

Stevie Smith and the Metaphors of Disengagement

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The English poet and novelist, Stevie Smith, once said that "being alive is like being in enemy territory".¹ This paper takes for granted that her work is an important twentieth-century statement of cultural and social alienation, the kind to which that ruthlessly unaccommodating statement directs us. My concern here is with the most obvious, curious, and artistically problematic manifestation of that alienation in her verse. This singular emphasis the poet herself openly admits when she remarks, ruefully, succinctly, that "my poems are a bit deathwards in their wish".² This "deathwardness" and a less specific use of escape imagery are my subject.

"Enemy territory" for Stevie Smith always meant what was specifically human, social, cultural about existence. "Oblivion", she wrote, is "better" than being a "human heart and human creature"³ and she envies the life of "other animals". "Enemy territory", then, the socially critical aspect of the work, is a large subject in itself. The mere *profession* in writing of the absolute solution serves inevitably to intensify the reader's sense of social estrangement. However, while I refer frequently here to the way the poems' metaphors of disengagement from life often encompass or reflect targets of social criticism, this criticism is not my first theme. Rather, I am concerned to describe the two main kinds of those metaphors of disengagement and to indicate the artistic problem they imply: that in verse at least, Stevie Smith's solution of death must seek its own solution in life.

As Stevie Smith recognized,⁴ it is not possible to read her work without consciousness of the strength and persistence of its death-wishfulness. The poet's convictions about the "friendliness" of death, the sweet gentleness of oblivion, as compared to the painful consciousness of the "enemy territory" where she must live, is a dominant preoccupation from her earliest writing,

1 In taped conversation with Kay Dick. See Dick, *Ivy and Stevie*, London, 1971, p. 45.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

3 References to the poems are to *The Collected Poems of Stevie Smith*, New York, 1976. This poem is on p. 562.

4 See her remarks to Kay Dick in *Ivy and Stevie*, pp. 45, 48.

and her poems cannot be properly understood if it is not accepted for what it is. It is life that Stevie Smith laments, not death; in particular it is consciousness, the business of being caught on a treadmill of thinking from which there is only ever one absolute release, and this is so notwithstanding all the delightful energy of her thinking through the poems. Thus death was never for Stevie Smith what it became for Sylvia Plath, a terrible solution to an intolerable existence, an action of despair, anger and outrage. Despite, indeed because of its probable character as oblivion, death was the friend her last poem announced it to be:

I feel ill. What can the matter be?
 I'd ask God to have pity on me,
 But I turn to the one I know, and say:
 Come, Death, and carry me away.
 ("Come, Death (2)", *CP*, p. 571)

Here the seemingly innocent but carefully staged (and implied) derogation of God serves to emphasize the contrasting claim to the friendliness of Death. Moreover, as tones of inquiry and uncertainty are replaced by the widening assurance of welcome in the fourth line, a quiet confidence about death is established, a confidence which in turn prepares for the imperious command of the last line of this poem and the last Stevie Smith ever wrote: "Come Death. Do not be slow".

Certainly the poet did not pursue the attractions of death to the point of committing suicide, however much she thought of this. She evidently found that she could cope with alien territory by living, as she put it "on the edge"⁵ and in the "merciful house"⁶ that held the "guardian Lion"⁷ she also knew as her aunt. The poems themselves were perhaps rather like that house of mercy for their creator and, as they made a halfway house to the "Oblivion" she preferred, so the poems often present images of disengagement from the life of the world which chart a release only halfway to the absolute one. That is, while there is a group of poems which are thoroughly deathwards in their wish, there is another group which are about a usually gaily careless, unspecific escape. "Oblivion" is a clear example of the first group and "I Wish" (*CP*, p. 449) of the second, even though the escape images of "I Wish" move toward a "heavenly sea"

5 *Ibid.*, p. 44.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 40, and see also the poem, "A House of Mercy", *CP*, pp. 410-11.

7 See, for instance, *Over the Frontier*, London, 1938, pp. 36, 60, 94.

and heaven-like "realms of light". The distinction, which appeals to degrees of explicitness and to tones or moods, is useful because it separates poems of very serious intention and emotional truth, such as "Come, Death (2)" from poems which share an acknowledged game with the reader.

Poems of this lighter kind use metaphors of madness, ignorance, enchantment, sheerly wilful wandering and, as mentioned, open fantasy. Several, for instance, use the imaginative freedom of the air and flying to image escape and put off "sight of the troublesome earth" ("The Passing Cloud", *CP*, pp. 351-2). The same metaphor occurs in the poem "No More People" (*CP*, p. 213), whose mischievously childish, independent aeroplane flight allows the poet to turn mere escape into power, significantly the power to rewrite the earth till it has "no more people". Here the characteristic use of a "mask of innocence"⁸ lightens a potentially dangerous wish, making it comically acceptable by reinforcing its nature as mere wishfulness. The socially critical aspect of Stevie Smith's art is deviously alive in this poem. The "mocking echo" of the poem's "busy clatter" can, in the context of the other poems, be seen to have a double reference: it mocks the power-craziness of war and scourge of wartime bombing on the one hand, and, on the other, it points toward those other poems which draw a veil of water across the earth to restore it with benign intent to the green pastoral of pre-human days.

A fantasy poem which well illustrates the way these disengagement poems always remain essentially poems critical of the "enemy territory" they seek to evade, is "My Hat" (*CP*, p. 315). With smug satisfaction, the speaker of this poem uses a hat, specifically designed to confine her within the social system, to escape it. The hat, her mother assures her, will guarantee that she "get off with the right sort of chap", but in the delightful event, it becomes the quixotically merry vehicle of flight away to a "morning land" where the girl is "rid of Father, Mother and the young man". Liberation, at least to the point of hat-waving, is allowed to work in this poem, which concludes:

There's just one thing causes me a twinge of pain,
If I take my hat off, shall I find myself home again?
So in this early morning land I always wear my hat
Go home, you see, well I wouldn't run a risk like that.

In a fantasy poem as playful as this one, this solution and con-

8 A forthcoming paper examines Stevie Smith's consistent use of this mask.

clusion cannot be faulted: the poem uses fantasy to make a critical gesture. Elsewhere, however, the gesture of throwing a world away becomes one which throws away a poem, and this helplessness of gesture, however comic or ironic in particular cases, can radically disappoint already established expectations. The gaze of these poems is too acute to lead satisfyingly to a mere shrug. I will take up this problem where it affects the pure "deathwish" poems, as the best of these show how it is to be surmounted.

Another poem of escape into an imaginative fiction, the poem of fenland memory, "The Engine Drain" (*CP*, pp. 316-8), also carries a carefully worked rejection of the social scene. This poem concentrates its fullness of lyrical power on bringing a remembered inland sea back across the fens. Ostensibly a lament for the draining of the fens and a superbly understated regret for what has replaced the waters

A fertile flat and farming land,
A profitable farming land
Is what is left behind

this poem remakes the waters in its song. The water-covered fens become idyllic ("All blue and flat and blue and flat it lay for all to see") and over them, significantly, the same birds of the poet's much-loved Avondale "swoop and swing and call". This bright singing, however, is not able to expunge its own wish to expunge the human scene in water. Water and sea, lakes or grasslands are to remain Stevie Smith's recurring images for peace and her desired oblivion. It is to these that her mind irresistibly turns when most oppressed by the weary weight of a world whose weight she always defines as human. However, when it is admitted that the human "enemy territory" has invaded even here, that the fens have been finally drained, the poems move one stage further and write more or less explicitly about the desirability of death's ultimate oblivion. To these poems of disengagement from life itself into death we must now turn.

As soon as we do, we face a paradox that I shall here make my theme: the paradox that it is not possible in this life to write purely of death because the limits of our language are those of living metaphor. Thus, Stevie Smith's death-wish poems are always about a living wish rather than about death: what they describe are attempts at active disengagement from life rather than engagements with death. Further, as I shall show, the most compelling of these poems makes its metaphor of disengagement

also a metaphor of re-engagement with a living problem: however positive her concept of death, for this or any poet, the solution to writing of death cannot be otherwise. The pattern of disengagement from life is then a lively one.

That said, however, Stevie Smith's theme of death-wishfulness remains and is persistent in a large group of poems ranging from the highly metaphorical, cryptic "Black March" (*CP*, 567-8) to the frankly explicit "Oblivion" (*CP*, p. 562). The cry "Oh shut me not within a little room",⁹ is not, in the context of the collected poems, a singular one. Further, however self-delighting the delight of many of the songs and ballads, their characteristic movement is away from what is positive and alive toward lament, rejection and active disengagement. Even the happy song of tribute to Avondale ("Avondale", *CP*, p. 445) has its shadow-companion in "Avondall" (*CP*, p. 446) with its pointedly symmetrical inversion of that mood of gaiety. In "Avondall", love and one's fellows become "inimical" and delight becomes thirst. In a similar way, the poem "Thoughts about the Person from Porlock" (*CP*, pp. 385-6) begins with a sceptical amusement, but the resourcefulness this poem makes a theme replenishes itself throughout the course of the poem only with effort, an effort which itself is thematic.

Thus, in this poem, there is an irritability of tone which mocks itself, but despite this self-awareness, the comically forced good humour of the address and its no-nonsense, restorative tones:

I felicitate the people who have a Person from Porlock
To break up everything and throw it away

and

Why do they grumble so much?
He comes like a benison

are turned increasingly to a wryly amused scolding of the self. More sombrely, however, by the end of the poem, the anonymous and imaginary Person from Porlock has become "One Above", that merciless experimenter with human lives, who, in Stevie Smith's world, is always free to withhold any benison, certainly that of Porlockian interruption. Few poems have so successfully combined a delighted banter, laughter and good cheer (however thematically "forced") with a central statement as firmly resonant of death as this:

9 "The Commuted Sentence" (*CP*, p. 287): in context this is a cry against life itself.

I long for the Person from Porlock
 To bring my thoughts to an end,
 I am becoming impatient to see him
 I think of him as a friend,

Often I look out of the window
 Often I run to the gate
 I think, He will come this evening
 I think it is rather late.

I am hungry to be interrupted
 For ever and ever amen
 O Person from Porlock come quickly
 And bring my thoughts to an end.

(*CP*, p. 386)

The success of this poem comes mostly from its modulating control of voice tones and from the way these tones command a sense of the absurd: the world's Coleridges, who disingenuously bemoan interruption, and the speaking self who longs for it, are both treated here with an equal irony and playfulness. All, for the time of the poem, are considered absurd, the Coleridges mockingly, the self with wryness, and it is this sense of the absurd that preserves a sombre theme from pretentiousness. The stanzas quoted for instance, show a delicate balance between laughter and a daring seriousness; between an innocent good humour and a startlingly slanted statement. The drama of a speaker apprehending herself in brisk resolution (however self-mocking) is made so engaging that moments of heaviness slip by but are not allowed to lose their power to darken the implications of later lines. Thus the memory of the quoted lines gives a chilling realism to the later line "Then you will be practically unconscious . . .". It is a poem whose movement toward a total disengagement with life is half-flaunted, half-disguised. Other poems are less devious.

Such poems occur sporadically all through the canon. The early poem "The River Deben" (*CP*, pp. 48-9), for instance, courts death in a dreamy acquiescence which professes to struggle against the moving time that confirms life. This poem is interestingly close in structure to Emily Dickinson's famous "Because I could not stop for Death". In both poems, death is both potential lover and chaperone on a journey, but where Dickinson's lines end with her surmise that "the Horses' Heads" were "toward Eternity", the River Deben speaker remains earthbound. The "coming day" she regrets is the terrestrial one whose light must rob her images of all the metaphorical meaning she calls

“blessed”:

Oh happy Deben, oh happy night, and night's companion Death,
What exultation what ecstasy is in thy breath
It is as salt as the salt silt that lies beneath.

Flow tidal river flow, draw wind from the east,
Smile pleasant Death, smile Death in darkness blessed,
But tarry day upon the crack of dawn. Thou comest unwished.

(*CP*, p. 49)

Here the innocent awkwardness and childish manner of the mask referred to earlier, allow extraordinary matter to seem prosaic, while a touching seriousness of statement is bestowed by the breathless, suspenseful delivery. The tonal innocence betrays its awareness of lack of innocence, thus revealing an implicative meaning which surpasses childishness:

Over here the waters are dark as a deep chasm
Shadowed by cliffs of volcanic spasm
So dark so dark is the waves' fashion.

But the oars dip I am rowing they dip and scatter
The phosphorescence in a sudden spatter
Of light that is more actual than a piece of matter.

(*CP*, p. 48)

The lines insist on their childish phrases (“piece of matter”) and yet suggest a sophisticated, adult, metaphysical awareness of the rhythms, edges and psychic depths of life. And continuously, there is the drowsy acquiescence in a dream with its insistent glimpse of death.

Intellectually, the most interesting and powerful of these death-wish poems is “Watchful” (*CP*, pp. 477–80). This narrative poem and the earlier “Who Shot Eugenie?” (*CP*, pp. 291–3) actually form poetic studies of aspects of Stevie Smith’s novel, *Over the Frontier*. Both share with the novel an aspect of its moral theme, its central motif of a flight across a European landscape, a dark-forested country, a land of moors and seas. The main reason for the intense interest of these two narrative poems is that their fully developed flight metaphor, surrounded as it is with all the balladic trappings of death scenery and the deathwatch stages so characteristic of the poetry of Stevie Smith, provides in each case a flight *into* experience as much as away from it.

The narrative of “Who Shot Eugenie?” uses shock tactics to describe that painful conundrum of life that leads precisely the most committed individual to self-betrayal and betrayal of others. Although the story’s outcome is not guessable, the poem shows

that because dedication to a cause is energized by a suppression of personal values and identity, treachery at the individual level becomes inevitable. The poem's long nervous ride through the landscape of death, the description of exhausting dissipation of individual purposes and the movement beyond decay to the "shadowy margin" end appropriately in a death and a nightmare-experience. This nightmare-experience is Kafkaesque in its apparent inexplicability and the fearful, psychological explicability that the poem's narrative implies. In retrospect, the answer to the poem's conundrum is seen to be evident in the early stages of the narrative: the contradictions of war itself imply a contradiction in the heart of each person who commits herself to it. In a situation where "so inappropriate is all individual consideration", betrayal of the individual is only a matter of terrible logic. The character, Pompey, of *Over the Frontier* makes the same discovery, but the discursive, circuitous path of her discoveries contrasts with the intense drama of the poem, which progressively narrows its reference to a point where the claustrophobic perception of one individual is all that is left. The rest is silence.

Over the Frontier and "Who Shot Eugenie?" chart the particular, terrifying anguishes of life committed to the purposes and values of "enemy territory". Movement into that territory involves a self-betrayal and loss of personal integrity, whose depiction forms an indictment of the values of central culture. In her flirtation with "enemy territory" Pompey loses and has to rediscover her perspective of rejection; it is necessary to move with her creator back to the "edge" of a society committed to war in order to criticize it clearly and without self-interest.

The impressive poem "Watchful" traces more completely than any other in Stevie Smith's work the pattern of rejection, disengagement and flight which is typical of and essential to her thinking and feeling. Like most others of her serious poetic explorations of moral experience, "Watchful" (*CP*, 477-80) adopts the character and voice of a child. The world and the period from which she must disengage herself is shown to be a society world of some glamour and a world of public affairs which requires that she give "parties" and "play" on the Stock Exchange:

Often we gave parties
In London
For Senior Civil Servants
And barristers
And Junior Members

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Of the Government.

(*CP*, p. 478)

Here the voice of the child operates at one level to assert the mere childishness of the pursuits of these bureaucrats; even the upper case is not without its irony. That such a lifestyle turns out to be the mere immature preliminary to "real life" is not without its point of sarcasm. This poet always seems to see the world of public affairs and society life as a characteristic part of "enemy territory", which, for all its glitter, is eminently childish in its values and activities.

The expository narrative of "Watchful" repeats several times the linguistically childish form "It is funny", meaning "peculiar":

. . . It was funny
How we made so much money
Because we did not want it . . .

(*CP*, p. 477)

Tommy said, It is funny
Like the money,
We do not want
It or them very much . . .

(*CP*, p. 478)

This phrase, like others of its type, is effective not only in revealing the speaker's adult contempt for such experience but in binding the poem's emerging experience of growth to childhood: the dawning of the discontent that presages rebellion and the decisive choices of developing maturity must come from within the immature fascination with things less worthwhile. In "Watchful", stages of growth and decision are put succinctly and simply. Although the first stanza has clearly dissociated Watchful and the speaker's brothers from the expository "schoolroom" period of the narrative, Watchful nonetheless merges with her brother, Tommy, who so warns his sister: "Watch out, said Tommy, the word is Watchful". At a later and more decisive stage:

The window of our schoolroom was open
And in the group of my brothers in the room was one, quickly,
Who was not a brother, coming to me.

(*CP*, p. 478)

The ensuing flight from the window and the symbolically fearful drop from the high wall into the waiting and suspensefully anonymous "arms that held me" precipitate the reader's awareness that Watchful is lover as well as mentor, fate as well as soul-watch, and further, that in terms of the rapidly developing theme of crucial maturation experience and meeting, Watchful is also alter ego. This last role of Watchful (the poem is sub-

titled *A Tale of Psyche*) is further stressed as the actual flight, which is as effectively away as toward, begins. It is important thematically that this flight begins with escape from Watchful as well as from the social schoolroom. The soul is shown in the psychologically realistic action of putting off moments of awareness, of refusing a watchfulness for which it is not quite ready, and yet in the long term hastening to meet them all the same:

Over the saltings I ran. The midnight high wind
 Pulled my straight hair in streaks behind me, and I ran and ran
 And did not care, as I ran by the sea shore
 If Watchful ran behind or waited for me
 On Northumberland Moor.

(*CP*, p. 479)

The detail of the passages that follow fills in a sense of both moral and experiential duration and marks the stages of the speaker's journey away from the schoolroom and toward her goal, Watchful. Attracted (as the poet always was) to the leaping waves of the sea and their temptation to the easy alternative of oblivion (this meaning is only implicit at this stage in reading) the child is warned to "Turn away, turn away" and, as narrator, she comments:

It was funny
 How easily I turned away from the high crests, as easily
 As from the parties
 And the money

(*CP*, p. 479)

and this recollection of earlier rejected experience serves to identify the temptation of absolute escape through suicide with temptations which this poem judged as contemptible and immature from the first. It also serves to identify the voice of Watchful with the speaker's own inner voice—the full experience she seeks is nothing more nor less than her own. She goes to meet her other self. Even so, as I shall show, the problem of the temptation of death is not as simple as the journeying child thinks it at this juncture. It remains with her as does the journeying Watchful, both a part of her self.

There follows on this a dramatic and curious passage which can only suggest this continuing presence of the temptation to death, and further, that the character of the adult experience the protagonist seeks, Watchful himself, is so close a likeness to death that the two may easily be confused. In this passage, as she confronts an actuality of death, the protagonist has to be told (twice) that this is not her goal, that she has gone, however fractionally, astray:

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Very dark it was and silent, I ran on brown pine needles
Silently, and came to a gamekeeper's gallows. The mournful birds
Hanging there cried: We are not Watchful, and an old badger
Crawling to his sett to die said: I am not Watchful. But the wind
Cried: Hurry! and drove great snowflakes against my face.
Then I came to a dark house and the door swung and I went in,
Oh Watchful, my darling, you have led me such a dance.

(CP, pp. 479-80)

The odd mixture here of apparent inconsequence and consequence, of symbolic realism and a sardonic punning jokiness, takes daring risks with action and mood. The sudden word "gallows", for instance, allows the poet to make a seemingly irrelevant side-thrust at such preservation. Similarly, she risks the surprising bringing together of starkly dying creatures (the hanging birds remind us of those Tess meets in her journey's wood in Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*) with a punning ambiguity of speech, so that their cries act as a macabre warning against death as well as a redirection to her "Watchful" goal. These creatures have met their fate in death for lack of watchfulness; if the protagonist attains to a better watchfulness than theirs she will avoid death. The joke thus realizes the identity of an ideal motto for self-conduct with her goal in self-wholeness. Further, in that she has to make so sharp a distinction to avoid temptation (to death) she is forced to demonstrate watchfulness before she meets Watchful. The joke therefore repeats the information that Watchful is a part of the traveller's waking self, her alter ego; she learns Watchful before she recognizes him. In active learning and exercise she earns her destiny.

It is of compellingly dramatic significance that the speaker's destiny, when she reaches it, is so near to the scene of death and shares certain of death's features:

Then I came to a dark house . . .

He lay on a truckle bed, cold, cold; his eyes shut.

This "child", as she meets her adult being, must awaken him again to life from the condition of death. The action parallels and symbolically repeats her struggle with the temptation of death just earlier; the action is more of the same and also one and the same. That is, this particular discovered adult experience is also to be the continuing one, because, from the confusion of the schoolroom, the speaker has passed to a recognition of the nature of herself and her striving.

The story can be understood, of course, in different ways, but what is clear is that the personal integrity and complete-

ness that this story's traveller seeks requires that she first look on death to recognize the value of the life of mature experience. That is, the meaning may be taken to be little more than the common human discovery that one feels the full value of being alive only as one recognizes personal mortality. It goes further, however, in suggesting that to be adult, one must discover within oneself the capacity for understanding and then actively fan it alive. However, in the context of Stevie Smith's other poetry, with its long obsession with death and death's attractiveness, such a universal meaning takes on a more particular colouring. The poem may, after all, show that the adult or "frontier" experience for this poem's speaker is exactly a continual engagement with the temptation to death, that this temptation, rather than death itself, is her fate and symbolic lover. In finding and accepting Watchful and in putting off the dreamy myopia of childishness (and of a merely social scene) she accepts the destiny of that constant temptation. As the structure suggests, she also accepts the responsibility of a clear-eyed recognition of the "enemy territory" that that social scene and its attempts to imprison her made.

This poem follows the pattern of thought and reaction I sketched in my opening paragraphs: it shows how the course of rejection and a struggling disengagement with life in Stevie Smith's poetry turns specifically away from social experience as our culture defines and controls it, and that it turns, as if to emphasize the strangely intense quality of that rejection, toward the only absolute rejection allowed to any of us. For this poet, even the journey into life is "deathwards in its wish", and this poem shows us in frankly simple detail, why and how.

More importantly, however, the poem clearly combines its fascination with death with an equally intense fascination with life and the way these intermingle. The point seems simple, but the problem it posed for this poet was real and ever-present. Too many of Stevie Smith's poems seem to throw themselves away in their conclusions; to end with a mere flippancy; to make poems whose first direction was lodged in a complex reaction to being alive, end with mere gesture. The resort to such flippancy and the "carelessness"¹⁰ which Mark Storey ends by finding a particular strength, was an almost inevitable problem for a poet who seriously doubted the value of life *per se*, who felt

10 In "Why Stevie Smith Matters", *Critical Quarterly*, XXI, No. 2, 41-55.

that human post-mortal existence or non-existence would have been "better".

In many of the poems which edge toward death and "wish" for death, the reader and the protagonist are left stranded in pure metaphor, merely caught at the edge of the sea. The problem, when it is reduced to simple terms, is one of metaphysics—every poet knows that one cannot say "dead" and really mean it. The most suggestive statement of death in English literature is, of course, Shakespeare's "the rest is silence", but even this famous line rests on the metaphorical and metaphysical weight of all the words of *Hamlet* that preceded it and also on the suggestive lyric "silence" that follows on the close of the play. Stevie Smith knew as well as any that she was committed to living metaphor, that even her words "peace", "oblivion" and "death" are metaphors for the unknown. Thus, in the simplest possible sense her poems are always about life, however much they speak of death. The poem "Watchful", however, by exploring the precise experience of this ambiguity, that the experience of death, as well as being a wish, is also a living wondering, gives far more to readers than could those poems which begin with a wish and move to a wishful vagueness. Being alertly and genuinely "on the edge" of that wondering about death, which is really a wondering about life, Stevie Smith was admirably equipped to write a "death" poem as strong as this one.

There is a sense in which all of Stevie Smith's poems are a "waving" from "out there", but in her case, "waving" from the drowning situation she also called "enemy territory" is not only mere gesture, because the waving is from one who knows well the element in which she struggles. Those poems whose metaphors record that struggle, showing the way the tug of death is a complex strand of the tug of life, are the poems to which we respond most keenly, most sympathetically.