

change the very categories in which the whole aspect of the Church's life is conceived. Whether we like it or not there is no going back. This may be disturbing and unnerving but it is an essential feature of the Church today.

The scientist is eager to push on into the unknown and readily modifies or discards his familiar concepts in his pursuit of a deeper and more comprehensive truth. He knows that the constant appeal to experiment, the careful cross-checking and continual discussion of many minds ensures the essentially progressive nature of his work. Likewise the Church in its 'pilgrimage into the eternal unknowability of God' (Rahner) is not afraid of experimentation and change, knowing that our continual growth is inspired and safeguarded by the promise of Christ.

That one must speak lightly . . .¹ A Study of Stevie Smith by Michael Tatham

It is likely enough that if some Catholic controversialist of the early seventeenth century had been discussing the merits of various contemporary poets, he would have extolled Crashaw and Southwell, deplored Donne, and vacillated in his opinion of Alabaster according to whether the gentleman was imprisoned in England for the Faith or had returned to the Anglican Church and a wife after differences with the Inquisition. Blame or approval would have been a matter of 'party' loyalty; not of poetry. The position was honourable enough in time of adversity but one we should attempt to outgrow. Such a simplistic attitude to religious belief is almost certainly an important factor in accounting for the intellectual and emotional poverty of religious art. One has heard the remark that dismisses Sutherland because he has lapsed,² as if integrity as an artist depended on Easter Communion. It is tempting to inquire how many of the great figures of the Renaissance were certifiably in a state of grace.

Thus it comes about that in March 1971 we lost one of the very few religious poets of our time and it is doubtful whether anyone noticed. She herself would not have been surprised:

I cannot imagine anything nicer
Than to be struck by lightning and killed suddenly
crossing a field
As if somebody cared.³

¹The title: 'That one must speak lightly . . .' comes from *A Soldier Dear to Us*.

²A priest's conversation overheard at Northampton, July 1962.

³All poems and quotations are from *Selected Poems*, Longmans; or *Scorpion*, Longmans; unless otherwise indicated.

But I am sure she would have been justifiably annoyed if she felt that unfair advantage had been taken of her death to pluck her bones devoutly from their resting place and haul them across into the enemy camp. Her integrity deserves as much protection as our own and we must be on guard against damaging either. Certainly she would have smiled a little wanly at any suggestion that after all she was one of us. And of course she would be right to deprecate such 'shifty' practice and to express her indignation. She is only one of us if we go out to find her. For the face of the Church was masked in her eyes by a terrible cruelty and a contemptible dishonesty; and in love she turned away. Nevertheless—or even, perhaps, because of this turning away—Stevie Smith was a profoundly religious poet and speaks to our condition as modern piety usually cannot speak.

Neither will fashionable reassurances of the 'we are all ecumenical today' variety, help our case, for Miss Smith was always unfashionable. During the thirties and forties she had great difficulty in getting her poetry published,¹ and mockingly remarked quite recently, 'Like anyone else that doesn't go to church I'm very much against changes'.² How she would have loathed the new English Mass; unless, perhaps, as someone suggested, the Church could adopt the old Anglican service when the Church of England have completely finished with it. Poetically her resistance to popularization found expression in the rather slight 'Why are the Clergy . . .?' with its pleasantly astringent conclusions:

Does Charity object to the objection?
Then I cry, and not for the first time to that smooth face
Charity, have pity.

In a similar piece Stevie Smith starkly and uncompromisingly demands:

Mocked by the priests of Mary Tudor, given to the flames,
Flinching and overcoming the flinching. Cranmer.

His touch as a writer was, she affirms, surer than that of modern improvers, and, whatever our reservations about other aspects of the man, there can be little room for doubt about the courage of his death or the beauty of his prose style; they plead for admiration just as surely as the deaths of other martyrs no matter whether in St Giles'³ or Smithfield or Tyburn. There is the same appalling glory. But an acknowledgment of beauty and courage do not constitute an ecumenical gesture which will permit us to appropriate such an unecumenical person. Only in the present time when we mostly live without faith it is reasonable to draw comfort from the fact that a religious poet shares our predicament. God is unnecessary. He is

¹'Poet on Thin Ice': *Guardian* article—Stevie Smith talks to John Horder.

²'Death is a Poem to Stevie Smith': *Observer* article by John Gale.

³As a matter of fact, as all pedants know, it was really round the corner from us, in the Broad. (Ed.)

irrelevant to our material well-being. He is never about in the quad. He has lost his status. Stevie Smith's remarkable achievement as a poet was to sustain a dialogue with God in which there was no pretence that a comforting reply was possible. She remarks: 'I wish I was more cheerful, it is more pleasant.'

Much of her conversation is a rejection of the God made with human hands, the God of the Inferno and the Church Militant . . . old Nobodaddy,

Speak not to me of tears,
Tyranny, pox, wars,
Saying, Can God
Stone of man's thought, be good?

who appears most often as the monster of Catholic piety noted by Yvonne Lubbock 'that God resurrects some bodies solely in order to torture them for ever':¹

So the vulnerable body is stretched without pity
On flames for ever. Is this not pretty.

The religion of Christianity
Is mixed of sweetness and cruelty
Reject this Sweetness, for she wears
A smoky dress out of hell fires.

There are, however, times when the historical dross of Christianity is less obtrusive and she can temporarily forget the horror of crimes attributed to God and committed in his name. The problem of heaven is the reverse side of the coin, and, although an ancient difficulty, has been made still more awkward by our general loss of confidence in the dimensions of childhood imagery. In an extremely recent novel² W. J. Weatherby sees heaven through the eyes of an elderly priest as a type of suburb – which touches the similar conception of C. S. Lewis in *The Great Divide*; Lewis seeing heaven as a park which could be reached by bus from anywhere within the urban area of hell. It was open to all who wished to stay. Miss Smith writes:

I should like him to be happy in
heaven here,
But he cannot come by wishing, only by being already
at home here.

Love is so much more difficult than hate to depict—a babe in a girl's arms is our only convincing symbol.³ Compared with the well-established geography of hell a park is an anaemic image. Small wonder the park remains comfortably empty and the congregations dwindle. How wise they were to paint those Judgments on the walls of every country church. We have digested our *Brighton Rock*, stared

¹'Belief is Being' from *The Future of Catholic Christianity*. Constable.

²*One of our Priests is Missing*. Penguin.

³I have deliberately omitted the cross.

through the newsprint at the interrogation procedures and remembered those nuns who held a Eurasian girl's finger in a candle flame because she would not lie.¹ Love is so much more of a problem despite St Francis and St Clare talking in a strange glare or Krishna dancing with Radha.² Ironically, Stevie Smith takes us there by visiting with Dante in the Second Circle of Hell.

O love sweet love
I feel this love
It burns me so
It comes not from above

It burns me so
The flames run close
Can you not see
How the flames toss

Our souls like paper
On the air?
Our souls are white
As ashes are

O sweet love
Will our love burn
Love till our love
To ashes turn?

I wish hellfire
Played fire's part
And burnt to end
Flesh soul and heart

Then we could sit beside our fire
With quiet love
Nor fear to in flames and see
A shadow move.³

Two other short and much anthologized poems, 'Not Waving But Drowning' and 'I Remember', come close to saying all that need be said about our isolation from one another. Few lines are so haunting as the movement out of colloquial speech rhythms in:

I do not think it has ever happened
Oh my bride, my bride.

and a similar plea for recognition is unheeded and obliterated in 'The Orphan Reformed':

Now when she cries, Father, Mother, it is only to please.
Now the people do not mind, now they say she is a mild tease.

Stevie Smith's compassion is entirely consistent with John Horder's

¹*Two Under the Indian Sun* by Jon and Rumer Godden. Macmillan.

²*The Loves of Krishna* by W. G. Archer. Allen and Unwin.

³Last verse omitted.

portrait in *The Observer*; he remarked that she was 'noticeably without the defence mechanisms or props that many poets adopt to keep the abyss at bay'. Perhaps this is another way of saying, as she does of herself, 'I'm probably a couple of sherries below par most of the time'.¹ It is fitting that it is the dragon Fafnir who wins her concern rather than the knight.

I shall say then,
Thou art better dead
For the knights have burnt thy grass
And thou couldst not have fed.

Equally, it is interesting to see that just as Stevie Smith's virtue as a religious poet lies in her sharing of our anxieties and disbeliefs, so when she is most specifically religious she is least successful. The probing hostility of her Christology in 'Was He Married?' appears to suffer from a looseness of treatment; the dialogue, despite its value as debate, is here entirely self-contained and one senses a certain superficiality which is also apparent in the verse attacking Christian acceptance of slavery: 'Was it not Curious?' Perhaps only her 'Airy Christ', inspired by reading Dr Rieu's Penguin translation of St Mark's Gospel, is as successful as a conventionally religious poem can hope to be at this date. The first lines evoke sunlight pouring through great perpendicular windows of clear glass, while in the final stanza there is the same simplicity:

For he does not wish that men should love him more than anything
Because he died: he only wishes they would hear him sing.

Her treatment of prayer in 'In the Park' is also remarkably satisfactory and we are caught by the almost metaphysical inversion of meaning before we are fully aware of what has happened. The culmination of her more controversial religious poetry was probably the piece which *The Guardian* printed a few years ago at Whitsun.² It contained many of her recurring criticisms of orthodoxy and touched on difficulties which concern most of us. They are worth setting out in some detail.

1. That because the Holy Spirit is the inspiration of good those who do not accept the Christian faith feel they must keep silent 'in case good suffers'.
2. That good must be separated from 'A beautiful cruel lie, a beautiful fairy story'.
3. That the creation story cannot be believed.
4. That the Christian belief in the inspiration of scripture is nonsense.
5. That Christ's redemption was 'the dreadful bargain, that God would take and offer
The death of his Son to buy our faults away.'

¹See note 2 on page 319.

²Called, 'How Do You See?' in *Scorpion*.

6. That Christians believe in eternal punishment.

From these statements she goes on to ask for illumination and explanation and reverts to the theme of Christ's nature as God-man.

‘He was not like us
He could not lose.’

Hence to a questioning of the mystery of the Trinity and so to an attack on the Roman Catholic hierarchy endlessly discussing ‘Their shifty theology of Birth Control. But thanks to the Civil Arm kinder now than it was.’

She ends with a plea for honesty—‘to be good without enchantment’.

It was unfortunate that when Fr Hill replied a few days later, ingeniously parodying her style, instead of acknowledging her very real problems he chose to accuse her of bad faith. For whether we like it or not her bewilderment and suspicion were well grounded and there can be few of us who, at one level or another, have not tossed and turned about such points. It is simply altogether too easy to say, ‘You are not a fair questioner or a fair listener’, throwing in for good measure the well-worn charge of spiritual pride.

I yearn for you, poor proud child of Europe,
Because you will not believe, and you refuse
To believe because you pretend that you want to understand
But you do not really want to understand,
Because to understand you must be humble. . . .

Not only was Fr Hill, understandably, unable to supply the answers, but more disappointingly he failed to appreciate the genuine depth of her concern. Such failures tend to establish the critical case. The correspondence printed beneath Fr Hill's reply was, moreover, a rough guide to the intellectual and spiritual malaise which equates loving God with making the appropriate noises. One educated Catholic—a doctor—actually accused *The Guardian* of disliking Christianity and detesting Roman Catholicism. Happily, or perhaps unhappily, others (non-Catholics) were more perceptive. An Anglican clergyman said that it was a good thing that fundamental questions should be asked and denied that such questioning could destroy the ‘depth, reality and ultimacy’ of Christ. A less sympathetic Anglican appeared to consider that having ‘reached the sixth form’ Stevie Smith should know better than to confuse religious myth and fairy story. ‘And, sir, it really sounds as if she has forgotten about her prayers.’ One remembers Simone Weil's letters to the Dominican Father Perrin:

During all this time of spiritual progress I had never prayed. I was afraid of the power of suggestion that is in prayer—the very power for which Pascal recommends it—Pascal's method seems to me one of the worst for attaining faith.¹

¹*Waiting on God* by Simone Weil. Routledge & Kegan Paul and Fontana.

David Holbrook, writing as an agnostic, asked helpfully why truth should be obvious and suggested that the problems of inner reality could only be explored by metaphor. In this respect Stevie Smith's attitude is not without ambiguity. One thinks of such lines as:

And I believe that two and two
Are but an earthly sum
Whose totalling has no part at all
In heavenly kingdom-come,

and the factually mournful counter refrain which accompanies it,

Ah me, the countless dead, ah me
The countless countless dead.

My own sympathies are with Holbrook, but I can see that there is a temptation for us to prefer the indistinct beauties of myth to the ugly reality of fact. And, for all Fr Hill's play with the untruthfulness of facts, it remains true that the Catholic Church has given little encouragement to the idea that her historical assertions may be metaphorically or symbolically understood. Eric Gill's autobiography provides a pleasant example:

The burden of my song was that I accepted the whole metaphysical and philosophical basis of Catholicism but that when it came to the historical and physical matters—the Bible, the Gospel miracles, the Mass and all the rest of it—I didn't see how it could be acceptable except as symbolical. 'Pas symbolique, pas symbolique', he kept on replying.¹

Perhaps Stevie Smith's Whitsun poem was most useful in revealing the simple level of our responses which stand out as entirely predictable conditioned reflexes. This surely is a matter for genuine humility. How fine it would have been if instead of attempting to bludgeon her with assorted Fathers of the Church, her passionate convictions and anxieties had been treated with the respect recently accorded to Epicurus (formerly *bête noire* of ignorant generations) by Fr Festugière.² It is time we understood. If the parable of the sheep and the goats is too trite and familiar, then Lear and Cordelia remain, and probably certain parts of the gospels *are* too familiar. Charlotte Mew in her poem 'Madeleine in Church',³ or even the absurd Undershaft of *Major Barbara*,⁴ may tell us things which St Matthew's Gospel fails to tell us. Simone Weil says that Christ likes us to prefer the truth to him—because 'before being Christ he is truth. If one turns aside from him to go towards the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms.'⁵ The problem is as sharp now as it was a quarter of a century ago—perhaps even sharper. There

¹ *Autobiography* by Eric Gill. Jonathan Cape.

² *Epicurus and His Gods* by A. J. Festugière, O.P. Basil Blackwell.

³ *The Farmer's Bride* by Charlotte Mew. Poetry Bookshop 1921.

⁴ *Major Barbara* by Bernard Shaw. Constable and Penguin.

⁵ See note 1 on page 323.

are few pages in such books as *The Future of Catholic Christianity* which are not concerned with the difficulties raised by Stevie Smith and the questions and doubts seem more relevant than the answers. Clearly this is not the place to pursue Miss Smith's objections much further but I think it is worth noticing a few lines from Simone Weil's *Letter To A Priest*—which had such a poor reception when it first came out:

Everything has proceeded as though in the course of time no longer Jesus, but the Church, had come to be regarded as being God incarnate on this earth. The metaphor of the 'mystical body' serves as a bridge between the two conceptions. But there is a slight difference, which is that Christ was perfect, whereas the Church is sullied by a host of crimes.¹

It is a distinction of this type which makes it possible for a religious poet to write so angrily of the Church.

A different problem arises in trying to relate Stevie Smith's work to anything else in the same field. There is the probability that if we are unable to relate her work to a school or tradition we shall dismiss it as inconsequential and fey. To some extent this is a hazard faced by all religious poetry. In 1935 T. S. Eliot wrote:

'. . . when you qualify poetry as "religious" you are indicating clear limitations. For the great majority of people who love poetry, Religious Poetry, is a variety of minor poetry.'²

Something of this attitude—for all his disclaimer—is apparent in Patrick Dickenson's introduction to 'Scorpion'. He calls her a 'Sunday poet', with a feeling for Sunday as opposed to other days of the week like a lapsed Catholic', and stresses her unique qualities. He finds a comparison with Emily Dickenson—they both sprang from 'a nowhere'. More helpful perhaps, although possibly misleading, is his comment 'Both shared a running quarrel with God in which God could seldom get in even an edgewise word. . . .'

Momentarily, in the ending of 'In The Park', there is a trace of Hopkins:

'Praise' cries the weeping softened one, 'Not pray, praise, all men,
Praise is the best prayer, the least self's there, that least's release.'

Yet it is to Blake that I see the closest resemblance. Sometimes there is an echo—'It was a human face in my oblivion'—but more frequently the similarity is to be found in a deep concern for all sensitive life and awareness of the blight that flies in the inescapable dark. There are the mute anxious eyes of Pug and the travesty of love in 'Over Dew'. There is something, too, of Blake's vision of innocence in the recollected joy of Archie and Tina:

¹*Letter to a Priest* by Simone Weil. Routledge & Kegan Paul (one example of this type of fusion occurs in the *Aylesford Newsletter*, No. 42, for April 1959).

²*Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*. Penguin in association with Faber and Faber.

Oh what pleasure, what pleasure!
 There never were so many poppies as there were then,
 So much yellow corn, so many fine days,
 Such sharp bright air, such seas.

and in the lost Eden of her 'Grateful Colours':

The grass is green
 The tulip is red
 A ginger cat walks over
 The pink almond petals on the flower bed.

Perhaps also in the invocation to love which proclaims strangely, as Blake himself might have done: 'Votaries of Both Sexes Cry First to Venus'.

Absurd though it may seem to mingle comparisons so diverse there is surely also some odd robust quality borrowed from the metaphysicals—some trace of Herbert in lines that begin a poem about the presence of God—

Mother, among the dustbins, and the manure—

But it is the message not the medium which must be our final concern and it is clear in her last book that Stevie Smith has moved towards an appreciation of suffering which rejects easy solutions. On the one side there is the heaven-approved epitaph of Angel Boley, 'She did evil that good might come', and on the other—

Grief spoke these words to me in a dream. I thought
 He spoke no more than grace allowed
 And no less than truth.

With the acceptance of suffering came a growing delight in the certainty of death. It is an attitude which endorses her position as a religious poet. The mood is established by the title piece of the collection:

O Lord God please come
 And require the soul of thy Scorpion
 Scorpion so wishes to be gone.

And the final stanza of the book with its reiterated last line,

Come Death—Do not be slow.

Fittingly enough she had written earlier that we should 'Study to Deserve Death', and it was equally in keeping that in talking to John Gale on the occasion of receiving the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry she should have remarked, 'I do really think death will be absolutely marvellous. I don't think one could possibly enjoy life without death; one couldn't stand it; not only the pain, but the pleasure. If there wasn't death I think you couldn't go on.'¹ It is equally typical that she should have wondered whether death should be Death or death—and decided that both were perhaps necessary. In similar vein, while reading her poem,

¹See note 2 on page 319.

My heart goes out to my Creator in love
Who gave me Death as end and remedy

we remember that she observed how easily it might become 'Creator in law'.

Stevie Smith's rare gift as a religious poet was not only to sing of disbelief as our common religious experience, but to laugh self-mockingly at so much seriousness.

'Fish-hooks in Amos': Izaak Walton and the 'Real Truth'

by M. A. Bond

The name of John Donne is not immediately associated with the idea of moderation and the golden mean, but that of one of his earliest and most ardent admirers, and his first biographer, most certainly is. In the description of his equable self as Piscator in *The Compleat Angler*, Izaak Walton offers to posterity a moral ideal which reconciles the turbulent egoism of the age of the English Renaissance with the quietist values of the more mature religious sects.

The nub of Walton's argument lies in the discussion between Venator and Piscator on the First Day of *The Compleat Angler*. 'And for that I shall tell you, that in ancient times a debate hath arisen, and it remains yet unresolved, whether the happiness of man in this world doth consist more in contemplation or in action?'¹ The battle lines are already drawn up between non-utilitarian and utilitarian points of view. On the one hand, 'the nearer we mortals come to God by way of imitation the more happy we are. And they say, that God enjoys himself only, by a contemplation of his own infiniteness, eternity, power, and goodness, and the like.' 'And on the contrary, there want not men of equal authority and credit, that prefer action to be the more excellent; as namely, experiments in physick, and the application of it, both for the ease and prolongation of man's life; by which each man is enabled to act and do good to others, either to serve his country, or do good to particular persons; and they say also, that action is doctrinal, and teaches both art and virtue, and is a maintainer of human society.'

For Walton, the 'happiness of man in this world' is axiomatic. Piscator evidently enjoys it, as witness not only the relish with which Walton creates the figure, but the immense popularity of the book which saw five editions in little over twenty years within Walton's

¹All quotations are from *The Compleat Angler* (1676 edition) (publ. by J. M. Dent & Sons, London 1906, 1964 reprint), 'The First Day', unless otherwise stated.