

## A JULIA KRISTEVAN PSYCHOANALYTIC ANALYSIS OF STEVIE SMITH'S POETRY

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to analyze the British poet Stevie Smith's poetry by using Kristevan psychoanalytic theory. Smith, who wrote between the 1930s and the 1970s, was underrated throughout most of her career. Julia Kristeva's work on the semiotic and the symbolic can explain why Smith's poetry was underestimated in the mid-twentieth century British poetry. Smith's language, poetic performances and themes come into conflict with the masculine symbolic discourse destroying the hierarchal boundaries between the semiotic and the symbolic. In Kristevan terms, the semiotic rebels against the oppression of the symbolic in her poetry. As a result, the masculine symbolic discourse fails to define her writing in the symbolic order and thus ends up labeling it simple and superficial.

**Key Words:** Mid-twentieth Century British Poetry, Stevie Smith, Julia Kristeva, the semiotic, the symbolic.

### Stevie Smith Şiirinin Julia Kristeva'nın Psikanalitik Kuramına Göre Bir Analizi

**Özet:** Bu makale İngiliz şair Stevie Smith'in şiirlerini Julia Kristeva'nın psikanalitik kuramını kullanarak incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Şiirlerini 1930'lu ve 1970'li yıllar arasında yazan Smith, yazı kariyeri boyunca hafife alınmıştır. Julia Kristeva'nın semiyotik ve sembolik üzerine çalışmaları, Smith'in şiirinin yirminci yüzyıl ortası İngiliz şiirinde neden küçümsendiğini açıklayabilir. Smith'in dili, şiir performansları ve kullandığı temalar maskülen sembolik söylemle çelişkiye düşmekte ve böylece semiyotik ile sembolik arasındaki hiyerarşik sınırları yıkmaktadır. Kristeva'nın tabiriyle, Smith'in şiirlerinde semiyotik sembolüğün baskısına karşı koymaktadır. Sonuç olarak, maskülen sembolik söylem Smith'in eserlerini sembolik düzende tanımlayamadığı için basit ve yüzeysel olarak etiketlenmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Yirminci Yüzyıl Ortası İngiliz Şiiri, Stevie Smith, Julia Kristeva, Semiyotik, Sembolik.

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### **Introduction**

This paper looks into Stevie Smith's poetry from a Kristevan psychoanalytic perspective in order to explain her underestimated status in the mid-twentieth century British poetry. Smith wrote between the 1930's and the 1970's. She was usually criticized by critics and canonical poets of the period for writing simple and superficial poems. She was thus categorized as a naïve writer, that is, a voice to be listened to for fun, but never to be taken seriously. As Laura Severin (2003, p.133) explains, Smith was casted as a talented but marginal and eccentric figure for a long time. Therefore, she has been largely ignored as a writer who contributed to the political discourse of the mid-century poetry. In a similar vein, Linda Anderson (2007, p.174) states that "the place accorded to her as poet remains marginal and unrepresentative".

Smith, on the other hand, often emphasized that she was straightforward but she was not simple. Christopher Ricks (1995, pp.246-7) supports her idea saying that "[n]one of the things that come together in her poems is itself unusual, but the combination is unique...Behind her simplest work is a very unsimple tradition". Many of Smith's poems demonstrate her constant preoccupation with social, philosophical and religious issues, but in a different manner from the dominant male discourse, which causes her remain underrepresented. In this respect, her situation may be associated with Hélène Cixous's depiction of a woman speaking in public, which Cixous (1997, p.351) depicts as "a great transgression": "A double distress, for even if she transgresses, her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear, which hears in language only that which speaks in the masculine". Smith has never defined herself as a feminist but her writing still poses a challenge to a clear and orderly masculine symbolic discourse. This is clearly seen in her poems as the fusion of the semiotic into the symbolic in Kristevan terms, thereby keeping a poetic 'I' which is always in a process. In other words, she resists to depict a unified and fixed subjectivity choosing instead "disruption, discontinuity and indirection" (Dowson and Entwistle, 2005, p.124). Disrupting the hegemony of the symbolic over the semiotic in the Kristevan sense and representing a subject-in-process through her language, poetic performances and themes, Smith produces a kind of poetry which falls out of the dominant male discourse.

### **Theoretical Background**

Kristeva attempts to overcome the dichotomies which govern the Western philosophical tradition, such as dichotomies between body and mind, the sensible and insensible, the rational and irrational. She subverts these dichotomies in her theory of language. For her, language is a signifying process revealing an interplay between the semiotic and symbolic. The subjectivity is an effect of this signifying process. In her revisiting of Lacan's psychoanalytic

paradigm, Kristeva substitutes the semiotic for the Lacanian imaginary. The semiotic is an extra-linguistic realm in which bodily energy and affects make their way into language. It includes both the subject's drives and articulations, and it is not subjected to the regular rules of syntax (McAfee, 2004, p.19). Contrary to this, the symbolic is a way of signifying that depends on language as a sign system complete with its grammar and syntax. It is the method by which meaning is ordered and communicated (Kristeva, 1984, p. 27). Kristeva associates the semiotic with feminine and maternal while the symbolic is associated with the masculine. Kristeva often uses the term "chora" in conjunction with the semiotic. It is the space in which the meaning that is produced is semiotic. In this space, the child is one with the mother so there is no subject-object distinction. It is the realm of the maternal before the Law of the Father, a space which is "receptacle, unnamable, improbable, anterior to naming to the one, to the father, and consequently maternally connoted" (Kristeva, 1984, p. 27). Kristeva (1984, p.24) further argues that the semiotic does not totally leave the symbolic alone, that is, the semiotic and the symbolic remain in a lifelong interaction: "The subject is both semiotic and symbolic, no signifying system can be either 'exclusively' semiotic or 'exclusively' symbolic". For Kristeva, the interaction between the semiotic and symbolic is best revealed in the structure of poetic language in which the referential position of language is always contradicted.

### **Analysis**

In her poetry, Stevie Smith makes use of some strategies to go beyond the fixity of meaning established by the symbolic and to defy the rational and referential language prompted by the symbolic. The most important feature of Smith's career, especially her later career, is her own performances of poems during which she tried to exceed the limits of the text and draw attention to the writing process rather than to the end product. She usually appeared in little girl dresses and funny hats during the performances of the poems. As Anderson (2007, p.179) also suggests, Smith, dressed like a child, "seems to have brought precisely a sense of anarchy to her performances, unleashing a disturbing humor which questions the stability of the adult subject". In other words, her appearance contributes to her poetry in that it reveals that the symbolic fails to imprison completely the semiotic when the child enters into the symbolic. In "Magna est Veritas" the poetic persona talks about her appearance, which reminds the reader of Smith's outlook that she disclosed in her poetic performances: "With my looks I am bound to look simple or fast I would rather look simple / So I wear a tall hat on the back of my head that is rather a temple / And I walk rather queerly and comb my long hair / And people say, Don't bother about her" (Smith, 2002a, p.394). The poetic persona explains that she

tries to attract other people's attention with a peculiar outlook, but she is still ignored by them. This may be explained with the fact that people cannot fully identify her within the frame of the symbolic. Semiotic is the language of the body, and the poetic persona, in Cixous's words (1997, p.350), implies a "return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display".

Smith's poems show that the symbolic never totally grasp the semiotic. "To Carry the Child" is one of these poems which clearly reflects this point: "But oh the poor child, the poor child, what can he do / trapped in grown up carapace / but peer outside of his prison room / with the eye of an anarchist?" (Smith, 2002b, p. 436). In this striking image of the child the speaker addresses a grown up man who is trapped by the orderly and stabilizing grown-up world. Yet, he is still being accompanied by the chora of childhood which has not been completely assimilated into the symbolic.

Smith's employment of language disrupts the hierarchy between the symbolic and the semiotic as well. As Baumert (2007, p.204) expresses, "[h]er poetry can be read as an attack on the smoothness and coherence, the comfort and safety offered by the Symbolic". The semiotic often reveals itself in her poems through unintelligible or onomatopoeic words. "The Songster", which is about a singer, abounds in such words: "Miss Pauncefort sang at the top her voice / (Sing tirry-lirry-lirry down the lane) / And nobody knew what she sang about / (Sing tirry-lirry-lirry all the same)" (Smith, 2002b, p.30). Miss Pauncefort confounds her audience with her unintelligible song, which can be read as a rebellion against the rational language of the symbolic. Music, dance and poetry generally include expressions exemplifying the semiotic (McAfee, 2004, p.17). These modes foreground a language associated with the irrational by going beyond the boundary of the symbolic linguistic constructions to an unnamable space.

Likewise, in "The River God" the speaker uses unintelligible words: "Hi yih, yippity-yap, merrily I flow, / O I may be an old foul river but I have plenty of go" (Smith, 2002a, p. 232). In these lines, the speaker seems to be speaking from the realm of chora. The image of a flowing river escaping any kind of framing and stagnation suggests the language of the body. To use Cixous words (1997, p.148), she exclaims that she overflows, her desires have invented new desires, her body knows unheard -of songs. In "The Passing Cloud" subtitled "From the Royal Bethlehem Hospital" the speaker cherishes the realm of chora in a different context, by speaking from the world of the mad and thus by rejecting the realm of the symbolic: "One, ha ha, with a merry ha ha, skip the fish and amoeba/where are we now?" (Smith, 2002a, p. 366).

Smith's poetic universe discloses that she has difficulty in reaching a coherent signification process or a transcendental signified to organize her

poetry around. To refer to Derrida (1993, p.225), “the absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the interplay of signification *ad infinitum*”. In “Magna est Veritas” the speaker implies this absence of the transcendental signified: “Although I collect facts I do not always know/what they amount to” (Smith, 2002a, p.394). Here facts refer to signifiers which keep their statuses as signifiers all through the lines, and do not attach to any transcendental signified. This situation leads to her failure in expressing herself within the realm of the symbolic. For example, in “The Word”, the speaker foregrounds the difficulty of expressing intense emotions: “My heart leaps up with streams of joy, / My lips tell of drought; / Why should my heart be full of joy / And not my mouth? / I fear the Word, to speak or write it down, / I fear all that is brought to birth and born; / This fear has turned my joy into frown. (Smith, 2002a, p.453). The reference to Wordsworth’s “My Heart Leaps Up” here problematizes the Romantic idea that poetry is the expression of powerful emotions and feelings. The poetic persona believes that she cannot verbalize intense feelings and emotions as long as they are beyond the grasp of the symbolic. However, this is not her real worry. Instead, she is worried about the Word which is capitalized and thus may stand for the symbolic or the transcendental signified. When put in the context of the symbolic her strong feelings and emotions will be captured by the Word which is lurking to “fix the bounds, coherence and determinate meanings of any spoken and written utterance” (Abrams, 1999, p.56). They will, then, lose their fluidity and indefiniteness because, as the speaker says, the meaning is frozen when it is “brought to birth and born” by the symbolic.

The postmodern elements in Smith’s poetry efficiently highlight the absence of a unified and permanent meaning. It can be observed that her poems often enter into intertextual dialogues with other poems, and language is always parodic. In this respect, in her poems allusions to grand narratives such as myths and tragedies are abundant. She seems to respect the decorum and traditions of these narratives’ discourse. On closer scrutiny, however, the reader can notice the subversive way in which she undermines traditional aesthetics and the demand for coherence and unity (Baumert, 2007, p.202). While modernist poets like Eliot use myths to explore a mythical sensibility which is absent in the modern world or, as in the case of Yeats, to register them to their symbolism in their search for a unity of being, Smith’s employment of myths is subversive. Anderson (2007, p.178) explains this in the following way: “Smith’s arch style establishes a complex writing position for herself, a contrary stance, where she can gesture to another silent subtext, repressed and unspoken”.

In “A Dream of Comparison”, subtitled “after reading Book Ten of *Paradise Lost*”, for example, Mary and Eve are talking: ““How can Something envisage Nothing?” said Mary, / ‘Where’s your philosophy gone?’ / ‘Storm

back through the gates of Birth,' cried Eve, / 'Where were you before you were born?' / Mary laughed: 'I love Life, / I would fight to death for it, / That's a feeling you say? I will find / A reason for it.' / They walked by the estuary, / Eve and Virgin Mary, / And they talked until nightfall, / But the difference between them was radical" (Smith, 2002a, p. 316). Obviously, Smith here parodies Milton's great epic. By putting Eve into a heretical dialogue with a vivacious Virgin Mary character, Smith challenges both the frozen identity given to Eve by the epic and the symbolic meanings and roles attributed to Mary who is supposed to be pure and chaste. Thus, "[s]he ruptures the Miltonic blank verse and the didacticism of classical epic" (Dowson and Entwistle, 2005, p.119).

In another poem, "Was he Married?", there are two voices, one asking naïve questions about Christ and one providing answers: "Was he married, did he try / To support as he grew less fond of them / Wife and family? / No, / He never suffered such a blow. / Did he feel pointless, feeble and distraught, / Unwanted by everyone and in the way? / From his cradle he was purposeful, / His bent strong and his mind is full / ... / A god is Man's doll, you ass, / He makes him up like this on purpose" (Smith, 2002b, p. 389). In these lines the naïve voice, in a way, demystifies and undermines Christ's supremacy with his/her questions. The other voice's answers are deprived of awe and respect expected from a person talking about God and religion. It also subverts the hierarchy between "Man" and "god" by capitalizing "Man" and using the small letter for "god". Since religious grand narratives are among those which aspire to organize a stable and unified meaning to establish the symbolic firmly, Smith generally parodies such narratives.

The two examples above also put forward that by challenging the stability of the subject, Smith criticizes the patriarchal system as well, this system being another grand narrative to stabilize the position of the subject in definite gender roles. There are many characters in Smith's poems who yearn for escaping the limitations of the patriarchal authority. In "Fuite d'Enfance", the poetic persona speaks out her desire to escape from both her worldly and her other-worldly fathers: "One is my father / And one my Divine / My father stands on my right hand, / He has an abstracted look. / Over my left shoulder / My Divine reads me like a book. / Which shall I follow... / And following die? / No longer count on me / But to say goodbye (Smith, 2002b, p. 158). In the poem the poetic persona is surrounded by the master signifiers of the symbolic. In the patriarchal system in which she is imprisoned, she is stabilized, identified and positioned through the gaze of her father and God. Thus, she feels uneasy and out of place, and she intends to go out of the limits of this system.

Smith regards writing as a means to cope with desperation, frustration and fear in her life. In an interview, she explains that by writing she could ease the

pressures of life and find some relief. She specifies the pressures which overwhelm her personality as following: "The pressure of daily life, the pressure of having to earn one's living, the pressure of one's relations with other people, the pressure of despair" (qtd. in Baumert, 2007, p.200). "My Muse" is illustrative in this context: "Why does my Muse only speak when she is unhappy? / She does not, I only listen when I am unhappy / When I am happy I live and despise writing / For my Muse this cannot but be dispiriting" (Smith, 1988, p.95). These lines actually imply that Smith cannot identify her despair within the limits of the symbolic order of daily life. Therefore, she escapes into the semiotic realm of poetry. In the Kristeva context the poet flouts the rules of symbolic language by sublimation, by reactivating the material through melody, rhythm, semantic polyvalency, the so-called poetic form (Baumert, 2007, p. 200).

The pressure of despair invokes the theme of death in Smith's works. Her most memorable poems, even the funny ones, present topics of death and suicide. She says that being alive is like being in enemy territory, whereas being dead is like feeling at home (qtd. in Baumert, 2007, p. 121). Her death theme is generally constructed through images like an open space, grass, the sky, an empty beach, the sea stretching to the horizon and the forest. For example, "Scorpion" is full of images that express the idea of death: "I should like my soul to be required of me, so as / To waft over grass till it comes to the blue sea / I am very fond of grass, I always have been, but there must / Be no cow, person or house to be seen. / Sea and grass must be quite empty / Other souls can find somewhere else" (Smith, 2002a, p. 421). The popularity of the theme of death in Smith's poetry can also be regarded as an attempt to go beyond the symbolic. According to Anderson (2007, p.177), "the image of death- and moreover a death that is energized and in movement- becomes a way for a woman writer of questioning the limits of signification and bringing her own uncanny presence back into text". Death is an abject topic in Kristeva's notion. For Kristeva (1982, p.85), "abjection is what disturbs identity, system and order, the in-between and the ambiguous". In this context, Nick Mansfield (2000, p.87) points out that "abjection both threatens and thrills us, dramatizing the insecurity of our subjectivity and the possibility of its loss, but also offering us a freedom outside of the repression and logic that dominates our daily practices". The theme of death suggests Smith's avoidance of creating a stable self since death destabilizes subjectivity.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Stevie Smith was regarded as an eccentric literary figure, and one of the reasons for this fact can be the fact she defied the symbolic order by means of her language, her poetic performances and her themes. She

confronted the symbolic logic not only with her poetry but also with her extra-linguistic strategies such as her weird appearance and her sketches. In her poems the semiotic fuses into the symbolic, which could also inform why they were pushed back to margins in their time period.

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