

REVIEWS

Stevie Smith, *All the Poems*. Edited by Will May. New York: New Directions, 2016. 704 pp. \$39.95

The poem may be just two lines long, yet anyone familiar with her work will immediately recognize Stevie Smith as the author:

I'll have your heart. If not by gift, my knife
Shall carve it out; I'll have your heart, your life.

The rhythm is both meandering and coiled; the vocabulary simple yet pointed; the tone flat but also dramatic, making a drama of restraint. The poem's surprises—of which there are many, compressed into a single couplet—depend on the reader's willingness to read the poem aloud, fulfilling its potential as a spoken performance. Smith moves unexpectedly from short to long clauses (pulling us across an enjambment), and back again. "Gift" sharpens into "knife," only to cut against "life." And in an odd grammatical turn, a semicolon locks two sentences into one after the morbidity of the speaker's possessiveness has been made clear and thus inescapable. Here is a plain statement that appears to say everything yet teases us with all that has been omitted.

To describe Stevie Smith's voice as unmistakable is to imply, perhaps uncharitably, that she did not much evolve from her first collection of poems in 1937 (*A Good Time Was Had by All*) to her last book released posthumously in 1972 (*Scorpion and Other Poems*). Nor is the charge wholly inaccurate. Without the aid of an editor, one would be hard-pressed to attribute most any of her poems to a specific point in her career. The range of Smith's writing, however, is impressive, from short lyrics of the kind quoted above, to long narrative poems and looser conversational pieces. The poems themselves often lean towards anecdote, letter, epigram, riddle, oration: things that poetry can obviously contain and imitate, but that presented so nakedly force us to consider where poetry stands in relation to these other forms.

After a brief and belated surge of popularity in the last two decades of her life, Smith has returned to the margins of literary history. She is now best remembered for "Not Waving but Drowning," the poem that solidified her reputation as a poet of solitude. Seamus Heaney, one of Smith's most acute critics, echoes this sentiment when he lists as her principal themes: "Death, waste, loneliness, cruelty, the maimed, the stupid, the innocent, the trusting." To that list we might add: the proud, the indifferent, the cruel. Smith was a poet

deeply interested in people, a writer who found comedy in their faults but whose satirical eye was matched by a genuine sympathy for their pains. Tone matters greatly here, since the dramatic nature of Smith's style also guarded her against sentimentality.

I never learnt to attract, you see,
And so I might as well not be,
A dreary future I see before me,
'Tis pity that ever my mother bore me.

The tone, so poised and matter-of-fact, reins in the speaker's lamentation and makes it difficult for us to indulge in the pain ourselves. Yet at the same time the heaviness of the word "be"—a mere two-letter verb that carries the much larger sense of "exist"—aptly conveys the heaviness of an undesired life and is compassionate to those who would prefer not to be. When portraying less agreeable figures, Smith tends to give us their perspective without moralizing upon it:

I longed for companionship rather,
But my companions I always wished farther.
And now in the desolate night
I think only of the people I should like to bite.

The sentiments may be far from honorable, and we can easily imagine a version of this poem where the isolation would serve as a kind of punishment, the desire to bite a sign that he has failed to reform. But Smith's attitude remains amused rather than sardonic—willing to let these foibles be and to not turn against them.

If Smith has been rightly praised for her sympathetic depictions of people, she is almost never celebrated as a poet of ideas. And yet she addressed a wide variety of subjects in her writing, from the British class system to the philosophy of materialism. Poems, for Smith, were opportunities to dramatize a given position, work through it, see how far it could go and where it came up short; and this, whether the idea in question was one she believed in herself or one she had trouble countenancing. For instance, we know from biographies that Smith felt strongly about cruelty towards animals. The oratorical "This is Disgraceful and Abominable," though, does not entirely commit to its oratory about a French circus:

A disgraceful and abominable thing I saw in the French circus
A performing dog
Raised his back leg when he did not need to
He did not wish to relieve himself, he was made to raise his leg.
The people sniggered. Oh how disgraceful and abominable.
Weep for the disgrace, forbid the abomination.

Though it expresses genuine distaste at the sight of animals made to do tricks, the poem does not allow itself to forget the scale of the problem. To what extent does training a dog to raise his leg constitute a “disgrace” or an “abomination”? Smith contrasts the smallness of the act itself, and the smallness of the audience’s response (“sniggered”), with the sheer length of the exposition and the oratorical laments that bring the scene to a close. This does not void the poem’s cogent understanding of shame—how humiliation depends on belittlement—so much as put the accusation in a different kind of perspective.

Smith’s talent for taking on a variety of opinions comes through most spectacularly in her attitude towards religion. She herself had deep qualms with Christianity, and many of her poems reflect that view. She attacked religious institutions for their hypocrisy, their cruelty, and their violence past and present (“Thoughts about the Christian Doctrine of Eternal Hell”: “Was it not curious?”). At the same time, she confessed admiration for the stoicism Christianity might afford (“The Roman Road”), and she saw in the desire to be consumed by God a parallel to her own longing for death (“God the Eater,” “God the Drinker”). Several of her poems provocatively revise doctrine in order to imagine an alternative to religious thought and practice. In “The Airy Christ,” she envisions a Jesus who “only wishes they would hear him sing,” and who does not especially wish his songs to be made into “working laws.” Elsewhere Smith takes on the voice of God and reinterprets him several different ways—as a loving paternal figure who does not wish Man to die out of sheer adoration (“God and Man”), or as a hypocrite who regrets Man’s flaws but insists Heaven will remain barred to him until he is “already at home” in it (“God Speaks”). Smith may have been a polemicist in some regards, but she never let an agenda drive her thinking. In poetry she found a medium that allowed her to try a host of contradictory opinions, both in the sense of trying them on and putting them to the test.

This commitment to poetry as a vehicle for thought—and a way to move beyond the narrowness of one’s thinking—explains why Smith often felt discouraged by her reputation as an eccentric. She, on the contrary, prided herself on her practicality. And indeed, one finds in her work a bracing clear-headedness that sets her apart from the category of nonsense verse she is so often associated with. Her poems are invariably more challenging than their form might suggest.

All things pass
Love and mankind is grass.

While this poem presents itself with the neatness and symmetry of an epigram, the nature of (and motivation behind) the lesson seems obscure. “Love” and “mankind” are united—startlingly—by the singular verb “is,” even as the

rhyme on “pass” and “grass” decimates these with the inevitability of death. Are we to take such lines as words of comfort, caution, or encouragement? In Smith’s writing, epigrams reveal themselves to be inapplicable (“Beware the man whose mouth is small / For he’ll give nothing and take all”) and allegories more elusive than elucidating (“The Lion dead, his pride no less, / The world inherits wormliness”). Even the simplest of sentiments become the object of attentive study:

Mother, I love you so.
Said the child, I love you more than I know.
She laid her head on her mother’s arm,
And the love between them kept them warm.

What are we to make of the paradox in the second line of knowing and not knowing; or rather of knowing one does not know? The child does not distrust her emotions. She is simply conscious that the full extent of her feelings lies beyond her comprehension, and the poem echoes this awareness in turn. Though the second couplet appears to bring the scene to a harmonious close with “arm” elongated into “warm,” the words “between them” present “love” both as a bridge and a barrier. We are never allowed to forget that mother and child are separate selves, genuinely united by love but separate nonetheless. Smith thus depicts the scene warmly but refuses to be warmed by it, determined to avoid the false comforts that come with so many portrayals of human and maternal love.



All the Poems, a new edition of Stevie Smith edited by Will May and succeeding James MacGibbon’s 1983 edition of the *Collected Poems*, both expands the available canon of Smith’s poems and deepens our understanding of them. It brings together her eight published volumes, the uncollected and unpublished material from *Me Again* (1983), as well as forty-eight poems that have not previously been released. The usefulness of this edition is therefore less a matter of how much new material we are given (though several of the forty-eight poems are excellent), and more of getting all Smith’s available work in one volume at last. May is careful to point out the book does not contain all the poetry Smith ever wrote, her output being such as to make a *Complete Poems* unfeasible for now. But this is certainly as complete as we will get for a long time to come.

In addition to its comprehensiveness, another major argument for this new edition is the illustrations, so strangely childlike and yet distinctly

un-childlike at the same time. MacGibbon had been forced to omit a number of drawings in 1983 to fit Smith's work into a single book. May has restored these images, as well as their original placement. The fact that most of the drawings were not conceived in conjunction with the poems seems of little import, as Smith's pairing of sketch and verse is sufficiently interesting to merit preserving the arrangement here. For example, the poem "*Quand on n'a pas ce que l'on aime...*" achieves a powerful effect by juxtaposing the abstract nature of the text itself ("Cold as no love, and wild with all negation— / Oh Death in Life, the lack of animation") with the plain and domestic quality of the illustration (which depicts a young man and woman sitting across from one another, the woman running a hand through her hair). Many of Smith's sketches work in this way, as pieces to interpret alongside and against the poems, rather than as simple representations of the scenes described.

The book also has a number of editorial virtues that make it excellent for longtime readers of Smith and newcomers alike. Of particular importance is the fact that May has given nearly all the poems their own page regardless of length. This design makes it possible to consider each individual piece on its own terms, and it avoids the ragbag effect MacGibbon had resorted to by necessity. Readers will also find useful notes providing facts about publication history, variants, sources, and allusions. The last two are especially good to have, since Smith was a highly allusive poet whose apparent plain style makes it difficult to track down references. Robert Browning, Tennyson, Blake, and Wordsworth fittingly dominate the notes, but some omissions may come as a surprise. While Smith claimed to be ignorant about much contemporary poetry, it is hard not to hear a parody of T. S. Eliot in "The Cousin":

Standing alone on a fence in a spasm,
I behold all life in a microcosm.
Behind me unknown with a beckoning finger
Is the house and well timbered park. I linger
Uncertain yet whether I should enter, take possession, still the nuisance

Of a huge ambition; and below me is the protesting face of my cousin.

Like many of the best parodies, Smith's poem does not ridicule Eliot but instead renders, in playfully exaggerated form, the stylistic traits that have made his verse so distinctive. Indeed, Smith's writing as a whole is remarkable for the sheer range of literary references she engages with, from classical to modern. In his introduction, May aptly draws our attention to the way Smith takes Tennyson's "The Dying Swan" ("The desolate swan creeks and pools among, / Were flooded over with eddying song"), and pares it down to the following:

Wan
Swan
On the lake
Like a cake
Of soap

May similarly offers Coleridge's "Youth and Age" as a source for the poem "Where are you going?" on the basis that they both feature a "tedious" old man who overstays his welcome. Yet other connections come to mind that are closer to the language of Smith's poem, even if they do not seem like her usual fare. The opening stanza reads:

O where are ye going ye human faces,
Where are ye going, to what far places,
Where are ye going, to what distances?

Is it being over-ingenious to hear in this an echo of a then-still-young but artistically confident W. H. Auden? The closing poem of *The Orators*, published a decade prior, begins, "O where are you going," said reader to rider," and then runs through a series of questions, one for each stanza. It would certainly be characteristic of Smith to take what in the original work was dramatic or fearful, and then give it an ironic twist. (At the end of her poem, those who have suffered through the old man's queries exclaim, "Good riddance!") Yet the opening stanza remains just as death-haunted as Auden's poem—again, more tribute than satire.

Indeed, the only real shortcoming of this new edition is the in-between quality of the notes. They are substantial to a point, but run to a mere forty-six pages for 732 pages of poetry. I suspect this was done to keep the volume at a reasonable length, which it is. (In fact, the book sits more slimly on my shelf than its predecessor.) There are moments, though, when the information provided seems thinner than one might wish. The note for "To Dean Inge Lecturing on Origen" refers us to "William Ralph Inge's second and third Gifford Lectures in *The Philosophy of Plotinus* (1918)," but May tells us nothing further about those lectures, when a summary would have proved helpful. Moreover, while the notes cite a range of poems Smith either alluded to or adopted as a source, few are quoted for comparison. The gloss on "A Dream of Comparison" directs us specifically to Milton's *Paradise Lost* Book X ll. 1001–6, but the passage itself is not included despite its brevity. Be sure to have a good library at hand. Such minor complaints aside, however, this is certainly the most authoritative edition of Stevie Smith to date, and readers will be grateful to May for the wealth of material he has made available in a single book.

May begins his introduction with the claim: "Like all great poets, Stevie Smith invites contradictions." It is hard to underestimate the boldness of that

first clause, which presents as generally assumed something that few would agree upon even now. Even at the height of her popularity, Smith was often dismissed as a “minor poet,” and it now seems unlikely she will ever be as well regarded as (say) her contemporary, Philip Larkin. Yet perhaps that marginal position need not be considered a snub. Her poems get much of their strength from appearing slighter than they are; from seeming not to fit in a particular school, movement, or period; from appearing to exist outside the literary tradition even as they are deeply in conversation with it. In her life, Smith placed much value in independence, even when standing apart came at the price of loneliness. Her poems express a similar commitment. By repeatedly evading our assumptions, they challenge and expand our sense of what serious poetry can do, what shape it can take.

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J. H. Prynne, *The White Stones*. Introduction by Peter Gizzi. New York: New York Review Books, 2016. 152 pp. \$14

J. H. Prynne’s *The White Stones* was originally published in 1969 by Tim Longville and John Riley’s Grosseteste Press. Its covers were dark green with a cairn of white dots framed by a black rectangle on the front. It collected fifty-eight poems published between November 1965 and August 1968, mostly in the subscriber-only magazine *The English Intelligencer*, but also in Andrew Crozier and Tom Clark’s *The Wivenhoe Park Review*. It followed the acerbic and politically focused *Kitchen Poems*, which Cape Goliard had put out the year before.

Now republished as a pocket edition in the New York Review Books Poets series and introduced by Peter Gizzi, *The White Stones* has been promised to the American reader as “the ideal introduction to the achievement and vision of a legendary but in America still little-known contemporary master.” The anonymous puff on the rear cover is unnerving, not least because the word “master,” though here perhaps intended as a compliment, perpetuates Prynne’s status as an obscure don from the old Oxbridge world, whose poems are constructed to preemptively subordinate the servants. (That’s us.) Prynne’s reception as a hermetic poet withholding the answers to our questions has done as much to intimidate readers as it has to seduce them. *The Guardian*’s besotted John Mullan, for example, wrote: “Prynne’s prophets have gone forth from Cambridge to whisper the word to the qualified few.”

Yet *The White Stones* really is the ideal introduction: it collects the majority of poetry written during Prynne’s most “lyrical” period, it generally