Will May

**The Untimely Stevie Smith**

In a Christmas column for *Modern Woman* in 1943, Stevie Smith recommends her own collection, *Mother, What Is Man?* as ‘an excellent last-minute present for yourself and your friends’ (Smith 1943: 79). Philip Larkin was to take her advice when Christmas shopping 15 years later, buying numerous copies of *Not Waving but Drowning* for ‘random distribution amongst friends’ (Larkin 1983: 153). By imagining her work as a ‘last-minute’ attraction, is she also acknowledging, albeit briefly, the aspects of her poems which seem themselves last-minute—expedient rhymes, fibbing epigrams, drawings picked with apparent casualness in the final stages of book production? There is a festive urgency to the reader’s suggested purchase, but it also suggests a curiously temporal quality to our appreciation of her writing, whether or not we hear the double meaning of ‘present’: if it is a ‘last-minute’ purchase, could there be a moment in time when it is toolate to buy her poetry? Rachel Cooke describes a relationship with Smith’s writing that is tantalisingly inverted: as a teenager it is something you feel you might grow out of, but as an adult it is something you will never quite be ready for (Cooke 2016). Perhaps the ‘last-minute’, with its combination of the impulsive and the distracted, is not so far off the mark. Pompey Casmilus in *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936) confesses to the reader that her mother died ‘quickly in a minute’, but worries ‘how long is that minute?’ (Smith 1980: 251). The relationship between last-minute and the very last minute are worth thinking about at length.

‘What is the time?’ runs the title of an early poem, echoing a question Augustine asked many centuries earlier (Smith 2015: 74). The poem complicates the answer by rehousing a twelfth-century saint in a 1930s suburban park. It is difficult to keep time in Smith’s work. We are warned that ‘the clock upon the shelf is slow’ in ‘N’est-ce pas assez de ne me point haïr?’ (250); the fireside ‘clock on the mantelpiece’ in poem ‘Nodding’ ticks ‘unevenly’ (576). It’s neither the only nor the most unreliable timepiece in the poem: in the following stanza, a rather exasperated voice cries ‘Good heavens what is the matter / With the kitchen clock?’. The lines themselves, switching tempo from the cosy slumbers by the fire to the hee-haw of the treetop owl, seem designed to fox a metrical timekeeper. Tennyson’s clock from *In Memoriam* beating out ‘the little lives of men’ has gone awry (Tennyson 2014: 346). In a 1951 article for *World Review*, Smith notes how many of her female writing contemporaries see life as ‘the daily domestic round […] and the clock ticking in the hall’ (Smith 1951: 80); they are ‘far from being Sterne’s lascivious timepiece’, she adds, mischievously, offering herself as a writer who will ignore the tick of the domestic clock, and refuse to wind it when it stops.

Jane Dowson puts Smith ‘ahead of her time’ (Dowson 1996: 140); Bidisha claims ‘the 21st century is finally catching up’ with her (Bidisha 2016)—as early as 1936 Naomi Mitchison recognized in her friend a writer ‘aware of her epoch but not done in by it’ (Mitchison 1937: 27). Randall Stevenson’s *The Last of England?* (2004), the twelfth part of the thirteen-volume *Oxford English Literary History*, hears in Smith’s poetry, on the one hand, a voice ‘unique, historically and socially, to England in the late 1950 and early 1960’, and also something deeply nostalgic, Smith’s poems presenting themselves as ‘swansongs for the vacuous gentility whose longevity so riled A. Alvarez in 1962’ (Stevenson 2004: 227). In clear opposition to the canon-maker Alvarez, Smith is a curio from the past, her anachronistic presence suggesting a period unsure of its future. We recall here that the first professional reader of Smith’s work, a reviewer for publisher Curtis Brown, found her poems so very ‘ultra-1934’, rejecting them on the same grounds.[[1]](#footnote-1) They were too achingly of-their-moment to suggest longevity. Even at the height of Smith’s fame in 1969, a reviewer dismissed her work as ‘undernourished’ (Benedictus 1969: 77), her poems stalking the stage like sickly children. The problems critics have found in placing her historically match their difficulty in plotting a chronology for her voice: does it develop, or hand that task over to its audience, who are compelled to make their own incremental changes to the ways they read and respond to her work? Ogden Nash’s promotional blurb for her American *Selected Poems* asked ‘Who or what is Stevie Smith?’: this essay turns its attention to when.

How soon do people become authors? Pompey Casmilus in *Novel on Yellow Paper* gives the reader a titillating glimpse of a writer-in-waiting, quoting airily from ‘an unfinished manuscript of twenty-six single-spaced typewriting, and now temporarily laid by until the time is ripe’ (23). Yet the crisp control of Smith’s authorial strategy was always subject to time. In 1961, she wrote in distress to Rose Macaulay of Bernard Bergonzi’s ‘nasty review’ of *The Frog Prince and Other Poems*: ‘he went on about me adopting a ‘little-girl’ persona, and being very sly, etc. How I hate that, but I fear it often creeps up, and will creep up again soon, as Cape are reissuing *Novel on Yellow Paper*, a book I now detest!’[[2]](#footnote-2) Several layers intersect in Smith’s anxiety here: her worry about being haunted by the ‘little-girl’ persona she adopts in a novel published 25 years earlier; the return of a recurring critical assessment; the complex relationship an author might have with their past work; the concomitant worries of future literary reputation. It explains why the moment always seems ripe for Smith’s rediscovery, recognition always overdue. Smith once proudly announced the times would ‘just have to enlarge to make room’ for her (Orr 1966: 229). It is a tellingly spatial metaphor, as if her particularly untimely version of the modern might need a more capacious understanding of ‘the times’ to fit in.

Timing is everything in Smith, but punctuality counts for little. Even punctuation, the set of fixed points ferrying us promptly from one sentence to the next, does not behave itself. Famously, Smith provided punctuation for the manuscript of *Novel on Yellow Paper* at her publisher’s request, before adding a grumbling complaint about doing so. Yet her re-punctuating of early poems for a 1960s volume came in response to no request, but from a conviction that readers got her rhythms and timings wrong. This is a moment where the reader must walk carefully, from her wartime poem ‘The Recluse’:

Pashy the ground underfoot where I trod,

Musing as I passed of the nature of God,

But on my reverent reveries and fruitful plod

Of tear-strewn steps, like a wrathful rod

Fell the touch of a girl, young in years and officious,

Who broke at once at a touch my chain of delicious

Melancholy. (253)

Here is a recluse whose gloomy world is shattered by love. The poem submitted to its own ‘officious’ interruption rather more reluctantly: the version in *Mother, What is Man?* was barely punctuated, the additions inserted by Smith for *Penguin Modern Poets* in 1966 over twenty years later. The recluse’s dilemma is also Smith’s. A full stop breaks the ‘chain of delicious / Melancholy’ into isolate moments, yet to let readers rampage their way through this poem without punctuation unsteadies the pace of its ‘fruitful plod’.

Perhaps Smith’s concerns were justified. Critics have an ongoing problem writing about her poetry and what she called its ‘square peggishness’.[[3]](#footnote-3) Yet Smith was inclined to see poetry itself as an ongoing problem, as these lines from *Over the Frontier* suggest:

It is lovely quickly to write a poem and then quickly it is finished, it is all over and to be forgotten. But alas it is not. For now with the passage of a good many years, oh yes a *good* many years, there are already these so many pieces of paper and backs of envelopes and this litter of paper—Oh the mechanics of authorship are frightful. (Smith 1980: 107)

A poem’s refusal to know when to stop—its life extended seemingly indefinitely by revision, selection, proofs, publication, review, performance—becomes one of Pompey’s many irritations. Poems become boomerang children. Like the dying tiger Flo at the end of *Novel on Yellow Paper*, subjected to the indignity of artificial respiration, the work of art is unsure of its conclusion. Smith’s exasperation at this process is well-documented: ‘I don’t think there’s an editor in London who hasn’t been asked to collaborate with me!’(Gale 1969: 21) she confessed to interviewers, playing the author-in-distress. It is telling her uncertainties often lay with how the poem should end: her great poem of interruption, ‘Thoughts about the Person from Porlock’ prompts a ruminative follow-up, ‘Thoughts about the Person from Porlock (continued)’. Both dramatize the Romantic crisis of not getting far enough by staying with us longer than expected. The first poem teeters on in speculative enquiry about the Person from Porlock—we hear, twice, that ‘he had a cat named Flo’ (445). It sounds like a train of thought close to being derailed, a poem in danger of being bitten—and infected—by doggerel. Then, suddenly, the poem is rescued by interruption. Smith wonders if the Person from Porlock might be death, the final interruption, the one we are all waiting for. He rescues us from ‘having to go on’. Death gives the poem somewhere to get to, but it also lets us stop worrying about where we might be going. Punctuation, like the Person from Porlock, can take the blame.

Smith’s late poem ‘The Stroke’, written for her dying sister Molly, was extended by several stanzas after initial publication, as if holding out the promise of convalescence. The first published version of the poem imagines the speaker as a ‘beautiful plant’:

I can feel the sun, and my blighted leaves

In an elderly way grow glad

But oh in my depths I bleed, I bleed,

From a heart that is youthful and sad

From a heart that is pierced and sad. (657)

The echo of the final line—from ‘youthful’ to ‘pierced’—suggests a poem unsure of how many beats it has left. The stanzas Smith later adds in conversation with Kay Dick find their way into the 1975 *Collected Poems*. They promise valediction, but make an awkwardly long goodbye:

Oh, feeling of youth you had better go

You are trapped by my age and deceased too.

Goodbye, goodbye I will send you away,

There is nothing here now to please you.

Then my feeling of youth said, ‘No, I will not go;

I will comfort you with love and pain.

And also, if you live, I can procure for you a potion

That you will not take in vain.

The torpors of age could not seize the notion

To drink of the freeing grain, to drink of the freeing grain.

All the same, I should not take it if I were you,

As you always can, but rather see life with me through.

It is not very long compared with geological time,

It is heaven to think of geological time.

The weight lifts…and this gives you a happy mind….’ (Smith 2015: 779)

The reluctance of this late poem to take its leave is striking. The poem’s title, together with its artificially extended life, suggest the stroke of a pen less sure of itself in ending than beginning. The additional stanzas attempt to banish the voice of youth and offer the comfort of ‘geological time’, but it determinedly refuses to make its exit. Yet if life—or a poem—might be extended by a couple of weeks, or a couple of stanzas, will it bring ‘nothing left to please us’? What could it mean to outstay your welcome in a poem, and might it lessen the pain of a poem even if it lessens its power? These are quandaries Smith’s poems often pose, but what fun they have in dodging difficult questions. In ‘Where Are You Going?’ an aging philosopher preaches the eternal verities only to be met with rolling eyes: ‘The tedious old person who asked such questions / As drove everybody to exasperation / No wonder they all of them cried, Good riddance!’ (188). When interrogation gets tough, the end can’t come soon enough. Here, too the poem’s title ‘The Stroke’, together with its artificially extended life, suggests the stroke of a pen that might be less sure of itself in ending than beginning.

Often, a cancelled or redrafted ending in a poem doesn’t just change its length, but the temporal position of the speaker and their world. Here is Smith’s fiercest threat, ‘I’ll Have Your Heart’:

I’ll have your heart. If not by gift, my knife

Shall carve it out; I’ll have your heart, your life. (163)

The final stanza, included for *Tender Only to One* (1938), was excised for *Selected Poems* (1962):

Love passed me by

A long time ago,

And now I cry

Doh ray me fah soh. (Smith 2015: 751)

This possible postscript has either left the knife-wielding speaker of the first stanza far behind, or become rather half-hearted about their gory ultimatum. Smith’s translation of Rimbaud’s ‘Chanson de plus haute tour’ (1872) has a change of heart too. The published version records the perils of indecision:

Indolent youth,

Drawn by everything in turn,

By not being decided enough

I lost my life. (459)

Yet earlier drafts share the subject’s paralysis, deleting, re-adding, then finally deleting the following stanzas:

Do I care? I do not,

My old boat and I

Are rather drunk

And we roll along.

The sea rolls too,

My old boat is drunk,

And so am I,

We are older now. (769)

The drunk speaker on this particular sea voyage is queasy about vintage: how long is he supposed to last? The choice will not only determine his age, but whether his poem sails closest to stoicism or melodrama.

Smith’s preoccupation with delaying or defying the ending finds its way into other aspects of her revision practice. As I have noted elsewhere, many poems had their final words revised at proof stage to transform the meaning of the poem altogether (May 2010: 216). Her writing is prompted by the desire, on the one hand, to finish a poem ‘quickly’, and, on the other, to keep re-opening it: editing picks a scab. For an author adept at killer endings, a surprising amount of Smith’s poems close with the promise of further incident or correspondence:

So no more now, from your loving husband, Wilfred. (382)

Meanwhile I am your most obliging confidante. *(*149*)*

Thou art the next. (190)

These unwritten sequels forestall the poem that will not finish by offering the poem as staging post: they exist in a suspended meanwhile. Smith adapts the technique from her novels, where the narrative voice, even in its opening moves, situates its protagonist between relentless propulsion and fatigue:

Oh I am so tired. There never was anyone so tired as poor Pompey at this moment at this page, at this very line, at this word. But wait, I will tell all before long. (Smith 1980: 38)

Just when we seem in danger of collapse, the voice supplants inertia with conspiratorial promise. This suspended exhaustion bounces and limbos from one paragraph to the next. Smith’s speakers are often anxious to conceal the past, but never quite able to let go of the present, recalling one of her philosophical starting points, Augustine: ‘As for the *present*, should it always bee present and neuer passe into time *past*; verily it should not bee *Time*, but *Eternity*’ (Watts 1631: 7555). In *The Holiday*, Celia describes with painstaking detail a tedious evening of bridge-playing, a social obligation that feels like it will never be completed. Yet in the retelling it becomes a narrative magician’s trick, a tottering testament to keeping the reader amused even at the limits of human indifference: ‘the terrible boredom that followed must now be described’, Celia intones, with a mixture of regret, authorial fidelity, and play. The final tally supposedly reassures us: ‘The pain of boredom is actual, and yet it was only three hours’ (Smith 1979: 186).. But if Pompey can never know how long her mother’s painful final minute really took, the ability of a three-hour bridge game to feel like eternity gives us a terrible clue. Count not tedious yet.

Last words in Smith are usually cruel or ridiculous. ‘Is it not a solemn moment when the last word is said[?]’ wonders ‘Silence and Tears’ (117), but the question is not merely rhetorical: Smith loves to jab away at ceremony. ‘Progression’ is a characteristically impatient elegy for the last in the line of an aristocratic family: ‘He was the last of the Spruces, / And about time too’ (14). Ancestral mourning is replaced with brusque common-sense. In ‘Exeat’, the Roman emperor Tiberius refuses execution for his convicted prisoners with the taunt they are not yet friends enough for death. Each final encounter proves not, after all, to be their last: life’s daily bread is postponement. The last word, when it finally comes, will be a relief, but only the emperor will speak. In ‘A Crown of Bays’, a young man who is ‘listless though famous’ hopes to finds a meaningful nothingness in death, his spurious immortality a riddle waiting to be solved. Yet though he counts earthly fame worthless, his attempt to escape it is judged more severely. The angel who comes when he calls whispers over his shoulder: ‘you die trivially’ (317). In a poetic world which often praises the bravery of suicide, there is no crueller conclusion. Something written at the last minute can be more significant than its composition suggests: our last minutes can be merely trivial.

Smith’s interest in that final moment, with its uncanny ability to invite the flippant and the stately, suits a poetry which shuttles between competing moods, registers, and tones. But how can we know how near it is? Christopher Ricks reminds us that tone is both ‘the expression on the face of the words’ and ‘the posture imitated by the body of the words’ (Ricks 1988: 133), but the posture of those words will also tell us something about the conversation’s length. How serious we are may depend less on who we are speaking to and how they are speaking, and more on how much time we have left to hear them. This might explain the curious tango of tone and timing in the late poem, ‘Oh grateful colours, bright looks!’ (629):

The grass is green

The tulip is red

A ginger cat walks over

The pink almond petals on the flower bed.

Enough has been said to show

It is life we are talking about.

The poem begins as a Clinton’s Cards valentine greeting: only the ginger cat prowls a more unusual territory, hinting that the poem is not just a walkover. There is a circumspect, euphemistic quality to the readerly address, which seems to keep poetic excess in check—‘enough has been said’. Yet a line apparently so simple—‘the grass is green’—that it hardly seems an utterance, is suddenly revealed as a two-person conversation—‘it is life we are talking about’. What is the expression on the face of the words now? Because enough is never enough, and the end is never the end, the poem finds it must continue:

Enough has been said to show

It is life we are talking about. Oh

Grateful colours, bright looks! Well, to go

On. Fabricated things too—front doors and gates,

Bricks, slates, paving stones—are coloured

And as it has been raining and is sunny now

They shine. Only that puddle

Which, reflecting the height of the sky

Quite gives one a feeling of vertigo, shows

No colour, is a negative. Men!

Seize colours quick, heap them up while you can.

But perhaps it is a false tale that says

The landscape of the dead

Is colourless.

The poem calls time on itself at several points—enough is enough by line 5, and the titular jubilation mid-way through signals another climax that, in typical fashion, is dulled into common-sense parataxis: ‘Well, to go / On’. If the trivial things we see are worth pausing over, the trivial things we make may be worthy of more attention too. Poems—like doors, slates, bricks and gates— are also ‘fabricated things’ which demand more time than we sometimes give them. The poem’s third ending offers a *carpe diem* exhortation to ‘seize colours quick, heap them up while you can’. Yet a poet who cannot quite commit to the end being the end cannot know how quickly to gather those colours, or how high to pile them. Perhaps, after all, the land of the dead is just as full of colour. Not knowing how much time is left makes it difficult to know what do with this final—or possible not-final—ending. Should a poem be over quickly, to make its way into the world while it can, or should it bid for immortality by increments? The ever-varying speeds of Smith’s lines, like the shifting moods of her poems, seem a response to living both in a moment and outside it. They know the arguments for getting to the end, and putting it off: her particular poetics allow them to do both. Her interest in the ambassador, looking both ways, and Hermes, skittering between the Underworld and our own, plots a regular commute between the eternal and the quotidian.

This superimposition of the everyday on to the eternal is captured in the introduction to *Scorpion*, Smith’s posthumous collection, where Patric Dickinson introduced her as a ‘Sunday poet’ (Dickinson 1972: 7). She was resurrected from beyond the grave as a believer, or an apostate with a dogged attraction to the faith she has left behind. Yet the term ‘Sunday poet’ also suggests for a secular age the writer-off-duty, the moment when vocation becomes mere vacation: this, too is characteristic of Smith’s work. The ‘Sunday poet’—depending on how we hear the phrase—is either especially devoted, or singularly uncommitted: the poet who tends to us on our off days, or the one who leads us towards something divine. In her short story ‘Sunday at Home’ (1946), Smith measures the distance between divinity and the everyday. The setting is domestic, an apparently unremarkable, fractious Sunday lunch between Glory, a despondent if divinely-named housewife, and her scientific husband Ivor. Yet Glory’s religious yearning is contradictory: she speaks of faith not to transform her future, but to bring it to an end:

‘I believe in mortality,’ said Glory flippantly, ‘I shall have on my tombstone, “In the confident hope of Mortality”. If death is not the end’, she said, an uneasy note in her voice, ‘then indeed there is nowhere to look.’ (Smith 1981: 47-8)

Her rhetorical conundrum, to look forward to there being nothing to look forward to, echoes an artists’ terror of immortality: if life is not finite, there is no sense in dividing the time that remains. Is the landscape of the dead colourless?

The eternal often enters Smith’s poems as a comic guest. In ‘God and the Devil’ (26), she imagines the creation of man as the product of an over-the-garden-fence conversation between the two: ‘God and the Devil / Were talking one day / Ages and ages of years ago’. The slippage between the idiomatic (‘ages and ages ago’) and the everlasting is a recurring motif in her writing, like the ‘heavenly’ escape imagined by ‘The Frog Prince’ (471). It makes our closely-guarded social idioms into dangerous portals by which we might skate between the everyday and the timeless: an abyss opens up in our imprecise language. Many of her poems most preoccupied with eternity are direct sequels, rewritings, or travesties, as if the eternal fixity of the poem she recalls is being dug up for inspection, a kind of literary autopsy. This ambivalence about whether eternity exists, and what relief the knowledge might provide, helps explain Smith’s predilection for characters caught not only between childhood and adulthood, but between the temporal and the eternal. A review she wrote for *Time & Tide* revelled in Henry James’ ability to ‘keep the really odd innocence of his Maisies, his Mileses, and his Pupils, by a hairsbreadth this side of corruption and with ears agog for it’ (Smith 1958: 49). When she returns to James for ‘The Last Turn of the Screw’, she imagines the moment Miles was ‘turned’ by Quint, and the point he finally rejects him:

To spend ten minutes with a Thing like this

Would be too long.

So snobbery made the breach, religion followed…

Ten minutes? No, Eternity, with Quint

That Quint, whose seedy sickness in my blood

I could detect (in time?) running to flood,

The sickliness of sin,

Oh yes, I saw quite plain by now

What was going in. (510)

The grammar does not make clear, or makes deliberately unclear, whether Miles has been seduced into spending eternity with Quint, or whether ten minutes becomes eternity. The parenthetic intrusion—‘in time?’—prompts two possible readings: either the realisation that Miles is being corrupted comes to him gradually (‘in time’) or expediently, that is, just in time.. This rhetorical blurring of the gradual and the immediate shines a light on other aspects of Smith’s writing: a ‘lovely quickly’ poem that writes itself in ten minutes will notmake for neat timelines. So it is that poems are hard to date precisely, or attach to schools or movements. Smith’s Helen of Troy describes the ‘ominous eternal moment’ (491) she lives in: Smith’s readers are often asked to wait with her while the poet travels back and forth between worlds.

Sometimes, the commute goes badly. The poem ‘Out of Time’ imagines a ‘formal and deserted garden’ of ‘unquiet days’ which:

tread me down,

The hours and the minutes beat upon my head.

I have spent here the time of three men’s lives

And am not dead.

And even as I count the days that pass

I lose the total and begin again.

It is an evil garden out of Time

A place of pain. (162)

Everything here is out of season and without chronology: a place with no sense of time has no conclusion. The poem goes through several versions, Smith not sure whether to describe the movement of time in the garden as ‘ponderous’ or ‘languorous’ (Smith 2015: 751). It’s a typical Smith dilemma, pivoting between two near-homonyms with apparently opposed meanings. The uncertainty suggests a cautious attitude to the eternal verities. Smith’s work asks when the end might via poetry of mistimings and anachronisms, but the most pervasive terror would be no ending at all.

This terror is also what allows Smith her perpetual to and fro. Her poems disarm us by inhabiting the realm of inappropriate time: her work is full of untimely exits and entrances. Her version of an ‘Aubade’ figures the passage of night to day as a difficult childbirth come ‘too soon’ (42): ‘The Wanderer’ (292) asks for an impossible inversion, and demands to be weaned again. The baby is born ‘two months too soon’ in ‘Infant’ (25) yet preternaturally wise, able both to read its father’s indifference and to convey a rejection of him.

It was a cynical babe

Lay in its mother’s arms

Born two months too soon

After many alarms

Why is its mother sad

Weeping without a friend

Where is its father—say?

He tarries in Ostend.

It was a cynical babe. Reader before you condemn, pause,

It was a cynical babe. Not without cause.

The tarrying father and the premature infant eye each other up like old nemeses—only a cynical beginning can come from a father in Ostend. Yet in a poem that swivels between the precocious and the dilatory, the reader is invoked as an undecided onlooker: ‘Reader, before you condemn, pause’, we are told, with a line that pauses, knowingly, after it does the same to us. The pre-emptive qualities of Smith’s readerly address, both in her novels and poems, are here aligned with a particular anxiety about timeliness. With an infant that comes too early and a father that comes too late, the speaker takes a risk in asking us to suspend our judgement: if she arrives too soon, her readers may be too hasty. The belated or novel feelings we can have reading Stevie Smith are responses, in part, timetabled by the author.

Her untimely poems are haunted by their own ghosts, which are sometimes hard to shake off: the premature births of Shakespeare (Macduff, Lady Anne’s curse to Richard), or the ghoulish fantasies of being buried alive in De Quincey’s *Confessions*. Pope’s translation of Homer opens with warriors ‘untimely slain’ on the shoreline (Pope 2001: 3), and Smith borrows the phrase twice (‘In Cannan’s Happy Land’, ‘La Gretchen de Nos Jours’). These gothic and apocalyptic sources raise the stakes of the word, which in Smith is often metaphysical: we recall the tale of ‘talent murdered’ in ‘Who is this Who Howls and Mutters?’ which ‘untimely and untimely buried works in my soul’ (425), or the soul ‘driven untimely forth’ (663) in ‘The grief of an unquiet mind is a thing accursed’. Yet untimeliness is less a tag for Smith than a technique. ‘The Dying Swan’, the Tennysonian source for Smith’s poem, ‘The Bereaved Swan’ is an untimely reminder that the swan can only sing in death: grief offers them no possibilities to be lyrical. Feeling bereaved in an age that is not elegiac might also prompt an out-of-time feeling. The allusion to a Tennysonian language—‘O would that I were dead’ (35)—summons up the ghost of Mariana; the intrusive archaism of ‘the swan saith’ recalls the ‘death/saith’ rhyme from Keats’ ‘Eve of St. Agnes’. Yet Smith importing language from her poetic ancestors at just the right moment only affirms the poem’s impossible and inappropriate feelings. Archaism for Smith is not just a way of playing hard and fast with her poetic inheritance: it imprisons speakers in idioms that are not their own, and drags into the present moment ways of feeling which curdle before their eyes into obsolescence. Diction, more than birth or death, marks out her most untimely subjects:

I hear

Beasts calling and birds singing, oh not clear

But as a prisoner

Who in a train doth pass (‘Every Lovely Limb’s A Desolation’, 393)

Manumission unhoped, undesired (‘The Abominable Lake’, 106)

‘Aroint thee, false witch!’ (‘The Small Lady’, 544)

This is not, as Isobel Armstrong has remarked of archaism, ‘a way of disclosing history which is also a kind of linguistic meaning’ (Armstrong 1993: 486): the ruptured idioms of Smith’s speakers deliberately unsettle our sense of who is speaking when. Perhaps her untimely diction finds its most appropriate—or inappropriate—vessel in ‘King Hamlet’s Ghost’:

Thou wouldst be spoke to, for unless one speaks

Thou canst not; *must* be spoke to then or go

Unheard, uncomforted to Misery.

(412)

The paradox the dead King lays out here is that we must speak to the dead before they can speak to us. The often comic mishearings, misunderstandings, or blundered conversations of the living in Smith’s poems are also an echo of this difficult speech between worlds, the overheard strains of voices from the tomb. Her allusions, travesties, and borrowings are footprints in the snow, tracking the uneasy course of these atemporal communications.

In a defensive preface Pope wrote excusing the oddities of Homer’s work, he compared the *Iliad* to ‘a copious nursery, which contains the seeds and first productions of every kind, out of which those who followed him have but selected some particular plants, each according to its fancy, to cultivate and beautify […] if some things are too luxuriant, it is owing to the richness of the soil; and if others are not arrived to perfection or maturity it is only because they are overrun and oppressed by those of a stronger nature’ (Pope 2001: 3). Pope’s explanation for the vigorous variety—and so variable quality—of Homer’s work was that the wonder and achievement of some episodes obscured and diluted the power of others. Its dizzying range becomes its supreme achievement. Time was lavished on much of the poem, but some scenes were brought to birth too soon. It seems a particularly Smith-ish sort of working practice. Or, to put it another way:

This is a foot-off-the-ground novel that came by the left hand. And the thoughts come and go and sometimes they do not quite come and I do not pursue them to embarrass them with a formality to pursue them into a harsh captivity. (Smith 1980: 38)

The copious nursery that Smith opens the curtain on to in *Novel on Yellow Paper* can be a way of reading her *Collected Poems* *and Drawings* too. The poems ‘come and go and sometimes they do not quite come’. We might come across an animal poem for children written in haste, or a repeated stanza dusted down from one poem and used again, as in ‘The Frozen Lake’ and ‘Angel Face’. For all Smith’s desire to write a poem then ‘lovely quickly it is finished’, her *Collected Poems and Drawings* includes a work with a thirty-year revision period: ‘Come on, come back’ begins its life in the 1920s as a draft called ‘Incident in the Great War, 1991-7’, but this futuristic vision of apocalypse is not completed until a war as long as the one it imagines has come and gone. There are poems let into individual volumes she spent much of her career regretting, like ‘Souvenir de Monsieur Poop’ (Spalding 1988: 144). There are others which missed print deadlines and found themselves unpublished in book form until after her death, like ‘The Holiday’ (687). Smith’s poems did not all make equal demands on her time. What about ours?

Smith’s tessellation of the eternal and everyday, and her determination to dwell in the untimely, may help us understand not only her poems’ range of moods—their indignation, their flippancy, their whimsy—but many features of her work and writing practice: her agonising about punctuation, her idiosyncratic allusion, her worry about how a poem ends, her preoccupation with last words. They prompt her long goodbyes, her mix of dictions, her preoccupation with idioms that trespass, unthinkingly, on the celestial. Smith’s hovering between the line that lasts and the lines that seem last-minute are neither accidental, nor the modus operandi of an incoherent poetics. Like the half-satirized Omerod in the poem ‘Distractions and the Human Crowd’, who finds that the ‘tea-parties’, the ‘ephemeral, under time, peculiar’ (210) can only be experienced in earthly life, Smith’s poetic agnosticism cannot decide whether anything lasts: love, poetry, faith. Christianity tries to have it both ways, but Smith cannot quite let Jesus get away with it:

you say

That Trinity is unchanging from eternity

But then you say

At the incarnation He took

Our Manhood into the Godhead,

That he did not have it before,

So must have altered it,

Having it (‘Oh Christianity, Christianity’, 485).

Smith’s one reference point for a text that manages to exist both within eternity and chronology prompts her perpetual admiration and anger: she will not tolerate alterations. Because Smith does not know how long anything lasts, she develops a writing style that pivots between the eternal and the everyday. The characteristic features of the poetry—its deliberate mixture of archaism and slang, its rhythms half-ancestral, half-improvised, its allusions, half-classical, half-contemporary—embody a way of speaking that insists on the irregular.

Smith gave few lectures, and gave those few reluctantly. For a rare public talk in Copenhagen on modern English literature in 1958, she deferred to Time who, ‘mercifully, seems to be a proper Highbrow, sorting the sheep from the goats without any effort at all, and throwing out the second rate’.[[4]](#footnote-4) Time, dressed as posterity, is a brusquely efficient sort of Grim Reaper. But how long might time ensure Stevie Smith lasts? Here, perfhaps, we could turn to Dean Inge on Plotinus, the series of lectures she most enjoyed in her life: ‘Time is a child of eternity, and resembles its parent as much as it can’ (Inge 1920: 103). Inge’s dutiful metaphor of resemblance captures something of Smith’s world—with its unwound clocks, wrinkled infants, and overstaying ghosts—her work—with its mistimed entrances, deferred valedictions, and prevaricating revisions—and her words—with their shifts from the vernacular to the obsolete. It summons up her increasingly careful readers too: getting there too late, alighting too soon, eager to knock at the right time, apologising or boasting on arrival. Yet parental resemblance seems rather cosy a relationship for Smith’s poetry, given its cast of half-knowing orphans, children slaying parents, and mothers throwing babies out with the bath water. We might say Smith’s work reassembles time.

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1. Curtis Brown to Stevie Smith, 28 June 1934, Stevie Smith Collection, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Stevie Smith to Rose Macaulay, undated letter, Stevie Smith Collection, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa; the review appeared in *The Guardian*, 16 Dec. 1966, p.7. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Stevie Smith to Naomi Mitchison, undated, National Library of Scotland. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Stevie Smith, ‘Modern English Literature’, Stevie Smith Collection, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)