cixous argues, is a powerfully transgressive action for women, whose bodies cannot be erased from their speech in the way they have been from their writing.[6]

Shiach therefore brings out the importance of orality, or the presence of speech in writing, as well as alluding to the prejudice against women's speech. Cixous argues that public speech an area that is prohibited to women:

> Every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak. Her heart racing, at times entirely lost for words, ground and language slipping away – that's how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak – even to just open her mouth – in public. A double distress, for even if she transgresses, her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine.[7]

It should be stressed that Cixous, writing in the early 1970s, is drawing attention to a position which is now historical. The purpose of my enquiry, however, is to examine circumstances that prevailed when Smith was writing; poetry, as Cora Kaplan argues, is an aspect of public speech historically dominated by men and from which women were excluded.[8]

Although Cixous dislikes binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity, she does locate gender difference in language in the area of sexual pleasure. The female libidinal economy is specific to women because it is neither known by man nor understood by man, and it is in the intense erotic rapture or *jouissance* that difference is apparent. Thus she argues that women must both write of the body's sensations and from the body itself:

> Write yourself. Your body must be heard ... To write. An act which will not only

> "realize" the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures.[9]

Cixous implies that both women's writing and her bodily pleasure have been suppressed by men, therefore the act of writing, both of the body and from the body, will liberate sexually and creatively. Morag Shiach points out that Cixous was writing at a time when 'many philosophers and literary critics were returning to the bodily as the location of pleasure.'[10] Roland Barthes' use of the term *jouissance*, however, meaning bliss or rapture, relates to the reader's experience of the text. Cixous' linkage of writing with sexuality, and claim that the former will give access to the 'pleasures' of the latter, clearly associates the idea with women's creativity.

Having placed woman's creativity in the realm of sexual difference, Cixous considers the source of a woman's relationship to language, which is the mother. Because of her own physical difference a woman retains a linguistic relationship with the mother who is both nurturer and metaphor. A woman's voice therefore echoes that which is in the primal memory:

> There always remains in woman that force which produces / is produced by the other – in particular the other woman ... matrix, cradler ... There is hidden and always ready in woman the source, the locus for the other. The mother, too, is a metaphor.[11]

While the physical mother is crucial in language acquisition, giving the initial introduction to language through song, lullaby, early word games and nursery rhymes, the figure of the mother does not have to be the physical woman who gave birth. She is simultaneously a metaphor for the early experience of voice, which is connected with 'the song, first music ... which is alive in every woman.'[12] Speech is thus associated with song, indeed music itself provides a different discourse and emotional alternative to the linear logic of the male discourse of reason.

As Sellers argues, Cixous' emphasis on the role of the mother in conveying pre-Oedipal rhythms and articulations parallels Kristeva's work on the semiotic,[13] or the pre-linguistic and pre-symbolic state of childhood in which the child's articulations consist of babbles and rhythmic sounds. 'The mother's body', Kristeva explains, 'becomes the ordering principle of the semiotic *chora*.'[14] Kristeva appropriates Plato's term which denotes a formless and invisible space or receptacle, however her use of the Greek word for womb, together with Plato's comparison of the *chora* with a mother or wet nurse,[15] relates the semiotic *chora* to the maternal figure. Indeed. Alice E. Adams affirms that:

> the *chora* is associated with the "maternal body" ... The womb, like the *chora*, appears to create something (body or meaning) from nothing ... The womb, like the *chora*, is organised by rhythms – the monthly rhythms of the menstrual cycle, the accelerated rhythms of labour ... it is through the maternal body that we all have access to the semiotic *chora*.[16]

The child thus experiences the semiotic *chora* either in the womb itself, or in the enclosed space of the mother's arms. Kristeva argues that:

> Discrete quantities of energy move through the body of the subject who is not yet constituted as such ...the drives, which are 'energy' charges as well as 'psychical' marks, articulate what we call a *chora*: a non expressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated.[17]

Kristeva's reference to 'the subject who is not yet constituted as such' makes it clear that this occurs before the symbolic allows the acquisition of language and adoption into the social order. While the 'drives', both physical (as in the case of oral and anal) and psychical, are connected with the body of the mother, since the infant at this stage has not yet reached knowledge of his / her separate identity, it is clear that this pre-linguistic experience leaves its mark, hence Kristeva's gloss of semiotics as 'distinctive mark, trace ... precursory sign'.[18] The semiotic can erupt through the symbolic order of language where it 'is particularly evident in poetic language'.[19]

The association of the semiotic with poetic language, and its similarity to Cixous' ideas of the role of the mother, leads me to regard the semiotic in positive terms, however it should be added that Kristeva shows that the semiotic can be hostile. Whereas in a man the reactivation of the pre-Oedipal semiotic creates rhythm and laughter, a woman's response to 'the call of the mother',[20] when unmediated by an Oedipal, paternal moderation of the semiotic, 'generates hallucinations, voices, "madness"'[21] and even suicide, as it did with both Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath. Margaret Homans argues, however, that women do not enter the symbolic order exclusively, and never entirely give up the pre-symbolic, or semiotic, communication. This means that 'the daughter ... speaks two languages at once',[22] her use of the semiotic therefore is always mediated by the Oedipal, and the semiotic needn't have such a destructive effect on the woman writer. Nonetheless, the 'drives' with which the *chora* is associated include the death drive.[23] The influence of the semiotic on Smith can, on the one hand, be found in her poetic language and search for a feminine poetic voice, yet it may also be responsible for her frequently voiced longing for death.

According to Judith Butler, theories such as those outlined above reinforce mistaken ideas regarding biological destiny. She argues further that Kristeva's view of the female body is 'fundamentally inverted':[24]

> the discursive production of the maternal body as prediscursive is a tactic in the self-amplification and concealment of those specific power relations by which the trope of the maternal body is produced. In these terms, the maternal body would no longer be understood as the hidden ground of all signification, the tacit cause of all culture. It would be understood, rather, as an effect or consequence of a system of sexuality in which the female body is required to assume maternity as the essence of itself and the law of its desire.[25]

Butler is here following Foucault's argument that it is discourse itself that produces ideas of sexual difference, to recognise the existence of a pre-symbolic element within discourse would therefore reinforce the power relations that are reproduced in language.

There are two problems here. First, to admit the existence of semiotic drives is not 'a tactic in ... power relations'. Rather, it suggests a means of asserting the femininity that might otherwise be devalued in those power relations. Secondly, it assumes that Kristeva's concentration on the maternal body imposes a biological destiny on women, and colludes in the idea that a woman is characterised wholly in terms of her reproductive function.[26] However, those theories which I have outlined above do not impose a maternal identity or motherhood itself onto a woman: rather they simply recognise that we are all born from a woman. Indeed, Toril Moi argues that Kristeva 'refuses to define "woman" ... [in] an attempt to locate the negativity ... pertaining to the marginal in "woman", in order to undermine the phallocentric order that defines woman as marginal in the first place.'[27] Ironically, since she as much as Cixous has been associated with the concept, Kristeva also rejects any idea of a specific *écriture féminine* since the semiotic is equally open to men in whom it creates laughter and poetry.

Extending Kristeva's ideas, and considering them in association with those of Cixous, it can be argued that a woman may feel or seek the maternal link because of the effects of patriarchal law. This is imposed with entry into the symbolic order and the acquisition of language in a system which is governed by a pre-existing binary structure of relationships in which the male is privileged over the female. A discourse which returns to the metaphorical mother, that is the early pre-symbolic experience, rather than becoming tied to patriarchal assumptions of femininity and reproduction as Butler argues, can be seen as a positive alternative to patriarchal ideas of what is the correct style of speaking and writing: indeed, earlier chapters have shown that ideas of writing like a man (and even writing at all) both privileges the male writer and dismisses the woman.

I have shown in earlier chapters that men's creativity has frequently focused on the metaphor of literary paternity: Harold Bloom describes poetic influence as 'a filial relationship',[28] in which a man becomes a poet by engaging in a literary struggle with his poetic forefathers. Similarly, in *A Hope for Poetry* (1934), C. Day Lewis uses the metaphor of the father to denote earlier poets, with the new or aspiring poet seen as the son.[29] As Gilbert and Gubar argue in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (1979):

> In patriarchal Western culture ... the text's author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power, like his penis. More, his pen's power, like his penis's power, is not just the ability to generate life but the power to create a posterity to which he lays claim.[30]

Literary creativity is thus harnessed to ideas of physical creativity, but the male creativity metaphor excludes women in its insistence on masculine procreation, fatherhood, and the filial relationship. Susan Stanford Friedman corroborates this point in her essay, 'Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor' (1989): 'to wield a pen is a masculine art that puts the woman writer at war with her body and her culture.'[31] Faced with this anxiety of authorship, Friedman argues that women have used a feminine creativity metaphor based on childbirth.

Smith, a childless woman, does not use the experience of giving birth as a metaphor for creativity. Yet she does use another version of the creativity metaphor, one in which she, or the subject of the poem, is a child seeking the mother. Creativity, however, involves poetic language, and Smith's search for the mother is a search for feminine language. Smith's creativity metaphor anticipates and illustrates 'French' feminism's analysis of the significance of the mother as a source or, to use Gilbert and Gubar's phrase, 'instrument of generative power'. The following pages will therefore examine those of Smith's poems which refer to childbirth, the search for the mother and the mother /

infant relationship in order to consider the significance of the mother in Smith's work. Further, I will look at them in terms of Smith's use of the creativity metaphor,

2. 'The Word': patriarchal exclusion from poetry

In 'About Chinese Women' (1974), Kristeva shows that it is the symbolic order marked by patriarchal law which excludes women from that which she designates the Word. In her analysis of the Judeo-Christian tradition which, in Western thought, has underpinned many attitudes to sexual difference, Julia Kristeva argues that the patriarchal system:

> requires that women be excluded from the single true and legislating principle, namely the Word, as well as from the (always paternal) element that gives procreation a social value: they are excluded from knowledge and power.[32]

Kristeva therefore follows the broadly Lacanian idea that formal language acquisition, the symbolic order, comes through the father: the world of the symbolic is marked by patriarchal law and governed by ideas of difference. In this system procreation itself is subordinated to the rule of the Father's Name, and Kristeva argues that motherhood would otherwise be perceived as a sign of the *jouissance* of the maternal body which must be suppressed.[33] Kristeva thus associates the 'word' that is speech and writing with social organisation and legislation, but her capitalisation of the word carries connotations of Logos, or the Word of God, originally Christ, then the interpreter of the message. That interpreter, however, whether as a priest or prophet, is masculine, for it is 'man who speaks to his God ... woman ... has no access to the word'.[34] As Susan Stanford Friedman argues:

> According to the Gospel of St John, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...' The power of the Word became the paradigm of male creativity, indeed the foundation of Western patriarchal ideology.[35]

Friedman shows that the capitalised Word, while referring to the Word of God, also comes to represent creativity, but as Kristeva and Friedman argue, that creativity is

itself a masculine prerogative.

Smith addresses this issue in 'The Word' (1971). In this poem the narrator expresses 'fear' of the spoken and written Word, and that fear impedes and blocks any expression of the narrator's joyous creativity:

> My heart leaps up with streams of joy,
> My lips tell of drouth;
> Why should my heart be full of joy
> And not my mouth?
>
> I fear the Word, to speak or write it down,
> I fear all that is brought to birth and born;
> This fear has turned my joy into a frown.[36]

That the narrator of the poem is female can be deduced by the image which equates speech and writing with childbirth, and the accompanying drawing also depicts a girl. It is significant that Smith, who had studied Greek,[37] capitalises Word, since it alerts the reader to the Word that is Logos, the Word of God, which Friedman argues has become 'the paradigm of male creativity ... the foundation of Western patriarchal ideology.'[38] Roger Scruton also points out that in Greek '*logos* means not only word, but reason, argument, account'.[39] This further relates *logos* to the masculine since reason is a masculine value.[40] The speaker of this poem, who wishes 'to speak or write ... down' the Word, therefore fears to enter the masculine creative discourse that is poetry.

For Smith, poetry is spoken before it is written: the first stanza concentrates on the inability of the voice to express that which she wishes to say: her 'lips tell of drouth', and the 'joy' that is in her heart cannot be translated to her 'mouth'. Only in the second stanza is the spoken Word associated with writing. However, despite Smith's use of the poetic and archaic word 'drouth', indicating a dialogue with and relationship to the literary tradition, it is the genre itself that causes the fear. There are similarities here to

'Voices About the Princess Anemone'(1950).[41] If Anemone's 'word' is the creative and literary word, like the speaker's in 'The Word', her need to leave society in favour of isolation in the wood can be attributed to the social prohibition against women poets.

I have shown that, according to Kristeva, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, men have appropriated the Word of God in their roles as priests and prophets, moreover, as it has been seen in the examination of poetry in the 1930s, they have also appropriated the creative word that is poetry.[42] However, women are rarely accepted as prophets and, until the latter decades in the twentieth century, were not granted the professional right to transmit the word of God as priests. Taking this into account, together with Kristeva's and Friedman's arguments regarding the masculine prerogative of creativity, can lead to an interpretation of 'The Word' that attributes 'fear [of] the Word' with women's marginalisation in the symbolic order, and suspicion of women who enter the genre of poetry. It is the knowledge of this marginalisation which turns the fertile and joyously productive 'streams' of the inspired emotion into a parched and arid drought: the 'fear' of 'the Word' impedes artistic expression.

Friedman argues further that the masculine 'appropriation of the creative Word ... attempts to reduce women to the processes of their body',[43] in other words, it identifies women with their reproductive potential. Moreover, 'the association of the pen ... with the phallus in metaphors of creativity ... implicitly excludes women from creativity.'[44] This has led women to adopt their own feminine metaphor to challenge the masculine concept of creativity and to propose another connection between creation and procreation. Women therefore use the childbirth metaphor in order to associate literary creativity with procreation, and challenge such patriarchal assumptions:

> women using the metaphor necessarily confront the patriarchally imposed, essential dilemma of their artistic identity: the binary system that conceives woman and writer, motherhood and authorhood, babies and books, as mutually exclusive.[45]

Friedman's approach does run the risk of assuming that all women who use the childbirth metaphor are mothers, although biological (rather than social) destiny ensures that women have the physical characteristics that associates the feminine body with maternal procreation, and it is in these terms that the metaphor can be specifically feminine. Hélène Cixous, for example, likens the desire to write with the 'gestation drive ... a desire to live self from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language'.[46] Cixous thus conflates creation with a metaphoric procreation, and likens the mind pregnant with literary production to the 'swollen belly'. Similarly, Jean Rhys knew that the labour of literary production was over and *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) finished when she dreamt of a baby in a cradle.[47] Smith's use of the metaphor to denote that which is not born (or written) has more in common with 'Stillborn' (1960), in which Sylvia Plath draws an analogy between unfinished poems which 'do not live' and stillborn babies:

> These poems do not live: it's a sad diagnosis.
> They grew their toes and fingers well enough,
> Their little foreheads bulged with concentration.
> If they missed out on walking about like people
> It wasn't for any lack of mother love.[48]

Here the childbirth metaphor lies behind the words: writing poetry is assumed to be like giving birth, therefore the poems which result are like the babies one has borne. In Plath's poetry the unsuccessful poems, those in which 'the lungs won't fill, and the heart won't start' are like babies which did not live. In 'The Word', too, Smith recognises the likeness between birth and literary creation, but, according to my reading, the masculine domination of poetry leads her to fear 'all that is brought to birth and born', that is both the process of writing and the written result.

Both Smith's and Plath's poems, written in 1971 and 1960 respectively, can be included in what Friedman describes as 'an explosion of women's writing about pregnancy, childbirth, nursing and motherhood'[49] which has occurred since the 1960s. Much of the more recent use of the childbirth metaphor has been a conscious feminist choice to represent women's experience: a 1978 edition of the journal *Feminist Studies* was devoted to motherhood because, as Carole H. Poston explains, 'female experiences, from menstruation to menopause, have been consistently slighted in our literature, childbirth is a virtually unexplored literary topic.'[50] This is what Friedman calls a 'biologic poetic' which 'does indeed run the risk of biological determinism ... It theoretically privileges motherhood as the basis of all creativity'.[51] The childbirth metaphor is therefore a feminine and a feminist strategy, however the problem with this metaphor, as Friedman points out, is that while it excludes men, it excludes childless women also. While Smith, a childless woman, did (in the autobiographical character of Pompey in *Novel on Yellow Paper*) claim to 'think of my poems as my kiddo'[52] it is noticeable that it is only in 'The Word' that she uses childbirth as a metaphor for literary creativity, only to emphasise her fear of both.

She does, however, refer to mothers in her poems. Some verses deal with a simple and apparently sincere representation of mother love, such as 'Human Affection' (1942), in which the child says 'Mother, I love you so ... I love you more than I know',[53] and 'The Sad Mother' (1942) who enjoys the baby's dependence on her before 'you must learn to creep'.[54] These brief verses (each consists of four lines) can be seen as an aspect of Smith's ventriloquy in that she speaks for the mother or child in a contented relationship. However, it has been seen in my examination of 'Rapunzel' in the previous chapter that the sorceress who stands in for a mother figure is absent, suggesting that

Smith is not entirely at ease with the idea, or the fact, of motherhood. This unease, however, is replaced by outright aggression in 'I'll have your heart' (1938), for the mother tells her child, who can be assumed by the accompanying drawing to be a daughter:

> I'll have your heart, if not by gift my knife
> Shall carve it out. I'll have your heart, your life.[55]

The metaphor of the knife used to 'carve ... out' the daughter's heart and obtain her love at the cost of the daughter's life, an inversion of the usual mother-daughter bond of love and protection, perversely shows motherhood in the most violent and threatening terms, suggesting anger on the part of the writer. The daughter's response to this destructive maternity is 'I do not love you, Mother', further undermining social ideas of the mother and child relationship.

'I'll have your heart' was first published in *Tender Only to One* in 1938, a period when there was great concern about the danger of a fall in population: according to Deirdre Beddoe '[i]t was predicted in 1936 that by the year 2033 England and Wales would have a population no larger than London.'[56] Even before demographic alarm placed emphasis on motherhood, there was an ideology which maintained the importance of marriage, with motherhood as the implied aim of marriage. An examination of magazines published by Smith's employer, Pearson's, in 1932 and 1934, *Peg's Paper, Peg's Companion,* and *Pearson's Magazine*, shows that the first two titles, both aimed at women, favoured romance plots in which the desired outcome is marriage. Moreover, *Pearson's Magazine* (aimed at a mixed audience) published in February and March 1934 two articles with the title 'Send the Women Back Home',[57] advocating that women should leave the workforce and return to domesticity. In her examination of the romance stories in Pearson's magazines

during the 1920s, Laura Severin has shown that Smith was aware of the ideology of domesticity.[58] 'I'll have your heart' is proof of Smith's rejection of the ideology of motherhood. It will be remembered from my earlier discussion of Smith's attitudes to children, moreover, that she identified with children and regarded them as rivals. Lacking empathy with or experience of motherhood, Smith avoids wholehearted use of the childbirth metaphor because she doesn't want to be, or put herself into the position of, a mother. However, she does desire to bear the word, and the following pages will show that she therefore seeks another kind of creativity metaphor in which Smith, or the subject of the poem, searches for a metaphorical mother. In this she anticipates the arguments given by Kristeva and Cixous that the mother, because of her association with the pre-Oedipal stage that precedes the child's acquisition of symbolic language, is the source of a feminine relationship to language.

3. Finding the source: 'The Lady of the Well-spring'

According to the poem's subtitle, 'The Lady of the Well-Spring' refers to and was inspired by Renoir's 'La Source', a painting which depicts a female nude in the odalisque pose. In Smith's poem, Joan, 'the English child'[59] in a French drawing-room, hears the ladies speak of one who has been enchanted: 'He is quite captive to the Lady of the Well-Spring, / Who will rescue him?' The identity of the unnamed 'he' is not given, neither is the reason for his captivity, but Joan, eager for 'an excuse to go', sets out to rescue him, but finds instead both the Lady and the well-spring in a lush woodland landscape:

> ... Into a little wood
> She runs, the branches catching at her feet draw blood
> And there is a sound of piping screaming croaking clacking
> As the birds of the wood rise chattering.
> And now as she runs there is the bicker
> Of a stream growing narrower in a trickle
> And a splash and a flinging, it is water springing.

Now with her feet in deep moss Joan stands looking
Where on a bank a great white lady is lying
A fair smooth lady whose stomach swelling
Full breasts fine waist and long legs tapering
Are shadowed with grass-green streaks.

Both Martin Pumphrey and Laura Severin consider 'The Lady of the Well-spring' to be a fairy tale poem. According to Pumphrey, Joan is presented with a choice between the social world of the sophisticated French drawing room, and the 'anarchic, fertile wood'.[60] Both, however, are 'potential prisons. Forced to choose, Joan opts for the wild.' Pumphrey basis his reading on the wood into which Joan travels, so that the Lady of the Well-spring thus becomes simply a part of the wild. This is to overlook the significance of the title, as well Joan's decision to 'live / here' as the Lady's captive rather than to rescue the unnamed man. Severin argues that Joan escapes into art, that is the painting by Renoir, rather than nature, but this done in order to 'abandon the stories of domesticity, which emphasise the centrality of a prince in a woman's life.'[61] In this way, 'Joan escapes her culturally prescribed ending' which is 'that of marriage'.[62] Severin therefore assumes that Joan would marry the 'captive prince'.[63] However, Joan is not a woman, she is a child simply using the rescue as an 'excuse to go', and her lack of maturity would preclude marriage. Moreover, 'he' lacks identity in the poem, and may be neither adult man nor prince. While this poem does juxtapose the real world with one of enchantment, I do not primarily categorise it as a fairy tale poem since it refers neither to an existing tale nor to the world of faery. Moreover, a reading that does not confine the poem to the frame of fairy tales releases it from Severin's interpretation that depends on marriage to a prince as a conventional ending. My reading will therefore diverge from both Pumphrey's and Severin's in that I will take both the Lady and the epigraph into account; and I will not assume that the poem refers to a romance plot. Instead, I see the

Lady as a metaphorical figure of a mother, and will argue that 'The Lady of the Well-spring' is concerned with the source of poetic inspiration.

The wood into which Joan runs, and in which she will find the Lady, becomes associated with femininity when the masculine couplets 'wood' and 'blood' give way to a rush of feminine endings: 'clacking' / 'chattering', 'bicker' / 'trickle', 'springing' / 'looking', 'lying' / 'swelling', as Joan gets closer to the object of her quest. Of equal significance are the sounds that Joan hears within the wood: these are unidentified and non-referential sound rather than language, a 'piping screaming croaking clacking' which belong to the wood but are not uttered by the birds which simply chatter. This could even indicate faery inhabitation, as in Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market' in which the goblins emit sounds which emphasise their non-human difference:

> Chuckling, clapping crowing,
> Clucking and gobbling,
> Mopping and mowing,
> ...
> Parrot voiced and whistler,
> Helter skelter, hurry skurry,
> Chattering like magpies,
> Fluttering like pigeons,
> ...
> Barking, mewing, hissing, mocking[.][64]

Non-referential sounds such as those uttered by Rossetti's goblins as well as Smith's unidentified woodland voices, however, can indicate the influence of the semiotic impulse breaking through the linguistic surface. I have argued that the semiotic is associated with the rhythmic and wordless flow, or pulsions, which are gathered in the *chora*.[65] Kristeva argues that:

> our discourse – all discourse – moves with and against the *chora* in the sense that it simultaneously depends upon and refuses it ... the *chora* precedes and underlies figuration and thus specularization, and is analogous only to vocal and kinetic rhythm.[66]

While the semiotic is normally suppressed within language, it can break through to act

as disruption which manifests itself as meaningless sounds and rhythm. The 'piping screaming croaking clacking', which convey sounds from an unidentified source but which do not resemble linguistic communication, can be identified as a semiotic impulse breaking through the narrative of the poem. According to Kristeva, 'the influx of the semiotic ... is particularly evident in poetic language.'[67] Since the semiotic is associated with a time before language and with the mother, it is significant that Joan hears the primitive sounds of the wood as she gets closer to *La Source*.

Severin argues that Joan's meeting with the Lady offers 'the option of women living together, perhaps as lesbians, as an alternative to the traditional romance plot.'[68] Calvin Bedient similarly interprets the poem as an erotic awakening.[69] The child Joan's meeting with the naked woman who has already captivated an unidentified male could indeed be seen as an encounter in which the child becomes aware of naked female sexuality. A reading that takes the eroticism of the theme into account can also interpret the poem in terms of the way it lends power to she who was the passive and supine object of the male painter's gaze: in Smith's poem she becomes a powerful enchantress. However, the woman has 'full breasts' and 'stomach swelling', therefore she represents fecundity and primal motherhood, which can remove interpretations of the poem from Severin's and Bedient's ideas of eroticism and lesbian sexuality.

I have shown previously that Hélène Cixous uses the metaphorical figure of the mother to describe the pre-Oedipal time before the child acquires the symbolic language which in itself can be governed by a pre-existing social relationship in which the male is privileged over the female. The mother therefore becomes a primal memory of maternal presence and wordless voice, thus emphasising the essentially oral nature of a feminine relationship to language:

> The Voice sings from a time before law, before the Symbolic took one's breath away and reappropriated it into language under its authority of separation ... How come this privileged relationship with voice? ... woman is never far from the 'mother' (I do not mean the role but the 'mother' as no-name and as source of goods).[70]

The Voice, which 'sings from a time before law' (or the Law of the Father, the patriarchal order that rules symbolic language) is therefore pre-linguistic, the voice of the meaningless sounds and rhythmic crooning that communicates with the infant. If the meaningless voices of the wood, which communicate without language, are seen in Kristeva's and Cixous' terms, then, Joan's journey to the Lady of the Well-Spring can be seen as a search for the origins of language and the source of poetic power. The parallel with 'Goblin Market' can again be drawn: the goblins who cluck and gobble, like the unnamed sources of sound in Smith's wood, represent a semiotic or pre-linguistic communication which recalls the instinctive and primary relationship with the mother which is essential to creativity. Joan's search takes her through the first sounds which might denote the first relationship with language, the feminine rhyme endings which have been identified reinforcing the idea that she is coming closer to the mother figure, who is seen in terms of fertility and voluptuous femininity, whose 'stomach swelling / Full breasts' signify the pregnancy or the possibility of motherhood and is thus associated with the womb-like *chora*. The source and *La Source*, the well spring and the origin of language, is therefore found in a maternal figure.

This idea is reinforced by Joan's journey, which has taken her through water, through 'tall wet grass', by the 'trickle' of the stream, to the 'water springing' where the woman lies in 'a place so green and watery'. The water which characterises Joan's journey can be seen as a feminine element because of its association with amniotic fluid and milk, the 'goods'[71] of which Cixous' metaphorical 'mother' is the source. Moreover, as Freud

argues in 'Symbolism in Dreams', because every human has spent the first phase of existence in water, namely the amniotic fluid of the uterus, '[b]irth is invariably represented by something which has a connection with *water*'.[72] Joan's journey is therefore towards a rebirth which will give her the well-spring of poetic language through the mother's body, the language which was prefigured by the primal, semiotic sounds of the wood. Having found the Lady of the Well-Spring, Joan rejects her mission to rescue the unnamed man and welcomes her own captivity:

> I do not wish to rescue him, blurts Joan,
> The lady lolls. Do you wish to go home?
> No, says Joan, I should like to live
> Here. Right, says the lady, you are my captive.

The enjambment after 'live' creates a pause, a suspension in which its linguistic opposite, 'die', hovers unspoken. Joan's captivity, which may be enchantment, could grant her poetic inspiration, like the knight in Keats's 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' and Laura in Rossetti's 'Goblin Market', both of which have been discussed in the previous chapter. Moreover, the figure of the mother will allow her to remain with the source of feminine linguistics.

4. 'A Dream of Nourishment': inscribing *jouissance* and finding the semiotic

'The Lady of the Well-spring' describes finding the figure of the mother, and thus the source of poetic and feminine language. 'A Dream of Nourishment' (1957) takes the theme of maternity further by explicitly narrating the experience of nursing at the mother's breast. In this poem Smith relates a dream of infancy, in which breast-feeding provides both nourishment and joy:

> I had a dream of nourishment
> Against a breast
> My infant face was presst
> Ah me what *suffisance* I drew therefrom
> What strength, what glory from that fattening fluid,
> The fattening most

Was to my infant taste...[.][73]

The joy of the imagined experience and the nourishment that is derived ends when the breast is 'withdrawn violently / And oh the famishment for me.' Arthur Rankin believes that this poem 'seems to get to the heart of [Smith's] sense of deprivation and lack of fulfilment more than any other'[74] and goes on to suggest that the poem reveals guilt feelings about sensory pleasure and 'frustration of the power to draw nourishment from love-relationships'.[75] Rankin thus takes a biographical approach to this poem, an approach which is, perhaps, invited by the assertive 'I' who speaks. In this reading Smith does not assume the voice of a different persona but appears to address the reader in her own voice, referring to the 'I' that is herself and relating her own experience.

Rankin's analysis does not consider Smith's gender and the women's literary tradition, both of which should be taken into account. In an extension of the childbirth metaphor which has been discussed above, other women poets have written of dreams of breast-feeding, either giving the breast to the child, as in Charlotte Mew's 'Ne Me Tangito' in which 'My breast was bared / But sheltered by my hair / I found you, suddenly, lying there,'[76] or taking the breast, as in Anne Sexton's 'Dreaming the Breasts', which is addressed to 'Mother, / Strange goddess face / Above my milk Home'.[77] In contrast to these female celebrations of the mother and child relationship, women writers have also shown that male emotions about the breast are dominated by the erotic. Whereas Ruth in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* feels 'maternal joy'[78] at nursing her son beyond infancy, Milkman is shamed by the recollection of breast-feeding that gave him his nickname, and thus` ascribes perversion to his mother:

> 'My mother nursed me when I was old enough to talk, stand up ... And how did I forget that? And why? And if she did that when there was no reason for it, when I also drank milk and Ovaltine and everything else from a glass, then maybe she did other things with her father?'[79]

Smith's use of the theme of breastfeeding, associated with celebration rather than erotic connotations of the breast, associates her with other women writers who have used the same topic. Both Morrison and Sexton, however, refer to a specific mother, while Smith celebrates an abstract relationship. Rather than commemorating (the) specific and particular dream, the poem is about 'A Dream', and the breast that offers such plenitude is similarly non-specific:

> I had a dream of nourishment
> Against a breast
> My infant face was presst
> Ah me the *suffisance* I drew therefrom
> What strength, what glory from that fattening fluid,
> The fattening most
> Was to my infant taste
> For oh the sun of strength beat in my veins
> And swelled me full, I lay in brightest sun
> All ready to put forth, all bursting, all delight.

The speaker remembers being pressed against 'a breast' which is granted the definite article only when it is withdrawn. The breast and the textually absent or missing mother can thus be seen as a symbol of sustenance and gratification. This gratification is experienced in terms of fruition: the strength which is gained from the milk is akin to the ripening qualities of the sun, in which the poet achieves fertile growth: the speaker is 'swelled ... full', 'ready to put forth, all bursting, all delight.'

It can be seen that this poem uses formal, even elevated, language, 'presst' compresses the word 'pressed' in an almost archaic manner, omitting a letter and substituting a final 't' to exploit the aural similarity to 'breast'. The use of the French *suffisance* assumes the complicity of a reader who will derive the connotation of self-importance as well as sufficiency from the word. However, within the symbolic language of this poem, Smith seeks something else. The time of infancy which Smith and other women writers describe, in which pleasure is gained from or by

breast-feeding, is the pre-Oedipal and pre-linguistic stage. Kristeva points out that this is 'dominated by the oral ... drives ... hence the pleasure is auto-erotic as well as inseparable from the mother's body.'[80] I have argued that the mother is absent or missing from Smith's text; the lost figure of the mother is thus implied but not articulated. It can therefore be seen as the Lacanian real that is anterior to or beyond the symbolic (or linguistic) order of the poem. The real, corresponding to neither the symbolic nor the imaginary, represents 'that which is lacking in the symbolic order. The ineliminable residue of articulation ... which may be approached but never grasped'.[81] A 'residue of articulation' which is not symbolic, that is linguistic, and which cannot be eliminated recalls Kristeva's theories of the semiotic which are based on the body of the mother, indeed Elizabeth Bronfen affirms that the real 'belongs to what Kristeva has called the "semiotiké".[82] Kristeva herself shows the connection between the Lacanian real and the semiotic which is the source of poetry when she argues that the rational thought of the classical age dismissed 'as *madness*, *mysticism or poetry* any attempt to articulate that impossible element which henceforth can only be designated as the Lacanian *real*.'[83]

It has been seen that feminist ideas of *écriture feminine* argue that, in order to find her own style of writing, a woman must seek out and return to the source of her own difference and strength, to the physical female body. Moreover, as Cixous argues, that source is the physical and symbolic mother:

> I don't mean the overbearing, clutchy "mother" but, rather, what touches you, the equivoice that affects you, fills your breast with an urge to come to language and launches your force; the rhythm that laughs you ... that part of you that leaves a space between yourself and urges you to inscribe in language your woman's style. In women there is always more or less of the mother ... who nourishes[.][84]

The nourishment that comes from the mother is the milk of which Smith dreams: in Cixous' famous phrase, a woman retains 'within her at least a little of that good

mother's milk. She writes in white ink.'[85]

In 'A Dream of Nourishment', then, Smith's reversion to or seeking after the metaphoric mother can be seen to be connected with her femininity and her own relationship to language. The memory or fantasy of suckling brings the delight which the poet describes in the physical terms of bodily satisfaction which have been seen to be related to fertility and growth. The imagery, however, also refers to sexual orgasm and conception: 'And swelled me full ... / All ready to put forth, all bursting, all delight.' Smith therefore writes from the body and inscribes the *jouissance*[86] that is experienced, thus anticipating by some twenty years Cixous' argument in 'The Laugh of the Medusa':

> I wished that ... woman would write ... might exclaim: I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs. Time and again I, too, have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could burst – burst with forms[.][87]

Cixous' 'forms' can be understood as literary forms which are suppressed. The world of the imaginary is related by Cixous to the physical body and the pleasure that can be derived from it. It is noticeable that in describing *jouissance* Cixous uses similar imagery to Smith's. Both women use the same verb, to burst, to describe the sensation of joyous plenitude: Smith is 'bursting ... delight' while Cixous suggests that the unexpressed literary imagination could 'burst' out. Smith uses the image of lying in 'brightest sun' which is akin to Cixous' image of brightness in 'luminous torrents'. Cixous' linking of the rapturous *jouissance* of the body's experience with feminine literary production can therefore be used to derive an interpretation of Smith's poem. The 'Dream of Nourishment' takes the poet back to the feminine source of language and poetry, which is the semiotic. Contact with the mother brings the woman writer delighted joy and facilitates literary production, a readiness to 'put forth'.

In the second stanza the sudden withdrawal of the breast, therefore the linguistic source, leaves the narrator starved and emaciated:

> In darkness I lay then
> And thin,
> Thin as a sheeted ghost
> And I was famished,
> Hankered for a dish
> I thought, of blood, as in some classicist's
> Old tale
> To give me hue and substance, make me hale.

The images of fulfilment which were seen in the first stanza are replaced by their binary opposites: the sun is replaced by darkness, fatness by thinness, sufficiency with hunger. The *jouissance* and fruitful growth which was expressed by the imagery disappears. In this state of deprivation the joyous life of the first stanza deteriorates into a state akin to death: the 'thin' and 'sheeted ghost' is surely a shrouded corpse. Once the breast has been 'violently withdrawn' the yearning is no longer for the life-giving and inspiring milk, but for a heroic and strengthening 'dish ... of blood' from a 'classicist's / Old tale', ostensibly alluding to the classical and male dominated literary tradition. Blood has other connotations, however, particularly for a woman: as Susan Gubar argues, 'one of the primary and most resonant metaphors provided by the female body is blood'.[88] After infancy comes puberty, therefore the blood might signify the menstrual bleeding that marks a female speaker's passage to maturity. In this reading it is longed for in order to complete the separation from the mother figure. A further nuance can lead to an interpretation of religious salvation, with the blood alluding to the blood of Christ, in which case the 'dish ... of blood' can be seen to represent the chalice of communion wine in the Christian Eucharist. The blood and what it represents, however, is finally rejected in favour of the primary and the preferred, which is the mother's body and the semiotic source of feminine language:

'Oh breast, Oh Best'. The unexpected capitalisation removes 'best' from the statement of an adjective of comparison and elevates it into a proper noun, so that breast becomes Best.

5. Conclusion: the significance of the mother

It has been seen that masculine metaphors of creativity draw upon ideas of fatherhood, filial relationships, and male procreation. This is a part of the exclusion of women from the male dominated genre of poetry, an exclusion that can be seen to result in Smith's 'fear [of] the Word'.[89] An examination of Smith's poetry has shown that Smith's engagement with the genre of poetry is marked firstly by diffidence, in that she masks her engagement with serious themes by the unthreatening use of nursery genres. However, this chapter has shown that she seeks other feminine versions of creativity. While feminine versions of the creativity metaphor concentrate on childbirth, 'The Word' expresses fear of 'all that is brought to birth and born', therefore fear of giving birth to children as well as poems. Smith avoids wholehearted use of the childbirth metaphor because she neither wants to be a mother, nor does she want to put herself into the position of a mother, in direct contravention of social ideas in the 1930s that imposed domesticity and motherhood as the ideal, moreover required, function of women. Smith's unwillingness to engage with the idea of real and tangible motherhood can also be attributable to her empathy with, and performance of, childhood: previous chapters have shown that Smith did not mentally and fully enter into adulthood, and would therefore not engage with the idea of (adult) motherhood.

I have shown that Smith does use another version of a creativity metaphor, one in which she, or the subject of the poem, is in the position of the child finding the mother, and both 'The Lady of the Well-spring' and 'A Dream of Nourishment' show a

preoccupation with fecundity and the symbol of the mother. In my reading 'The Lady of the Well-spring' does not signify Joan's erotic awakening, rather the discovery of she who is textually absent from 'A Dream of Nourishment', that is the mother with whom the infant was once in a unitary relationship during the pre-Oedipal and pre-linguistic stage. Taking Kristeva's theory of semiotics into account, then, we can see its significance for a reading of Smith's work. When language is acquired, the semiotic *chora* is not lost but 'acquires a more precise status ... it exists in practice only within the symbolic and requires the symbolic break to obtain the complex articulation we associate with it in musical and poetic practices.'[90] Smith's texts both exhibit the function of the semiotic in that it erupts through the symbolic order to provide the rhythms and transformations of language that occur in poetry, and show an unconscious search for the source of that poetry. What is also remarkable about Smith's privileging of the figure of the mother in 'The Lady of the Well-spring' and 'A Dream of Nourishment', together with her writing of and from the body's *jouissance*, is that it anticipates theories of *écriture féminine*, thus revising Cixous assumption, in 1976, that feminine writing, rather than existing already, would become possible in the future. However, I have argued that the semiotic *chora*, as the location of drives or pulsions, is also connected with the death drive, and therefore has a significance with regard to Smith's frequently voiced longing for and obsession with death. This will be examined in the greater depth in the next chapter.

Notes

1. Susan Sellers, *Language and Sexual Difference: Feminist Writing in France* (London: Macmillan, 1991) p. 132.

2. Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1981) pp. 245 - 264 (p. 245).

3. See note 2 above.

4. Cixous p. 253.

5. Cixous p. 251.

6. Morag Shiach, *The Politics of Writing* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 22.

7. See note 5 above.

8. Cora Kaplan, 'Language and Gender' in *Literature in the Modern World: Critical Essays and Documents* ed. by Dennis Walder (1990; rpt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) pp. 310 - 316

9. Cixous p. 250.

10. Shiach p. 19.

11. Cixous p. 252.

12. See note 5 above.

13. Sellers p. 140.

14. Julia Kristeva, 'Revolution in Poetic Language', in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (1986; rpt. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 89 - 136 (p. 95).

15. Ibid p. 127.

16. Alice E. Adams *Reproducing the Womb: Images of Childbirth in Science, Feminist Theory and Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994) p. 21.

17. Kristeva, 'Revolution in Poetic Language' p. 93.

18. See note 17 above.

19. Kristeva 'Revolution in Poetic Language' p. 113.

20. Julia Kristeva 'About Chinese Women', in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (1986; rpt. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) pp.139 - 159 (p. 156).

21. Ibid p. 157.

22. Margaret Homans, *Bearing the Word: Language and Experience in Nineteenth – Century Women's Writing* (1986; rpt. London: University of Chicago Press, 1989) p. 13.

23. Kristeva, 'Revolution in Poetic Language' p. 95.

24. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990; rpt. London: Routledge, 1999), p. 117.

25. Ibid pp. 117 - 8.

26. Ibid p. 118.

27. Toril Moi, *Sexual Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (1985; rpt. London: Routledge, 1993) p. 163.

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30. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, 2 vols (London: Yale University Press, 1979) 2 p. 6.

31. Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Creativity and the Childbirth Metaphor: Gender Difference in Literary Discourse', in *Speaking of Gender* ed. by Elaine Showalter (London: Routledge, 1989) p. 73.

32. Kristeva, 'About Chinese Women' p. 143.

33. Ibid p. 138.

34. Ibid p. 142.

35. Friedman p. 76.

36. Stevie Smith, *The Collected Poems*, ed. by James MacGibbon (1975; rpt. London: Penguin, 1985) p. 542.

37. Frances Spalding, *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography* (1988; rpt. London: Faber. 1990) p. 43.

38. See note 27 above.

39. Roger Scruton, *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Philosophy* (London: Duckworth, 1996) p. 21.

40. Moi p. 160.

41. Smith, *The Collected Poems*, p. 295. See also my discussion of this poem on p. 41.

42. See my discussion on pp. 28 – 30.

43. See note 35.

44. Friedman p. 73.

45. Ibid p. 85.

46. Cixous p. 261.

47. Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, ed. by Angela Smith (1966; rpt. London: Penguin, 1997) p. xxvi.

48. Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems,* ed. by Ted Hughes (London: Faber, 1981) p. 142.

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50. Carol H. Poston, 'Childbirth in Literature', *Feminist Review*, 4 (1978)), 18 - 31 (p. 20).

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53. Smith, *The Collected Poems*, p. 163.

54. Ibid, p. 176.

55. Ibid, p. 148.

56. Deirdre Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty: Women Between the Wars 1918-1939* (London: Pandora, 1989) p. 20.

57. Sylvain Hardacre, 'Send the Women Back Home', *Pearson's Magazine*, February 1934 pp. 126 - 132 and March 1934 pp. 324 - 6.

58. Laura Severin, *Stevie Smith's Resistant Antics* (Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 1997) p. 13.

59. Smith, *The Collected Poems*, p. 311.

60. Martin Pumphrey, 'Play, Fantasy and Strange Laughter: Stevie Smith's Uncomfortable Poetry', in *In Search of Stevie Smith* ed. by Sanford Sternlicht (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991) pp. 97 - 113 (p. 109).

61. Laura Severin, '"The Gilt is off the Gingerbread": Stevie Smith's Revisionary Fairy Tales', *Journal of Gender Studies,* 12 (2003) 203 - 214 (p. 209).

62. Ibid.

63. Ibid.

64. Christina Rossetti, *Poems and Prose*, ed. by Jan Marsh. (London: Everyman/Dent, 1994) pp. 170 - 2.

65. Kristeva, 'About Chinese Women' p. 143.

66. Kristeva, 'Revolution in Poetic Language' pp. 93 - 4.

67. Ibid p. 113.

68. See note 63.

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70. Cixous, p. 251.

71. Ibid.

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73. Smith, *The Collected Poems*, p. 344.

74. Arthur C. Rankin, *The Poetry of Stevie Smith 'Little Girl Lost'* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1985), p. 30.

75. Ibid, p. 31.

76. Charlotte Mew, *The Collected Poems,* ed. by Val Warner (London: Virago, 1981), p. 43.

77. Anne Sexton, *The Book of Folly* (London: Chatto/Hogarth, 1974), p. 29.

78. Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon.* (London: Picador/Pan, 1989), p. 13.

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80. Kristeva, 'About Chinese Women' p. 148.

81. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, tr. by Alan Sheridan (1977; rpt. London: Tavistock, 1980) p. x.

82. Elizabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 53.

83. Julia Kristeva, 'The True-Real' in *The Kristeva Reader* pp. 214 - 237 (p. 217).

84. Cixous, p. 252.

85. Ibid, p. 251.

86. I have used *jouissance* in Barthes' terms of bliss or joy (*The Pleasure of the Text*, tr. by Richard Miller, London: Jonathan Cape, 1975). Feminist use, however, also encompasses ideas of participation and property as well as ecstasy. As Betsy Wing glosses the word, it conveys "*simultaneously* sexual, political, and economic overtones" and phonetically suggests *j'oui sens*: I hear meaning. (*The Newly Born Woman*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986, p. 165)

87. Cixous, p. 246.

88. Susan Gubar, '"The Blank Page" and the Issues of Female Creativity', in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*, ed. by Elaine Showalter (1986; rpt. London: Virago, 1992), p. 296.

89. See note 36.

90. Kristeva, 'Revolution in Poetic Language' p. 118.

CHAPTER 7

FEMININE POETICS II: DEATH AND REBIRTH

1. Introduction: death and language

Few critics have considered the theme of death in Smith's work in any depth. Catherine A. Civello argues that 'Smith identifies the cessation of poetry with the death of the poet'[1] while Frances Spalding remarks that 'central to her thoughts on death ... was the belief in its finality'.[2] Both of these statements are arguable, and are based on a biographical reading of Smith's work, whereas the following pages will show that the poems reveal more complex ideas about death. In this chapter I will therefore examine several poems together with two prose works to show how they support the idea that it is neither the finality of death nor the cessation of poetry that makes the theme of death important in Smith's work.

Romana Huk takes the argument beyond the simplistic equation between death and finality, and in so doing goes further in offering a useful theory about the death for which Smith obsessively longed throughout the *Collected Poems*. Huk argues that:

> modern women writers have been obliged to redefine love and death, the only options available to feminine protagonists throughout the literary tradition. For Smith, as for Sylvia Plath ... love becomes a burning desire for death, the only "ecstasy" possible in her "human textuality" (as opposed to "sexuality"). And death becomes, of course, the (feminine) abyss beyond language, the space against which words and identities take definition; it becomes the darkly desired, Lacanian "real" glimpsed when the symbolic (or linguistic) and "imaginary" worlds collide.[3]

In Smith's poetry the theme of death is returned to obsessively, but also romantically. Death is frequently personified and courted, flattered and invoked in prayer, as in her poem 'Why do I...' (1962) with its explanation that death is regarded as a friend because 'Sweet Death, kind Death, / Of all the gods you are the best.'[4] What Huk calls Smith's 'burning desire for death' is, indeed, frequently associated with love. Often

poems are ostensibly about love, such as 'Tender Only to One' (1938) which mimics the 'he loves me, he loves me not' game with flower petals. The poem is also apparently about romantic love. It plays on the female virtue of constancy with the speaker fingering the petals, remaining 'Tender only to one / I do not know his name'[5] until the last stanza reveals the loved one to be Death, significantly capitalised so as to become a named person akin to a human lover. Similarly, in an unpublished couplet, Death is described as 'my earliest love ... That was my love from my first breath.'[6] In these terms, death, ardently desired and longed for, stands in for the sexual desire and love which is otherwise lacking in Smith's poems.

Deriving her ideas from an interpretation that defines the 'real' as that which is excluded and belongs to neither the symbolic nor imaginary registers, Huk argues that death becomes the 'feminine abyss beyond language ... the Lacanian "real"'.[7] Elizabeth Bronfen also links death to the real when she argues that a 'representation ... of the dying body / corpse ... can be understood as a representative of the order of the real'.[8] In the previous chapter I have argued that in poems such as 'The Lady of the Well-spring' and 'A Dream of Nourishment' Smith seeks the source of language in the maternal image, moreover, the textually absent mother in the latter poem is the Lacanian real which cannot be articulated, but which is associated with Kristeva's ideas of the semiotic. Drawing on these ideas, together with those of Cixous, I have proposed that, for Smith, the *source* of language is in the semiotic, or imaginary period, in which the child is in a state of unity with the mother. However, the semiotic *chora* is the location of the drives or pulsions that are analogous to rhythm and therefore to the music and poetry which results from the eruption of the semiotic into the symbolic order, but these drives include the death drive:

The mother's body is therefore what mediates the symbolic law organising social

> relations and becomes the ordering principle of the semiotic *chora*, which is on the path of destruction, aggressivity and death ... Freud notes that the most instinctual drive is the death drive ... the semiotic *chora* is no more than the place where the subject is both generated and negated, the place where his unity succumbs before the process of charges and stases that produce him.[9]

In these terms, the death drive, or Smith's obsession with death, is a necessary part of Smith's search for feminine poetic language, since both are generated in the *chora*. The following pages, then, will examine further the significance of death in Smith's poetry, and extend the argument of the previous chapter to show that death, like ideas of infancy and the search for the mother, is connected with artistic creativity and inspiration. However, rather than death representing an abyss *beyond* language, as Huk argues, I will show that death in Smith's work is associated with the desire for rebirth. By seeking rebirth through the figure of the mother, which I have shown is connected with Smith's linguistic search, Smith longs for death as part of her search for the source of poetic language itself, which is the semiotic.

2. The desire for death

In Smith's manuscript of 'God the Drinker' (1957), the poet explains that the poem describes '[a]nother suicide situation'.[10] The suicide attempt is made explicit in the opening stanza:

> I like to see him drink the gash
> I made with my own knife
> And draw the blood out of my wrist
> And drink my life.[11]

According to Catherine A. Civello, in this poem 'God drinks the blood that flows from the speaker's self-inflicted wound.'[12] This interpretation, however, allows the title to dictate the meaning at the expense of close examination of the poem. Although the drinker is 'a god' (although not God), it is Death who drinks from the wound: 'Who is this one who drinks so deep? / His name is Death, He drinks asleep.' Civello's

interpretation is also aided by the capitalisation of 'He', however it should be noted that this is a later addition: the manuscript has 'he' in lower case.[13] It is, then, death itself that is personified: the speaker likes to 'see him drink the gash / I made with my own knife'.

The relationship with death is oddly erotic: the speaker derives pleasure from the act of gashing the wrist and from the masculine figure who 'draw[s] the blood' from her wrist afterwards. Death is thus seen as a vampire figure who drinks the speaker's blood. This poem, however, inverts the usual trope of male versions of vampire fantasies in which women are the passive and innocent victims of desire: in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) Lucy and Mia are, as Burton Hatlen argues, 'receptive but passive ... Nothing is asked of them but surrender' to male desire;[14] while Christobel in Coleridge's poem of the same name (1798-9) similarly submits to the lesbian lamia vampire, Geraldine. In Smith's poem both the poet and the speaker, referred to as 'she' in the third verse, are female, and in Smith's vampire fantasy the male vampire-figure who drinks the blood is welcomed rather than predatory. Moreover, the speaker has the ability to offer and withdraw both the wrist and the bleeding knife, for another speaker, who can be assumed from his desire to drink the blood to be death himself, reveals that the knife (and therefore the suicide attempt) has been withdrawn:

> (She has taken the sweet knife far away,
> The knife bleeds by night and day,
> Night and day the blade drips,
> I put the sweet knife to my lips.)

What emerges is a flirtation with death. The speaker, liking to see 'him drink the gash' and 'draw the blood' then draws back from the suicide so that Death can only 'put the sweet knife' to his lips rather than the wrist. If, as I have argued, the second speaker is death, the narration is shared between the suicide and Death; however each narration allows attention to be focused on the personification of Death rather than on the suicide.

Rather than describing the reasons for or the effect of the wrist-cutting on the first speaker, Smith places the focus on he whom 'drinks so deep ... drinks asleep'. Smith therefore idealises suicide: the means of death is a 'sweet knife'; the act of dying is eternal, since '[t]he knife bleeds by night and day'; and there is no indication that death either occurred or was foiled. Rather, the concentration is on making intimate and erotic contact with Death, whose personification Smith loved, through the use of the alluring knife. The fact that he is seen here as a god carries connotations of power on the part of Death, and worship on the part of the first narrator of the poem.

'God the Drinker', while taking the topic of suicide, concentrates more on the god who is death than on the suicidal subject, and it is unlikely to describe Smith's own suicide attempt four years earlier. According to Spalding:

> What exactly happened cannot now be uncovered. One story that reached Kay Dick was that Stevie lunged at Sir Neville [her employer] with a pair of scissors. If this was so, she must have turned them on herself after he had left the room and cut one of her wrists. At her request a member of staff telephoned Margaret Branch.[15]

This account does not describe a serious and considered suicide attempt: Smith seems to have acted on impulse and requested help immediately. Moreover, cutting one wrist with a pair of scissors does not resemble the slow and lovingly described 'gash ... with my own knife' in 'God the Drinker'. In fact, the manuscript of the latter poem explains that 'it has for a subtitle one of Goya's titles for a drawing ... Porque Fue Sensible (because she was sensitive)',[16] thus the drawing rather than experience of suicide inspired the poem.

'God the Drinker' is explicit in its desire for death, or rather for the personification of Death, a desire that is activated by the suicidal slashing of the speaker's wrists. In 'A Turn Outside' (1959), a play for radio, however, Smith's obsession with death is

unveiled more implicitly. In this play Smith places herself in an imaginary radio interview in which she is questioned about her poems. Two voices are heard: that of Stevie Smith, and that of the interviewer, called the Interlocutor. Although the part of Smith was played by Janette Richer in the first broadcast in May 1959, the author's insertion of herself as both the subject of and character within the play suggests that the voice which is heard, both literally on the radio and through the medium of the printed text, is her own rather than an act of ventriloquy. During the course of the play, the character of the Interlocutor, with his persistent invitation to take 'a turn outside' is gradually revealed to be Death, and Smith's relationship with him becomes increasingly intimate, as the following extracts show:

> INTERLOCUTOR: In the hands of death...?
> S.S.: Oh what beautiful eyes you have ...
> INTERLOCUTOR: Then *look*. But you always turn away.
> S.S.: In the hands of Death she might become happy ...
> INTERLOCUTOR: Or unconscious, in perpetual sleep?[17]

The personification of Death thus suggests that the finality of death can be avoided: happiness might be found in the hands of the figure of death, and the 'perpetual sleep' which is the actual result of dying is unconsciousness rather than cessation of life. Later the Interlocutor alludes to Smith's poem 'I rode with my darling...' (1950) in order to reveal to the reader / listener and confirm to Smith that he is the 'darling':

> INTERLOCUTOR: Then I was your darling, your true darling – that never yet rode away. Do you think I am attractive?
> S.S.: Yes, awfully. I mean I always think Death is so attractive ... awfully attractive. No, don't come any closer.[18]

Not only is he her 'darling', he is faithful to her, since he 'never yet rode away'. This passage also shows that Smith's relationship with the Interlocutor, or Death, confirms Huk's assessment that love and death are conflated.[19] The word-play between Stevie Smith and the Interlocutor is flirtatious, even lover-like and the

internal direction in the lines quoted above indicate that physical contact is imminent. Smith is both attracted to her interviewer and afraid of him: the word 'awfully' is more than a superlative since it refers back to the idea of death as a god, and implies that she is, in fact, full of awe, and she fears actual contact.

Death, then, is both craved and feared. It is also seductive:

> S.S.: You are a power of the air who has trapped me.
> INTERLOCUTOR: Does that feel better?
> S.S.: Yes, when you kiss me again ... I feel, I feel ...
> INTERLOCUTOR: 'That everything is swimming in a wonderful wisdom', I know.[20]

The dialogue conveys intimacy, both the physical intimacy of kissing and the mental intimacy of shared knowledge of her poetry and other intellectual ideas: the above quotation refers to Smith's poem, 'Everything is Swimming', published after 'A Turn Outside' in 1962, indicating the Interlocutor's familiarity with it. Referring to the Interlocutor's quotation she responds: 'It was that German ass who poisoned himself with mescalin who used that sentence, about everything swimming in a wonderful wisdom ... he could not have hit on it for himself, he must have been inspired by a Power of the Air ...[.]'[21] The 'Power of the Air' is therefore an external force which inspires firstly the sentence that Smith admires, and secondly her poem of that title. Its 'Power' maintains the association with that which can be deduced to be death, indeed Smith explicates its association with death by saying to the Interlocutor 'You are a power of the air'.[22] Placing that reference in the dialogue of her play links several ideas: death, wisdom, and kissing. For Smith, then, wisdom, or the insight and knowledge which may be required in order to write, can be acquired through the kisses of Death, the Power of the Air who inspires. Smith also explains that the poem 'I rode with my darling ...' was written 'after I saw you in the wood'.[23] This further links the Interlocutor with creativity

since seeing him inspired the poem, thus it can be seen that Death could function for her as a kind of muse.

I have argued in a previous chapter that in the poetic tradition the figure of the muse has been gendered female. According to this tradition, the woman is the inspirer rather than creator. Indeed, this project has shown that Smith's engagement with the idea of the muse and literary inspiration was as problematic as her relationship with the canon. Although in 'Thoughts About the Person from Porlock' (1962) she parodies the idea of literary inspiration in an ironic reinterpretation of Coleridge's inability to complete 'Kubla Khan' (1816), she also simultaneously uses and reverses the trope of the muse, gendering it male in 'Fairy Story', and giving it the form of an old gentleman in 'The Fairy Bell'. As Elizabeth Bronfen points out, the restrictions placed on feminine creativity and the traditional gendering of the muse means that the woman poet needs to 'define herself as an active creator rather than passive inspirer'[24] by inventing her own creative metaphor. Bronfen, however, argues that the trope of death takes on a significance which can be seen to be in dialogue with the traditional gendering of poetic creation and inspiration. In the work of twentieth-century women writers, such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, the dead woman or imagined dead self functions as a muse for feminine poetic production, and thus releases the female subject from the inspirational role traditionally assigned to her gender:

> The imagined own death makes up the inspirational source and thematic content of this poetry. Given that the death they invoke carries their own gender, they themselves take on the dual function of referential object and addressee of poetic utterance. In this act of autopoesis muse and creator coalesce ... The theme in their [Plath's and Sexton's] poetry is ... feminine death as the creative resurrection of the represented woman.[25]

Smith's relationship with death does differ from Plath's and Sexton's. She

doesn't use the death of another woman poet as poetic inspiration as Sexton does in 'Sylvia's Death', in which Plath, addressed as 'O Sylvia, Sylvia', is envied for the death that they both had wished for: 'Thief - / how did you crawl into, / crawl down alone / into the death I wanted so badly and so long'.[26] Nor does she inscribe her own suicide attempt, as does Plath in 'Lady Lazarus' (1962), in which she claims that 'Dying / Is an art ... / I do it exceptionally well.'[27]

There is an obvious tension between Bronfen's idea of the imagined own death of the female poet, and the intervention of a masculine inspirational force through the personified figure of death in 'God the Drinker' and 'A Turn Outside'. This does not, however, deny feminine creativity any more than a male poet invoking a feminine muse to inspire him detracts from his own creativity. Indeed, Margaret Homans argues that '[i]t is not inherent in the concept of the masculine muse that he should take and keep more power than the traditionally feminine muse'.[28] Moreover, the personification is a romanticised, even eroticised, metaphor for Smith's own death, in which the death that is so ardently desired is seen as a lover. Indeed, according to Sexton's 'Sylvia's Death', both Plath and Sexton referred to death as '*our* boy',[29] which also testifies to the way a woman poet who desires death sees it in terms of a masculine lover. The death that is imagined, however, remains that of the female writer, and it is this death that acts as a source of poetic inspiration.

3. 'Persephone': death and resurrection

In 'Persephone' (1950) Smith imagines that death is followed by a physical resurrection. In this poem the voice of Persephone announces herself assertively in the opening line: 'I am that Persephone'.[30] This ventriloquised voice of the mythical character takes the form of a personal testimony that tells the story of Persephone's abduction by the king of the

underworld from the viewpoint of the victim. The surprising inclusion of 'that' into what would otherwise be a straightforward introduction carries a sub-text that hints of other stories. On one level the reader is aware that this is the subject of the myth who is speaking through the medium of the text, but other stories are simultaneously referred to. The poem contradicts other versions of the myth which place Persephone as the unwilling victim of the king's lust. Instead she is the willing victim who finds happiness in the underworld:

> I in my new land learning
> Snow-drifts on the fingers burning,
> Ice, hurricane, cry: No returning.
>
> Does my husband the King know, does he guess
> In this wintriness
> Is my happiness?

According to the myth Persephone was abducted by the king of the underworld, while picking flowers, and taken to his kingdom. Winter was therefore imposed on the earth as a sign of Demeter's mourning while her daughter was away. Here, that winter is transposed to the underworld and contrasted with the springtime of Persephone's previous life, but Smith's economy of language, feminine rhymes of 'learning', 'burning' and 'returning', and piling up of images convey a 'burning' of passion and bliss as much as the pain of chill.

In the second stanza Persephone remembers the 'glorious life' which she led with her companions, or 'darlings', in Sicily, but goes on to doubt the memories of pleasure: 'Or had we not? They said it was sad / I had been good, grown bad.' Persephone therefore struggles against the 'glorious' and sun-filled life. Growing 'bad' by one who 'had been good' refers to the loss of sexual innocence, but carries simultaneous connotations of her rebellion against 'a background of social security.' This rejection is reiterated in the third stanza:

Oh can you wonder can you wonder
I struck the doll-faced day asunder
Stretched out and plucked the flower of winter thunder?

In Smith's simple three line stanzas the compressed language is packed with associations, thus 'doll-faced' conveys ideas of childhood and innocence but also suggests that the beauty of eternal springtime was little more than superficial prettiness. Persephone rejects that time of childhood in perpetual springtime and destroys that life. Striking it 'asunder' is metaphoric, referring to the cataclysmic change suffered by the earth as a result of her abduction, but the word has a literal meaning also in that it refers to the chasm which opened up to take her into Hades.

Her abduction, then, is as seen release as well as rape. The innocence that was played out on earth is replaced with the experience of sex. The sunshine is described in retrospect as 'harsh' rather than fostering happiness and security, while those who live in that world are 'sunny fools'. If Hades, both the underworld and the king who abducts her, represents death, then Persephone's espousal of death is a rejection of life, thus it may be that those who *live* are fools. Her denial of childhood is also a repudiation of the mother-child relationship in favour of sexual maturity:

My mother, my darling mother,
I loved you more than any other,
Ah mother, mother, your tears smother.

Smith's Persephone, then, does not want to return to her mother and the earth each spring. In the ninth stanza the lines become shorter and the rhyming triplets of much of the poem are replaced by the reiterated word 'me', thus conveying a single repeated cry to be allowed freedom and autonomy:

Oh do not fret me
Mother, let me
Stay, forget me.

What is unstated in this poem is the central premise of the myth, which is that

Persephone *does* return each spring. In Pierre Macherey's terms this is the significant absence or silence which 'endows meaning with a meaning'.[31] We read this poem against the background of this knowledge, which is shared by both writer and reader, and interpret it accordingly. Persephone pleads with her mother to be allowed to stay in uninterrupted bliss, but she will return to her mother and the earth annually. Escape from the mother, like her own death, then, is neither irrevocable nor permanent.

Smith's 'Persephone', which was first published in 1950, contains striking similarities to Sylvia Plath's 'Lady Lazarus', which was written in 1962. Both poems are in a format of three line verses (although each avoids the rhyme scheme of the traditional *terza rima*), and both begin with an assertive subjective voice: Plath's 'I have done it again'[32] addresses the reader as confidently and directly as Smith's 'I am that Persephone'. More significantly, both poems use legend as the central trope in their treatments of the cycle of death and return from the dead. In Smith's use of the myth Persephone desires the death that is associated with the underworld, despite the inevitability of returning to life; while Plath depicts herself as a feminised Lazarus, rising from the dead after repeated suicide attempts:

> Dying
> Is an art, like everything else.
> I do it exceptionally well.
>
> I do it so it feels like hell.
> I do it so it feels real.
> I guess you could say I've a call.

The latter stanza shows that Plath's use of single syllable words, repetition, and colloquial vernacular are similar to Smith's poetic style. While Smith admitted that she had read little of Plath's work,[33] it is surely significant that Plath admitted to being 'a desperate Smith-addict'[34] and in answer to a question posed by *The London Magazine* regarding her poetic influences replied '[t]he poets I delight in are possessed by their

poems as by the rhythms of their own breathing ... Some of Elizabeth Bishop and a very great deal of Stevie Smith.'[35]

Unlike Plath, however, Smith's wish for death did not lead to suicide: her only suicide attempt was, perhaps, a hysterical or histrionic gesture rather than serious intent. For Smith, the idea of death's availability might have served as a means of making life bearable because the end could be summoned. In *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936) the voice of Pompey relates an incident which happened during a period spent in a children's convalescent home. Since Smith herself was in such a home in Broadstairs from the ages of five to eight this part of the text can be assumed to be heavily autobiographical:

> No, when I sat up and said: Death has got to come if I call him, I never called him and never have.
>
> So teach your little ones to look on Death as Thanatos-Hades the great Lord of the Dead, that must, great prince though he be, come to their calling. And on the shadowy wings of this dark prince let them be borne upwards from the mire of makeshift and fearful compromise.[36]

Again, Death is personified, and Smith attributes to him the status of a 'Lord' and a 'prince'. Moreover she grants him a name: Thanatos-Hades, conflating the Greek word for death with Hades, the god of the underworld who abducted Persephone. In Freudian terms Thanatos also refers to the death drive which is the ultimate goal of life:

> ...the theoretical importance of the instincts of self-preservation, of self-assertion and of mastery greatly diminishes. They are component instincts whose function is that the organism shall follow its own path to death ... What we are left with is the fact that the organism wishes to die only in its own fashion.[37]

Thus the urge for self-preservation and sexual energy, or Eros, is locked in a conflicting relationship with the urge for death and destruction which is Thanatos. 'Persephone', then, contains ideas of both Eros and Thanatos since Persephone yearns for both love and erotic pleasure and the death that the underworld represents but, as I have argued, the urge for death within this poem is not final. Persephone's pleas to her mother are fruitless: she will return from the dead.

Lilian Feder notes that in the myth of Demeter and Persephone 'the double roles of Demeter and Persephone as earth or agricultural goddesses and goddesses associated with immortality'[38] lie behind the Eleusinian Mysteries, an ancient cult which, according to Isocrates, 'offers its participants more joyous hopes about death and eternity.'[39] Feder argues that the myth expresses a human need to control death: 'Thus, the mythical story expresses man's yearning to control the mysteries of barrenness and death. In the end, death is known and regulated. It has been limited by the secret power of its apparent victim.'[40] Smith's use of the myth, then, can be seen in the context of her obsession with death, and illuminates that obsession to suggest that death is desired, not because it is intrinsically a final end to life, but because of the wish to regulate it. Power is lent to the apparent victim, moreover, because she is able to pass from death to life.

In other work by Smith there is a tension between the wish for death and the realisation that death might impose a final silence. Referring to the myth in 'A Turn Outside' she reveals that '*I* dare not pluck the flowers that Persephone plucked ... I remember the other books ... where the dead cannot speak'.[41] This explains the occasional tremor of fear shown by the character of Stevie Smith in the play, who tells the Interlocutor: 'No, don't come any closer.'[42] Yet it is significant that the name of Smith's heroine in *Novel on Yellow Paper* and *Over the Frontier* is Pompey Casmilus: Casmilus, or Hermes, was the god who conducted Persephone out of the underworld. Casmilus can therefore enter into and out of death at will: '[b]ut once inside of the house of Hades, is there any outcoming? Oh yes, my chicks, for anyone of my name there is a passage to and fro, come at will and go at pleasure.'[43] Despite Smith's conscious and rational knowledge that death is final, then, the ventriloquised voices of Persephone and Pompey express the underlying fantasy or desire that it may be controlled: death is craved and loved, it can be entered when wished, but it can be returned from at will.

4. 'Not Waving But Drowning': drowning and rebirth

In 'Not Waving But Drowning' (1957), probably Smith's most famous poem, death is followed by a resurrection or rebirth. It takes as its theme the idea of death by drowning, but the voices which are heard within the poem reveal that the drowning, conversely, facilitates speech. Three voices are heard: that of the narrator who introduces the paradoxical premise that 'Nobody heard him, the dead man, / But still he lay moaning',[44] the voice of the drowned man, and the voices of the unnamed 'they' who explain the cause of drowning and propagate the misunderstanding that underlies the man's life and death. Lacking the separation which is normally provided by inverted commas, the voices flow from one to another unhindered, interweaving different modes of speech. Thus the voices of 'they' are noticeably colloquial, vernacular, and irregular of metre compared with the spare introduction and explanation of the narrator and the 'moaning' of the dead man:

> Poor chap, he always loved larking
> And now he's dead
> It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,
> They said.

As Frances Spalding notes, this 'displays her ventriloquising talent ... allowing the reader both to share the man's fate and to view it from the outside.'[45] What is significant for this study of Smith and death, however, is that that the man *can* speak: he is a 'dead man' yet he is able to lie moaning and speak for himself. His death is not final, then, since his voice returns from the dead:

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

The poem is revealed to be about alienation: the drowned man has always been (or felt himself to be) on the outside of society, and his 'larking', in death as in life, is

explained as a cry for help which went unnoticed. It has been argued throughout this project, however, that the theme of isolation recurs in poems by Smith, particularly those which deal with the genre of poetry. Indeed, in both 'Voices About the Princess Anemone' and 'Fairy Story' the speakers have become alienated from society as a result of having become poets.

Many critics have referred to the difficulty of ascribing gender to the subject of this poem. The speaker is male, yet the accompanying drawing is apparently female, with long hair streaming over her face and a slight smile. Romana Huk points out that the speaker of the poem:

> has long bewildered critics by drowning at the edge of recognisable 'signals' / signs with the male subject of the poem, yet emerging in the nonverbal sphere of the accompanying drawing as a very much alive woman ... this *imago* of subversion both forces us to read between the lines to find a feminine agent within the language of the poem and adds a vision of frightful / longed-for release from its alienating signs and symbols and the selves they construct.'[46]

Huk grants an active role to the narrator of the poem. Because the drowned man is unheard by anyone except, apparently, the speaker or narrator, Huk is able to conflate the drowned man who is the subject of the poem with the speaker of the poem. The discrepancy between the statement that 'Nobody heard him' and the speaker's account, which betrays the fact that he *was* heard by someone, causes what Huk calls 'a fissure' to open within the text, allowing the drawing of the woman to enter and affect interpretation.

Laura Severin also considers the appearance of a female within the drawing in contrast to the male voice of the subject, arguing that '[t]he contrast could suggest that a man who ventures outside society's boundaries drowns, but a female survives and even flourishes ... to be "outside" brings life, not death, for women.'[47] However, being outside in the sense of being a woman poet, thus transgressing social ideas about gender and genre,

causes the tone of melancholy in Smith's work which is as typical as her refusal to sustain seriousness: indeed, Janet Watts describes 'the dreadful comicality of pain'[48] in this poem. However, the lack of seriousness, in this poem at least, was not intended by the poet. In a letter to Kay Dick dated April 1953, Smith described how this poem had been written as a result of feeling 'too low for words (eh??) ... *Punch* like it, think it's funny I suppose, it was most touching, I thought.'[49] Clearly 'Not Waving But Drowning' was written out of depression if not despair: 'too low for words', followed by her self-questioning 'eh??' can be interpreted as that which is indescribable, except through the medium of poetry. If the poem is self-referential, expressing Smith's own dejection, the drowned man becomes a metaphor for the poet herself. Smith was 'far out', that is boldly different by being both marginal and eccentric; moreover her 'larking' was similarly misunderstood, and, in Seamus Heaney's assessment, resulted in a literary style that he deemed to be 'not adequate'[50] to the literary task.

The contrast between the gender of the male speaker within the poem and that of the drawing can offer further interpretations. While the dead man speaks after drowning, the poet's ambiguous drawing appears to depict a woman rising from the sea. This resembles artistic representations of Venus, who is said to have been born of the sea and who is usually pictured in Western art rising fully formed, with long hair, out of the water. Ideas of feminine power are suggested by the image: Venus is, after all, a goddess. Moreover, the use of a Venus-like image also reinforces the idea that death is significant in Smith's work because it is associated with birth, or more correctly rebirth, the rebirth that would allow Persephone to return from Hades and Casmilus / Hermes similarly to pass between the realms of the living and the dead. If the drawing is interpreted as resembling a woman, that rebirth may be connected with femininity: the dead man speaks through the (reborn) female poet and the medium of water.

My discussion of 'The Lady of the Well-spring' has shown that water is an important symbol in Smith's work. It is also surely significant that Princess Anemone gazes at her reflection in the stream, 'The Bereaved Swan' (1937) bows his head to look into the lake, and the speaker of 'Look!' (1957) reaches into the sea. Water is frequently associated with feminine freedom and creativity. In her work on the feminine metaphor, Ellen Moers notes that 'the freedom and tactile sensations of near-naked sea bathing' has played an important role for modern women writers.[51] Certainly, in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Edna's freedom begins when she learns to swim, and the water is shown to be a liberating element which works to free her from the constriction of her social role:

> A feeling of exultation overtook her, as if some power of significant import had been given to her to control the working of her body and her soul. She grew daring and reckless, overestimating her strength. She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before ... She turned her face seaward to gather in an impression of space and solitude, which the vast expanse of water, meeting and melting with moonlit sky, conveyed to her excited fancy. As she swam she seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself.[52]

It is significant for a consideration of women writers that in this passage water is connected with the imagination, it stimulates Edna's 'excited fancy', and the 'unlimited' and 'vast expanse of water' symbolises her new awareness of her own power and limitless potential for self expression. This first swim, then, symbolises Edna's rebirth as well as freedom.

In the previous chapter I have argued that water can be seen as a feminine element. For Hélène Cixous, 'we are ourselves sea, sand, coral, seaweed, beaches, tides, swimmers, children, waves':[53] Toril Moi points out that this imagery, which evokes pleasure and childhood, 'is the feminine element *par excellence*: the closure of the mythical world contains and reflects the comforting security of the mother's womb.'[54] However, as Toril Moi's remark infers, the image of water is associated with creativity as well as freedom

and sensation. It will be remembered from the previous chapter that Freud argued that water invariably represents birth,[55] with the water standing in for the amniotic fluid of the womb. Water is thus allied with the maternal image which facilitates the rebirth of Edna and the birth of the fully formed Venus figure in Smith's drawing. It has been argued earlier in this project that Kristeva's appropriation of the symbolic *chora* is associated with the womb because of the derivation of the word, and because of its association with the rhythmic pulsions which may be the source of poetic language. The water that stands in for amniotic fluid therefore allows the man in 'Not Waving But Drowning' to return to the womb. The words that he speaks, however, despite being dead, hint at the rebirth which is implied by the metaphor. Smith's obsession with death, seen in both the personification of death in the figure of the Interlocutor and Thanatos-Hades, and in her use of the motif of death by drowning, represents a wish for a death that is followed by the rebirth that may be facilitated by the water that symbolises the womb. The following pages will take this theme further, and show how Smith inscribes the retreat to the womb.

5. 'Storm back through the gates of Birth': retreat to the womb

In 'Ode to a Nightingale' (1819), Keats describes a desire for an intense experience, culminating in the wish to die:

> Darkling I listen; and for many a time
> I have been half in love with easeful Death,
> Called him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
> To take into the air my quiet breath;
> Now more than ever seems in rich to die,
> To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
> While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
> In such an ecstasy![56]

Keats, like Smith, personifies death, it is referred to as 'him'. In the above extract the ecstasy of the nightingale is transferred to the poetic voice, the narrator listens to the

nightingale's song and feels the intense empathic delight himself. This experience does not reinforce a sense of pleasure in life itself, but conversely, 'Now more than ever seems it rich to die'. Moreover, like Smith, the poet has been 'half in love with easeful Death'. There is a tension between the inspiration that the nightingale provides and the wish to die in this state of inspired productivity and happiness: for, ironically, the death that is desired would prevent the production of poetry.

Smith rewrites this trope. In her short story entitled 'Surrounded by Children' (1939), Smith alludes to a retreat to the womb, as well as addressing the issue of death. In this, too, she seeks the maternal image, and thus overcomes the romantic irony seen in Keats's poem that death, although desired, would prevent further literary production. Death thus becomes a means of rebirth, and the consequent acquisition of feminine language. The story opens with a scene of maternal tranquility and normality in which '[u]nder the shadow of the trees in Hyde Park the mothers are nursing their babies,'[57] and children are playing. Class and gender roles are emphasised, 'the little brothers and sisters ... are the children of rich parents' and the brothers 'have no care at all; theirs is a careless fate, to be pampered and cared for'.

The scene is disrupted by 'a famously ugly old girl' muttering to herself as she walks, presenting a subversively eccentric appearance with carelessly dyed grey hair and 'a queer hat'. As Laura Severin points out, the woman's age and ugliness 'defies social conventions of what women should be ... she does indeed prove unruly ... with the spectacle of her body.'[58] Still more disruptive is the old woman's grotesque desire to occupy a baby's perambulator, an act that causes children's laughter. The pram is a grand carriage belonging to the baby of rich parents, and, since class has been emphasised in this story, it offers security and comfort. In one reading the gesture can

therefore be interpreted as representing a desire to assume the wealth and privilege of the baby. Severin argues, however, that the old woman represents an anarchic challenge to domestic ideology:

> Lying in the carriage, she acts as a parodic symbol of both babyhood and motherhood. Hardly the attractive, cuddly baby that the domestic narrative presents, she is the nightmare baby, an ugly representation of what the mother eventually produces: death, not life. ... She is an emblem of woman past her prime, old and used up, and thus a warning sign to all women.[59]

Severin therefore concentrates on social expectations of womanhood and domesticity, in which women are expected to be young, attractive and fertile, and age and ugliness represents a transgression from the ideal. Severin's emphasis, however, overlooks the significance of the old woman's motives. What is revealed by the last paragraph in the story is that the old woman climbs into the baby carriage in order to die. Once more death is associated with pain, as it was in 'Persephone' in which pain and pleasure overlap, and with bleeding, as in 'God the Drinker':

> 'Ah,' cries the sad beldame, transfixed in grotesque crucifixion upon the perambulator, stabbing at herself with a hatpin of the old fashion so that a little antique blood may fall upon the frilly pillow of the immaculate vehicle, 'what fate is this, what nightmare more *agaçant* so to lie and so to die, in great pain, surrounded by children.[60]

Barbera and McBrien point out that in this story 'Stevie seems to depict her struggle to climb into the condition of infancy',[61] but it can be proposed that the struggle is to return to a condition that *precedes* infancy. The baby carriage symbolises the womb: its function is to hold a baby, and the rounded shape of a perambulator in 1939 when this story was written reinforces the image. The pram, then, relates to both tomb and womb. The old woman climbs into it in order to die, yet if the pram also symbolises the womb, that death is desired in order to achieve a rebirth.

In her analysis of the story, Laura Severin concentrates on the laughter of the onlookers, which in the narrative precedes the old woman's speech which has been

quoted above. According to Severin, 'the people's laughter allows subversion to surface, thus ending, at least momentarily, the placid social order of Kensington Gardens.'[62] This reading supports Severin's interpretation that the story represents an anarchic disruption of the social order; the old woman thus becomes a means by which social conventions and the ideology of domesticity are brought into focus. Severin's interpretation is derived from the narration, however in this story the narrator's voice interweaves with the voice of the old woman, either the silent voice of the woman's reported thoughts, or the reported speech with which the story ends: thus the old woman has the last word. It is notable, then, that the old woman does not refer to the laughter of the onlookers, it is to be 'surrounded by children' that is part of the annoyance and nightmare. If the desire for the perambulator represents a desire for the womb and therefore the rebirth which, as Severin concurs, is re-enacted and parodied by the blood which falls on the pillow, the children are hated because the old woman sees them as rivals in that they are closer to the womb.

Similar ideas of adult rebirth are seen in Smith's poem, 'A Dream of Comparison' (1957), in which Mary and Eve are seen walking together and talking 'philosophically'. Each represents opposing positions: the urge for life or Eros, and the death drive or Thanatos, with Mary claiming to 'love Life'. Eve, however is apparently in the thrall of Thanatos:

> 'Oh to be Nothing,' said Eve, 'oh for a
> Cessation of consciousness
> With no more impressions beating in
> Of various experiences.'[63]

Eve therefore seems to wish for death, since she wishes for a '[c]essation of consciousness' and the consequent loss of experiences and sensations. But Mary's question forces Eve to amend this:

'How can Something envisage Nothing?' said Mary,
'Where's your philosophy gone?'
'Storm back through the gates of Birth,' cried Eve,
'Where were you before you were born?'

Eve therefore clarifies that the end of consciousness and experience, rather than a wish for death, is really a desire to return to the womb, or to 'Storm back through the gates of Birth'. The poet presents this as a kind of a last word; Mary promises to 'find / A reason for' her apparently instinctive grasp on life, but the poet fails to deliver any more reported speech and the poem ends as it began with a spare description of the walk:

They walked by the estuary,
Eve and the Virgin Mary,
And they talked until nightfall,
But the difference between them was radical.

This suggests that Mary, or rather Smith the writer, is unable to find an argument to support the idea that life is to be enjoyed and clung to, and Eve's statement serves as a challenged but un-refuted truth. 'A Dream of Comparison' therefore reinforces the idea that is central to 'Surrounded by Children': Smith, or Pompey Casmilus, desires death because of the hope that it is not final, but offers a rebirth. Further analysis will show that rebirth itself is desired because it is connected with the wish to ensure a connection with the source of feminine language: thus the poet's own death leads to the creative resurrection that Bronfen noted.[64]

6. Death and the search for the linguistic source

In Emily Brontë's poem beginning 'Silent is the House' (1840), a figure called the Wanderer is guided by a lamp in the window. The Wanderer is not described in human and material terms, although gendered male, but is simply 'What I love', and a 'visitant of air', a 'Strange Power' who has 'might', and to whom the speaker vows constancy. The Wanderer, then, could be seen as a lover (like Smith's Interlocutor) but he also

functions as a spiritual force. Brontë's Wanderer is also associated with a winter landscape, which is described in the first stanza:

> Silent is the House – all are laid asleep;
> One, alone, looks out o'er the snow wreaths deep;
> Watching every cloud, dreading every breeze
> That whirls the wildering drifts and bends the groaning trees.[65]

The snow and winter chill that is evoked is reminiscent of Persephone's chosen land which was the realm of death. Indeed, according to Margaret Homans, because Brontë's Wanderer must cross the snow to reach the house and the 'one, alone' who awaits him, he 'may come from the regions of death'.[66] Homans also argues that Brontë's Wanderer functions as a masculine muse who brings poetry to the female and otherwise silent poet. 'It is because he may choose to give or withhold language that he is associated with death, because the withholding of language is death to the poetic vocation.'[67] However, it will be remembered that Homans argues that the idea of a male muse does not represent more power than the traditional feminine muse, indeed in 'Silent is the House', as in other poems by Brontë, this forms part of ' a continuous effort to wrest the visitants' power away from them and make it her own.'[68]

I have shown in an earlier chapter that Smith's poem entitled 'The Wanderer' (1950) is a pastiche of Isaac Watts's moral song for children called 'The Sluggard'. However, it is also a reworking of Brontë's trope. In Smith's version the Wanderer is a ghostly and unseen female presence who wanders the streets at night, tapping each window as she passes, and sighing 'You have weaned me too soon, you must nurse me again.'[69] Yet the ghost 'taps in vain', her voice is ignored and she is not admitted:

> Her voice flies away on the midnight wind,
> But would she be happier if she were within?
> She is happier far where the night winds fall,
> And there are no doors and no windows at all.

The text tells us, then, that she is, unknowingly, happier dead. Her search for rebirth

leading to another life is therefore pointless because 'She is happier far where ... there are no doors and no windows at all.' It is of greater significance, however, that the ghost is asking to be nursed again. It has been seen in the discussion of 'A Dream of Nourishment' in the previous chapter that the desire to be nursed is associated with a search for a return to the experience that may be the source of a feminine relationship to language. Smith's Wanderer, like Brontë's, is therefore associated with poetic inspiration, but rather than bringing language to the passive female poet, Smith's feminised Wanderer desires to acquire it for herself.

7. Conclusion: death, rebirth, and creativity

Smith's texts show that death is important to her because it appears to be at her command, a means of ending life should it become unbearable. However her apparent thrall to Thanatos, the god of death and the death drive, is conditional. Rather than desiring a total ending of life, an examination of some of her work has shown that death is seen in terms of rebirth. If Death, or Thanatos-Hades, is associated with artistic creation, the rebirth that follows death is a prerequisite for the infant's union with the mother and therefore the linguistic and poetic source. Death, then, is desired because it is not final: she can return, like Persephone, and talk again like the drowned man. It has also been seen that Smith personifies the abstract so that Death takes the form of a leading character throughout much of her oeuvre. In Bronfen's terms, Death as a lover or death which happens to another subject whose voice is ventriloquised, both function as her own desired or imagined death in order to act as a muse or creative source and inspiration.

What the voice of the Wanderer tells us is that to retreat into infancy is to delve into the pre-Oedipal relationship which derives from the voice and presence of the mother.

However, the Wanderer is a ghost, therefore she does not simply ask to be nursed again, but to be reborn in order to be nursed. 'Surrounded by Children' also shows that Smith's desire for death is associated with a wish to be reborn, or, as Eve describes it in 'A Dream of Comparison', to 'Storm back through the gates of Birth.../ Where were you before you were born?'.[70] The place of an existence *before* birth is the uterine location of rhythmic pulsions and the semiotic impulse that can break through symbolic language and create poetry itself. In this way death does not threaten to withhold language, but enables linguistic acquisition. The above readings of Smith's work can also contribute to an understanding of Smith's attitude to children, a topic that has been explored in previous chapters. While the figure of the child and the cultural forms of childhood are necessary in that they provide a means of self-expression and a sense of identity, children are hated because they are closer to the mother figure and therefore the literary and linguistic source.

Notes

1. Catherine A. Civello, *Patterns of Ambivalence: The Fiction and Poetry of Stevie Smith* (Columbia: Camden House, 1997) p. 62.

2. Frances Spalding, *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography* (1988; rpt. London: Faber, 1990) p. 302.

3. Romana Huk, 'Eccentric Concentrism: Traditional Poetic Forms and Refracted Discourse in Stevie Smith's Poetry', *Contemporary Literature*, 34 (1993), 240 - 265 (p. 248).

4. Stevie Smith, *The Collected Poems*, ed. by James MacGibbon (1975; rpt. London: Penguin, 1985), p. 508.

5. Ibid, p. 91.

6. Stevie Smith, 'A Turn Outside', in *Me Again: Uncollected Writings*, ed. by Jack Barbera and William McBrien (1983; rpt. London: Virago, 1988), 335 - 258 (p. 230).

7. See note 3 above.

8. Elizabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 52.

9. Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (1986; rpt. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 95.

10. British Library ADD MS 537232.

11. Smith, *The Collected Poems* p. 340.

12. Civello p. 17.

13. See note 10 above.

14. Burton Hatlen, 'The Return of the Repressed/Oppressed in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*' in *Dracula: The Vampire and the Critics* ed. by Margaret L. Carter (London: Ann Arbor, 1988) pp. 117 - 136 (p. 124).

15. Spalding p. 213.

16. See note 10 above.

17. Smith, 'A Turn Outside', in *Me Again* p. 345.

18. Ibid, p. 349.

19. See note 3 above.

20. *Me Again* p. 357.

21. See note 20 above.

22. Ibid.

23. *Me Again* p. 347.

24. Bronfen, p. 395.

25. Ibid p. 401.

26. Anne Sexton, *The Complete Poems* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999) p. 126.

27. Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems* ed. by Ted Hughes (London: Faber, 1981) p. 245.

28. Margaret Homans, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson* (Guildford: Princeton University Press, 1980) p. 105.

29. See note 26.

30. Smith, *The Collected Poems,* p. 248.

31. Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, tr. by Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge, 1978) p. 86.

32. Plath p. 244.

33. Spalding p. 256.

34. *Me Again* p. 6.

35. Jack Barbera and William McBrien, *Stevie: A Biography of Stevie Smith* (London: Heinemann, 1985), p. 242.

36. Stevie Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper: or Work it out for Yourself* (1981 rpt. London: Virago, 1993), p. 160 - 1.

37. Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', in *Complete Psychological Works,* vol. 18, ed. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1964) p. 57.

38. Lilian Feder, *Ancient Myth in Modern Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973) p. 237.

39. Isocrates, *Panegyricus* 28-9, in *Political and Social Life in the Great Age of Athens*, ed. by John Ferguson and Kitty Chisholm (London: Ward Lock, 1978) p. 190.

40. Feder, p. 14.

41. Smith, 'A Turn Outside', *Me Again,* p. 353.

42. See note 18.

43. Stevie Smith, *Over the Frontier* (London: Cape, 1938) pp. 86 - 7.

44. Smith, *The Collected Poems,* p. 303.

45. Spalding, p. 222.

46. Huk pp. 248 - 9.

47. Laura Severin, *Stevie Smith's Resistant Antics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), p. 73.

48. Stevie Smith, *The Holiday*, intro. by Janet Watts, (1979; rpt London; Virago, 1993) p. iv.

49. Smith, *Me Again*, p. 294.

50. Seamus Heaney, 'A Memorable Voice: Stevie Smith', in *In Search of Stevie Smith*, ed. by Sanford Sternlicht (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991) pp. 211 - 213 (213).

51. Ellen Moers, *Literary Women.* (1976; rpt. London: Women's Press, 1986) pp. 260 - 1.

52. Kate Chopin, 'The Awakening', in *The Awakening and Selected Stories,* ed. by Sandra M. Gilbert, (1984 rpt. London: Penguin, 1986), pp. 43 - 176 (74 - 75).

53. Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology,* ed. by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1981) pp. 244 - 264 (260) (first publ. in *Signs*, Summer 1976).

54. Toril Moi, *Sexual Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory.* (1984; rpt.London: Routledge, 1993) p. 117.

55. Sigmund Freud, 'Symbolism in Dreams', in *The Complete Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, tr. and ed. by James Strachey (London: Allen and Unwin, 1971) p. 153.

56. John Keats, *Selected Poems and Letters,* ed. by Robert Gittings (1966; rpt. Oxford: Heinemann, 1989) p. 126.

57. Smith, 'Surrounded by Children', *Me Again* pp. 26 - 7.

58. Severin, p. 110.

59. Ibid.

60. See note 57.

61. Barbera and McBrien p. 129.

62. See note 58.

63. Smith, *The Collected Poems*, p. 314.

64. See note 25.

65. Emily Brontë, *The Complete Poems,* ed. by Janet Gezari. (London: Penguin, 1992) p. 177.

66. Homans, p. 120.

67. Ibid p. 122.

68. See note 28.

69. Smith, *The Collected Poems* p. 257.

70. See note 63.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

In 1972 Geoffrey Summerfield confidently declared that 'Britain in the last fifteen years has not produced a woman poet of real stature.'[1] Yet Smith was in many ways a foremother for women poets, a fact that is recognised by Linda France who begins her selection of poems for *Sixty Women Poets* with the date of Smith's death, 1971, thus 'honouring her influence and importance.'[2] Smith's use of feminine genres and revisions of fairy tales were an early feminist strategy that later became employed by other women poets, indeed, Sylvia Plath's 'Lady Lazarus' (1962) is clearly influenced by Smith's 'Persephone' (1950). Moreover, Smith anticipated many of 'French' feminist criticism's theories regarding the importance of voice, writing from the body, and the semiotic source. Since Smith's death in 1971, her literary reputation has continued to grow, attesting to the fact that she has, despite Summerfield's assessment, come to be seen as a poet of 'real stature'. *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* (1973), edited by Philip Larkin, includes six poems by Smith. More recently, *The Oxford Book of English Verse* (1999), edited by Christopher Ricks, includes five by Smith, and *The Penguin Book of English Verse* (2000), edited by Paul Keegan, also contains five of Smith's poems. Equally significant is Harold Bloom's 'cultural prophecy', added in the form of an Appendix to *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages* (1994). In it, Smith's *Collected Poems* is included in his list of twentieth century works that may enter the canon,[3] albeit with Bloom's disclaimer that 'I am not as confident about this list ... Cultural prophecy is a mug's game. Not all the works here can prove to be canonical.'[4] Nonetheless, Smith's work has entered university syllabuses at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, reinforcing her importance as a poet of the twentieth century, and the recent publication of Romana Huk's full length critical study,

Stevie Smith: Between the Lines (2005) further establishes Smith's reputation as a poet of significance.

This thesis, however, has shown that the literary climate was less favourable to Smith throughout much of her poetic career, and I have argued that the conditions that prevailed when she began to write affected her style of writing and led to her search for a feminine source of language. Along with the social inequality suffered by women in the first half of the twentieth century, Smith was faced with an additional problem in that the literary tradition was dominated by male poets, thus offering few exemplars and reinforcing the idea that poetry was a masculine prerogative. The assumption that women could not or should not be poets is associated with the control of language, the idea that women speak under sufferance in a patriarchal society, and that poetry itself is a specific form of high utterance, connected with spiritual and philosophical interpretations, and therefore giving the poet a function akin to that of a priest or a philosopher. This cluster of ideas: the control of language; the quasi-priestly role; and the domination of the canon of poetry by men, all contributed to the consequent disadvantage of the woman who aspired to write poetry. Such gender-based prejudice meant that, not only could the woman poet find few female precursors with whom to identify, but that any poetry that a woman did write was not readily accepted for publication.

Given these factors, it is unsurprising that Smith found it difficult at first to get her poems into print, and entered publishing through the medium of a novel. *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936) gave her the visibility that allowed her first collection of poems, *A Good Time Was Had By All*, to be published in 1937. The literary supremacy of the Auden group of poets in the 1930s, when Smith began to publish poetry, promoted masculine aesthetic principles, and its espousal of a masculine poetic offered an

exclusive, gender-based view of poetry. This was supplemented by the misogyny that found expression in Auden's 'Miss Gee'.

Smith was not in the literary mainstream. Employed as a secretary and living on the fringes of London with an aunt, she suffered the additional social disadvantage of being an unmarried woman at a time when the figure of the spinster, like the eponymous Miss Gee, was an object of scorn and derision. Additionally, she belonged to the reviled suburban classes. This ensured that she was ex-centric to the metropolitan and literary mainstream. Moreover she was considered eccentric in appearance and character. Smith, however, used these disadvantages to good effect: her eccentricity became a means of gaining visibility, and her suburban environment gave her the inspiration for much of her poetry. There is even evidence that the suburban connotations were exploited: the title of her first collection (*A Good Time Was Had By All*) was taken from reports of church socials, and is undeniably parochial in tone.

Smith's use of the suburbs, however, renders her categorisation as a poet of the suburbs somewhat inappropriate: she offered views and critiques of her London suburb that simultaneously tapped into intellectual ideas of suburban small-mindedness, reflected suburban mores of gentility and respectability, and emphatically defined herself as being of the suburbs without, however, being 'suburban'. Her texts therefore reveal that she allied herself with the intellectual elite. Yet she was a suburban woman, and this, together with her representation of the voices of the reviled suburban classes, allowed her poetry to offer a challenging intervention into the centrality of the mainstream male and urban voice. Moreover, in Smith's writings her suburb remains essentially rural. In it there remains pockets of countryside, suburban streets are poetically transformed into country dales, and the municipal park is imagined as an early English or mythical

location for the deeds of heroes. This adaptation allies her with the pastoral tradition and rehabilitates her suburb into ideas of nation that focus on rural rather than urban Englishness.

G.M. Stonier's review of *A Good Time Was Had by All* categorised Smith's collection of poetry as 'light verse':[5] moreover both he and Louis MacNeice applied the term 'doggerel' to Smith's poems.[6] In some cases accusations of triviality might be justified: Smith's work does not include lengthy works or epics, but it does contain short and humorous epigrams that might not have been included in the published work of many poets. Moreover, poems that deal with issues such as death and religion frequently mask their underlying seriousness with humour, or at least wryness. Other poems come under the category of light verse because of Smith's adoption and adaptation of nursery rhymes. In Smith's hands, however, the nursery rhymes work to conceal her underlying critical engagement with religion and social structures. In these terms they are carnivalesque: the laughter they invite is, in fact, carnival laughter in that it mocks, derides, and undermines established social norms.[7] Thus the carnivalesque linguistic play in 'Our Bog is Dood' (1950) challenges the reader to uncover the concealed attack on insincere piety; 'Heber' (1937) similarly hides its engagement with the difficulties of retaining religious faith; and 'The True Tyrant or The Spirit of Duty Rebuked' (1962) criticises ideologies of women's domesticity. These poems, then, are subversive of social establishments and mores, moreover they give a voice to the otherwise powerless woman and child. In this way they offer an albeit temporary suspension of the masculine and adult hierarchy. However, Smith's use of children's linguistic and literary forms, like her eccentric adoption of child-like dress and behaviour, is in Judith Butler's terms performative in that they constitute a fabricated discourse and identity. In this sense they are a strategy. Neither Smith, the performance poet dressed in a pinafore dress and strap

shoes, nor the poems that masquerade as children's literature, or at least light verse, pose a threat to either masculine power or the male domination of poetry.

I have argued that Smith was influenced by fairy tales and ballads as well as nursery rhymes. These genres are all forms that have been associated with the oral tradition, moreover these forms are essentially feminine in transmission and even composition. While the ballad tradition has become enshrined in masculine and canonical tradition its roots remain feminine: the original ballad singers or speakers may have been men, but women transmitted them, and passed them on to the ballad collectors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Fairy tales, too, were told, and were in many cases composed, by women. Certainly the oral literature that has been the realm of childhood has owed its survival to the mothers and nurses who, remembering rhymes and stories from their own childhood, have used them to calm and amuse their own children. In recent decades feminist poets have seized upon the fairy tale genre in order to critique gender relations, but Smith was a forerunner in this field by two or three decades. Writing, as she did, largely before the women's movement had exposed the structures of thought that have propagated women's inequality, Smith's gender-based fairy tale poem, 'The After-thought' (1950) satirises masculine speech, shows other versions of the fairy story gender stereotypes, and revises the convention of marriage as a happy ending. Moreover, 'The Fairy Bell' (1957) and 'Fairy Story' (1962) refer to specific problems faced by the woman poet: a male dominated tradition in which a woman may be an inspiring but silent muse; and the conflict between a woman poet's art and her social identity.

Smith's poetic influences are, of necessity, mainly male: women poets have tended to disappear from literary history and therefore few are included when lists of the canon are drawn up. The idea that a woman should not write poetry was widespread in the decade when Smith began to publish poetry and remained in evidence throughout her career, so

it is not surprising that Smith should be uncertain about attempting to enter a male dominated literary tradition. Although 'Little Boy Sick' (1938) engages with several of Blake's poems, thus showing her wholehearted engagement with the tradition, 'Intimation of Immortality' (1937) is an irreverent and subversive reworking of Wordsworth's great Ode, moreover my reading reveals Smith's ambivalence as regards the literary tradition and any place that she might take within it. Romanticism is also significant in Smith's work because of the way she, as well as her Romantic predecessors, derived inspiration from the topic of childhood. However, Smith challenged Romantic idealisations of childhood innocence, concentrating instead on the capacity of children to be cruel or even sinful, thus showing similarities with the eighteenth-century writer of poems for children, Isaac Watts. For Smith, however, this did not come out of an Evangelical concern for children's souls, but arose out of her own deep identification with children. Furthermore, Carolyn Steedman's ideas of interiority suggest that Smith's strategic performance of childhood was absorbed into her own interiorised understanding and expression of herself.

Part of the masculine domination of poetry is the patriarchal metaphor, in which the tradition of poetry is equated with literary paternity. Harold Bloom describes the 'filial relationship'[8] of poetic influence; C. Day Lewis similarly uses the metaphor of the literary forefather, with the new or aspiring poet seen as the son.[9] Such examples consolidate ideas of masculine literary procreation, and, as Gilbert and Gubar point out, the pen / penis becomes the power to create literary posterity.[10] Smith's simultaneous desire for, yet fear of, the word that is poetry can be seen in her adoption of a socially appropriate poetics, that is, one that offered no threat to male poets and poetry. This is seen in poetry that is apparently non-serious and derived from children's culture. However, Smith also uses a version of the childbirth metaphor that women have adopted

in a reaction against the masculine paternal metaphor. This can be found in poems in which Smith, or the subject of the poem, goes in search of the metaphorical mother. Thus she seeks a feminine source of language, and anticipates Cixous' and Kristeva's arguments that the pre-Oedipal stage, during which the infant is in a state of close unity with the mother, is the source of that relationship. It has been seen that in 'The Lady of the Well-spring' (1957), the subject of the poem goes on a quest that results in finding a fertile and female mother figure who is the 'source' or well-spring. This poem, however, also conveys the semiotic impulse that is wordless, rhythmic, and associated with the maternal *chora*, the round womb-like space which is simultaneously uterus and the arms that enclose an infant. In 'The Dream of Nourishment' (1957) the mother is found and the experience of breast-feeding gives intense pleasure or *jouissance.*

Smith's obsession with death recurs throughout her *oeuvre*. Death is ardently desired and often personified as a masculine lover. The significance of this is, first, that the death drive is part of the drives or pulsions that are gathered in the *chora*, therefore necessary to the acquisition of poetry. Secondly, if death is seen in terms of rebirth it can lead back to infancy and the mother figure. Death in Smith's poems is not final, indeed, Smith's Pompey Casmilus character in *Novel on Yellow Paper* and *Over the Frontier* is named after the god who conducted Persephone out of the underworld and can therefore enter into and out of death at will. Thus the eponymous 'Persephone' (1950) wishes to stay with Hades in the realm of the dead, but will return to her mother. Smith's most famous poem, 'Not Waving But Drowning' (1957) similarly expresses ideas of resurrection or life after death in that the dead man speaks Smith's short story 'Surrounded by Children' (1939) explicitly relates death to birth in that an old woman climbs into a baby's perambulator and stabs herself, thus making the baby carriage represent both tomb and womb; and in 'The Wanderer' (1950) a ghost, taps on the windows demanding to be

'nursed again',[11] therefore reborn as a baby who will return to the semiotic source. In this way death enables language acquisition.

I have argued that Smith assumed the performance of childhood as a strategy, and that this became so imbued in her personality as to become her own interiorised identity. Smith's search for the feminine source of poetry, manifested in the poems that reveal a wish to find the mother, to nurse, or to be reborn in order to nurse, can also explain Smith's strong sense of herself as a child, and her feeling of rivalry towards children. If she regarded herself as a child, real children usurped that role. Moreover, they are closer to the womb, and therefore to the semiotic source of poetry. Although in 'The Word'(1971) Smith writes 'I fear the Word, to speak or write it down, / I fear all that is brought to birth and born',[12] emphasising her fear of both the metaphorical birth that is literary creation, and childbirth, this thesis has argued that Smith did desire to bear the (albeit feared) word that is poetry. This desire led to her own original and feminine poetics.

Notes

1. Geoffrey Summerfield, *Worlds* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974) p. 2.
2. *Sixty Women Poets*, ed. by Linda France (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1993) p. 14.
3. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages* (London: Macmillan, 1994) p. 555.
4. Ibid p. 548.
5. G. M. Stonier, 'The Music Goes Round and Round', *New Statesman and Nation*, 13 (1937) 641 - 642 (p. 642).
6. Ibid. See also Louis MacNeice, 'A Brilliant Puritan', *Listener* 20 (1938) viii.
7. M.M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World,* tr. By Hélène Iswolsky, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) pp. 10-12.
8. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford

University Press, 1973) p. 25.

9. C. Day Lewis, *A Hope for Poetry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1934) p. 1.

10. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination,* 2nd ed. (London: Yale Nota Bene, 2000) p. 3-4.

11. Stevie Smith, *The Collected Poems*, ed. by James MacGibbon (1975; rpt. London: Penguin, 1985) p. 257.

12. Ibid p. 542.

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