Stevie Smith's Questions

James Williams

Ogden Nash, in his couplet on Stevie Smith, presents her as a series of questions without answers:

> Who and what is Stevie Smith?
> Is she a woman? Is she a myth?[1]

The initial spur to puzzlement is presumably Smith's gender-bending name (hence 'Is she a woman?') but that puzzle is presented as just one facet of a bigger mystery. There is a touch of Edward Lear here, a forefather Nash and Smith had in common ('Who, or why, or which, or *what*, Is the Akond of SWAT?'[2]) hinting that Smith might be a kind of nonsense animal. There may also be an echo of the famous jingle from *The Scarlet Pimpernel* ('Is he in heaven? – Is he in hell? / That demned, elusive Pimpernel?'[3]) which would cast her as a romantic secret agent. Nash's Smith is an enigma, and the right way – perhaps the only way – to approach her is by collating a series of questions. In the process, question marks, the tonal and grammatical signs of the interrogative, proliferate across the lines (a top-heavy ratio of 3:2). Nash was one of the more artful readers of Smith but far from the only one to respond to her in this way. Will May notes that after Smith's first novel, *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936), was published, the offices of Jonathan Cape were inundated with questioning letters, some of which, like this one from a Mr Cyril M. Wood, contained demands for information that went considerably beyond what readers of poetry usually consider themselves entitled to know:

> Who is Stevie Smith? From her photo in *Now and Then*, she seems to bear a slight facial resemblance to the Duchess of Windsor. Is she an

[1] Quoted in Frances Spalding, *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography* (London 1988) p. 2.

[2] Edward Lear, *Complete Nonsense and Other Verse*, ed. Vivian Noakes (London 2006) p. 399. On Stevie Smith's relationship to Edward Lear, see Will May, 'Drawing Away from Lear: Stevie Smith's Deceitful Echo', in James Williams and Matthew Bevis (eds.), *Edward Lear and the Play of Poetry* (Oxford 2016) pp. 316–38.

[3] Baroness Orczy, *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, ed. Nicholas Daly (Oxford 2018) p. 90.

https://doi.org/10.1093/camqtly/bfae012

> Oxford graduate, or has she been 'finished' in Switzerland? And … dare I ask … how old is she? And was she christened Stevie or Smith?[4]

'Dare I ask?' asked contesting Cyril, and would not stay for an answer.

Both of these respondents – the ironic Nash, and the more explicitly bewildered Wood – accumulate questions in a manner that is, knowingly or not, highly characteristic of the writer about whom they purport to be so mystified. You don't have to look far in Smith's *Collected Poems* to see this feature of her work on display. The first poem, 'The Hound of Ulster', in her first collection, *A Good Time Was Had By All*, achieves its effects by, among other things, piling up question marks. The poem begins with a questioning voice inviting the listener to observe an enticing animal, with a repeated 'Do you see?':

> Do you see that wire-haired terrier?
> Could anything be merrier?[5]

– followed by one of Smith's characteristically wrongfooting rhymes, a labrador retriever named, of course, Belvoir. The questions derive from, just as they help to shape, a voice: the enticing, charming pet shop owner who is attempting to lure a little boy in. But the boy has a question of his own:

> … tell me pray
> What lurks in the gray
> Cold shadows at the back of the shop?
> (p. 3)

'Her poems are full of committed conversations', May writes, 'but often ones that turn on difference or mishearing' (p. xxxi). The 'difference or mishearing' that May diagnoses at the heart of Smith's dialogues plays out, in this example, partly through the comic-macabre figure of a precociously formal child ('Thank you courteous stranger … ', he begins), but very largely through the poem's twisty and cross-purposive way with questions.

Not all of the questions in 'The Hound of Ulster' are alike, or what they seem to be. Some are requests for information, others not: the poem quickly maps out a range of uses for questions – sincere or self-interested, phatic or fretful – the variances of which are hidden at the visual level of the page through the repeated punctuation of ?, ?, ?. In an uncompleted essay on

[4] Cyril M. Wood to Jonathan Cape, quoted in Will May, *Stevie Smith and Authorship* (Oxford 2010) p. 116.

[5] *The Collected Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith*, ed. Will May (London 2015) p. 3. Further references to this edition – of which Faber & Faber is hereby acknowledged as the publisher – are given in the text, with poem titles where helpful for orientation.

punctuation, Samuel Taylor Coleridge drew attention to just this gap between the marks on the page and their operations in the receptive imagination:

> It would be … absurd to imagine that the ? and ! should designate all the moods of passion, that we convey by interrogation or wonder – as the simple question for information – the ironical – the impetuous – the ratiocinative &c. No! this must be left to the understanding of the Reader or Hearer.[6]

Generously expansive in its sense of the range of work that punctuation marks might do, this is at the same time briskly sure of the right way to understand the economy of information that they represent ('No!'). Coleridge is right, of course, that marks of interrogation and – to use his older term for the exclamation mark – admiration[7] convey a much wider range of meanings and significances than a single symbol can neatly encapsulate. But the tendency of his remarks, a tendency followed by a great many critics of 'the interrogative lyric', has been to shift the emphasis of the discussion from print to rhetoric, and to disattend to the typographical dimension of questions. To read a poem like 'The Hound of Ulster', we need both Coleridge's understanding of the gap between mark and meaning, and Theodor Adorno's insight that a mark of punctuation 'acquires a definitive physiognomic status of its own, an expression of its own, which cannot be separated from its syntactic function but is by no means exhausted by it'.[8] The latter view helps to see how, despite the mysterious vagaries of the poem's questions, the repeated ?, ?, ? of its surface enacts its own counterpointing set of qualities and feelings: needling, persistent, irritable, uncannily affectless.

Question marks are peculiar little hooks, and in this essay I want to draw attention to their presence in Smith, and to consider some of the issues that might hang on them.[9] That is really to say that this essay is about the role and function of questions in her poems, but I choose to begin by framing the issue in terms of the mark of punctuation because, in a poetics which appeals as self-consciously as Smith's to both the ear and the eye, the question and its printed presence can be neither neatly conflated nor neatly

[6] *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, vol. iii: 1808–1819: Text*, ed. Kathleen Coburn (London 2002) p. 3504.

[7] And the French term: *points admiratifs*.

[8] Theodor Adorno, 'Punctuation Marks', in *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (New York 2019) pp. 106–11: 106.

[9] In American usage, they are sometimes 'interrogation points'; it is helpful to keep both vocabularies in mind.

separated. Smith's poems often play up tensions and dissonances between sound and writing (revelling, for instance, in ear rhymes that are not eye rhymes, as in some of the rhyming pairs in 'The Hound of Ulster': 'retriever/Belvoir', 'beguiled/child'). In the half-spoken-half-sung performances of her work for which she became famous, she liked to play up these moments of dissonance; in *Novel on Yellow Paper*, Smith has her heroine Pompey Casmilus imagine wonderingly how a voice could take shape in and through its punctuation: 'Oh talking voice that is so sweet, how hold you alive in captivity, how point you with commas, dashes, pauses and paragraphs?'[10] There is a private joke here, in that *Novel on Yellow Paper* was largely unpunctuated in its earliest drafts, and a less private provocation: her punctuation *does* hold the voice alive, but also curiously 'captive' to a set of coolly scribal conventions. This is particularly true in the question mark which, though not named in this list of marks, is present on the page, bringing the list to its interrogative conclusion. Much of the interest of Smith's handling of questions springs, I argue, from the fact that she is making this little mark do such a lot of different kinds of work while allowing it to assert its own graphical personality, though of course the dynamics of particular questions in Smith might hang more or less on their relationship to the question mark. In what follows, I think this through in relation to three broad categories of question: questions that go unanswered, because simply left hanging without a response (the first and longest section); questions that receive a response, whether ambiguously or definitively (the second section); and, finally, questions that never get asked (the third and shortest section).

***

Smith's poems often grow out of questions in the first line or in the title; at least as often, they gravitate (as some of Yeats's most famous poems do[11]) towards a suspended question in the final line. She is one of English poetry's great posers of questions, but she is not simply a poser: her work pushes at the possibilities of the interrogative mood, testing out its capacities and considering the range of responses it might elicit. '[P]unctuation choreographs and orchestrates thought',[12] writes Jennifer DeVere Brody, and Smith's poems do much of their hardest thinking through question marks. Questions left unanswered sometimes create a blockage which can

[10] Stevie Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper* (London 1980) p. 39.

[11] On this aspect of Yeats, see George S. Lensing, '"Among School Children": Questions as Conclusions', *College Literature*, 13 (1986) pp. 1–8; Lee Zimmerman, '"Singing Amid Uncertainty": Yeats's Closing Questions', *Yeats Annual*, 2 (1983) pp. 35–45.

[12] Jennifer DeVere Brody, *Punctuation: Art, Politics, and Play* (Durham, NC 2008) p. 13.

only be met with further questions. In 'Oh Christianity, Christianity', she writes:

> Oh what do you mean, what do you mean?
> You never answer our questions.
> (p. 485)

And she knew whereof she spoke, for she was herself an inveterate non-answerer of questions:

> Then also as a writer she must fail
> Since art without compassion don't avail?
> ('Full Well I Know', p. 337)

> Foolish illusion, what has Life to give?
> Why should man more fear Death than fear to live?
> ('Come, Death (1)', p. 115)

> Is it surprising Reader do you think?
> Would you expect to find him in the pink?
> Who's solely occupied with his own mental stink?
> ('Analysand', p. 52)

In these three examples we sense questions getting progressively out of hand: one complex, grammatically peculiar question sprawls across two lines, then a couplet of questions which rhyme aurally even as they pull apart semantically, then a triplet of questions appearing, as triplets tend to do, to 'swell' or 'overflow',[13] the last line even swelling in size from a heroic decasyllabic line to a lolloping dodecasyllabic line, like the final hexameter of a Spenserian stanza. The questions seem to be growing and spreading, proliferating even as they are being asked.

These are examples of what we might call 'rhetorical questions', but that term is unhelpfully vague. The scholar of punctuation John Lennard is helpfully clear about why this is, and about the range of functions the question mark performs:

> Latin has four primary verbs of enquiry: (*quaero*, *inter/rogare*, *sciscitor*, and *percontor*) … . 'Interrogations' (demanding 'yes' or 'no') certainly take a *punctus interrogativus*, but whether 'queries' (lookings, searchings), 'sciscitations' (repeated enquiries), or 'percontations' (soundings, as of water with a pole) should do so is unclear. English has only two of

[13] Terms used by Christopher Ricks in 'Dryden's Heroic Triplets', in *Along Heroic Lines* (Oxford 2021) pp. 60, 62.

> these verbs (question/query and interrogate) but adds Germanic 'ask' (callings for or upon) while fudging all their distinctions – as the very loose term 'rhetorical questions' shows: are they unanswerable? unanswerable in time? or just unanswered (in time)? In drama (as in court) the distinction might be life or death, but no conventional means of marking it is available.[14]

This passage is worth quoting at length because it so neatly unpacks the grammatical and semantic freight which is packed up in the question mark and, by extension, in the word 'question'; and the difficulty Lennard identifies with 'rhetorical questions' (are they unanswerable, or just, for the present, unanswered?) hangs over many of Smith's best questions:

> Oh what can be happening pray what are they at?
> Oh why am I slowly turning into a cat?
> ('Friskers, or Gods and Men', p. 307)

Why indeed? The voice seems to talk past the reader; it cannot possibly expect an answer. The poem is a miniature Ovidian metamorphosis, staging a peculiar pagan drama about the ways of the gods with men (or with women). Noreen Masud writes convincingly of the 'Escheresque' dimension of such transformations in Smith, the way in which '[i]nterpretative frameworks outlive their usefulness, form and dismantle themselves',[15] and in this case, by the conclusion of the process the poem is no longer animated by, or answerable to, the questions that initially impelled it. By the end of the poem, Friskers (the name that the speaker adopts as a cat) has lost interest in them, too preoccupied now with her 'beautiful coat and handsome whiskers'. (Smith liked 'to watch cats when they do not know they are being watched',[16] and would have known their capacity suddenly to lose interest in what, seconds before, had held their attention rapt.) But the questions haven't been answered so much as abandoned, and their queer force, whatever that was, has not been cancelled. It leaves one with 'funny feelings', as Hermione Lee puts it:[17] in an odd mood.

'Mood' is often a nugatory word, but it is also the correct grammatical term for what the interrogative is. The term is an apt one, since a characteristic effect of questions in poetry is to create a feeling of suspension, like an unresolved chord. As Susan Wolfson writes, 'the event of an

[14] John Lennard, *The Poetry Handbook*, 2nd edn. (Oxford 2005) p. 120.
[15] Noreen Masud, '"Ach ja": Stevie Smith's Escheresque Metamorphoses', *Cambridge Quarterly*, 45 (2016) pp. 244–67: 253.
[16] Stevie Smith, *Cats in Colour* (London 1959) p. 12.
[17] *Stevie Smith: A Selection*, ed. Hermione Lee (London 1983) p. 17.

unanswered question retains a disruptive effect'.[18] The single floating line 'Happy, is it happy?' (p. 550) brings Smith's poem 'Is it Happy?' to end where it had begun, with the questioning title. Questions, even when we can explain them away as being 'rhetorical', have a way of wanting answers, or at least making us feel that something is wanting. Sometimes this 'disruptive effect' is what Daniel Feldman, paraphrasing Hans Jauss, calls 'lyric poetry's numinous capacity to adumbrate the unknown';[19] though just as often, in Smith, a more precise and needling game is being played with the implied reader, as in 'Thoughts about the Christian Doctrine of Eternal Hell':

> So the vulnerable body is stretched without pity
> On flames forever. Is this not pretty?
>
> (p. 448)

This leaves us at a loss, not because the poem's general attitude towards the doctrine of eternal hell isn't fairly obvious, but because a negative syntax in a yes/no question (an 'interrogation') leaves us in danger of falling into a trap if we try to answer it. Play out the dialogue for a moment: Is this not pretty? No. No it's *not* pretty, or no it *is* pretty? (And the same ambiguity, *mutatis mutandis*, goes with answering 'Yes'.) You could avoid the problem by answering 'It is not' (like the solemn final line of Samuel Beckett's 'Dante and the Lobster') but you'd probably have to think about it for a second.[20] It's not that the poem is ambivalent, but that its depth of feeling on this subject is a result of, has in a sense been *earned* by, the speaker's ongoing struggle: we are supposed to think the speaker is right, but also to feel her perplexity. It would be to sell that struggle out if the poem allowed its reader too easy an 'Amen!'. Anne Toner points to a potential over-easiness, and moral queasiness, in punctuation when she notes that the exclamation and question marks in particular 'act as a shorthand to human emotions, bypassing laborious verbal descriptions'.[21] Smith's poems find ways to make the shorthand deceptive, to make us feel the labour of the thought.

[18] Susan Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence: Wordsworth, Keats, and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca, NY 1986) p. 21.

[19] Daniel Feldman, 'Poetry in Question: The Interrogative Lyric of Yeats's Major Poems', *Partial Answers*, 12 (2014) p. 91.

[20] Samuel Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks* (London 1970) p. 21. Beckett's concluding line conjures a kind of absolute finality that contains its own idea of hell. In 1986 he wrote to Barry McGovern: 'Thought of an alternative close … Instead of "It is not" "like hell it is." Better? Worse? Can't decide.' *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, vol. iv: 1966–1989*, ed. George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn, and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge 2016) p. 674.

[21] Anne Toner, 'Seeing Punctuation', *Visible Language*, 45 (2011) p. 11.

Thinking hard about the world, Smith believed, committed her to agnosticism, and agnosticism committed her to uncertainty, a world of unanswered questions. This need not mean despair: 'I [do not] find the world of uncertainty, to which my thoughts draw me back, a cruel place', she wrote in her essay 'Some Impediments to Christian Commitment'; 'there is room in it for love, joy, virtue, affection, and room too for imagination.'[22] Questions are, for Smith, a particularly imaginative way of reasserting and reaffirming her commitment to that 'world of uncertainty' even as she remains ambivalent about being alive in the world at all. Indeed they often brim with a kind of morbid joy, as when a lamenting 'Slug-a-bed's wife' asks whether Christ died so that her husband might stay '… In bed for breakfast, dinner lunch and tea?' (p. 34). And did He die for that? Theologically speaking, the question is rather a complex one. It may be a slightly different question from whether He died for that type of thing, or whether the idea that He died for anything at all is a myth or a forgery or a figure of speech. Theology doesn't need to be believed to be seen, and seen to possess rhetorical force. But the interrogative mode allows for all these questions to come rushing out (like the increasingly garbled mess of 'breakfast, dinner lunch and tea'), and for these dissonances to be felt in the hyperbole of the wife's expostulation.

Elsewhere, Smith finds her characteristically anti-theological theological voice when she is in the business of asking questions:

> Well, Mother, I shall continue to feel as I do,
> And I think you would be wise to do so too,
> Can you question the folly of man in the creation of God? Who are you?
>
> (p. 125)

This poem, 'Mother, among the Dustbins' (the comma holds it at a hair's breadth from the syntactical cadence of 'Sweeney among the Nightingales'), contains the sentence 'Man is most frivolous when he pronounces', and that thought can help flesh out why the interrogative, not the indicative, mood is made to do so much work. 'Who are you?' is both 'What standing do *you* have, Mother, to question the ways of God?', and 'What is your identity? – what kind of a creature are you?' In its double-edged grandiloquence, it recalls the Caterpillar's question to Alice in chapter 5 of *Wonderland*: 'Who are *you*?',[23] and the agonies of doubt that question provokes in Lewis Carroll's young heroine. 'I often think of Alice', Pompey writes in *Novel on Yellow Paper*, 'and how she was glad she was not Mabel,

[22] Stevie Smith, *Me Again* (London 1981) p. 153.

[23] Lewis Carroll, *'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland' and 'Through the Looking-Glass'*, ed. Hugh Haughton (London 1998) p. 40.

and how for one dreadful moment she thought she was going to be Mabel. But that is just one thing we don't have to worry about.'[24]

She's not worrying about it, here, exactly, but she is drawing attention to it (waving, not drowning). It is a common enough feature of Smith's world of uncertainty that questions are not springboards of pleasure and wonder so much as points where we register a kind of fatigue:

> But will the Lord forgive me? Is it wrong?
> Will He forgive me do you think for not minding being hung,
> Being glad it will soon be over,
> Hoping he isn't the Ruler, the busy Lover,
> Wishing to wake again, if I must at all,
> A vegetable leaning against a quiet wall,
> Or an old stone, so old it was here before Man,
> Or a flash in the fire that split out world from the sun?
>
> ('The Hostage', p. 375)

The rhyme of 'all/wall' suggests another fatigued, troubled questioner sick of bearing the brunt of his own and others' questions, Eliot's Prufrock: 'And I have known the eyes already, know them all / … When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall.'[25] As in that precursor, the questions become expansive to the point of claustrophobia. They can be felt expanding to fill the available logical space, but at the same time losing their coherence as questions: by the time we reach the punctuation, the memory has been overtaxed, the questions become too diffuse, the point of interrogation is lost.

Much critical work on the interrogative mode in lyric poetry has been written since the mid-1980s, in the wake of Paul de Man's *Rhetoric of Romanticism* (1984), and focusing on poetry in a long Romantic tradition. It tends to regard questioning as a source or a form of energy. For Susan Wolfson it is 'an active power of dislocation', it 'sets the mind against itself, the energy of that opposition driving new expansions of thought'.[26] William Howard, writing of Wordsworth's narrators, was impressed by 'the *drama* of their questionings'.[27] All this energy and drama lends Romantic or post-Romantic questions a particular kind of intonation: for George Lensing, Yeats's concluding questions can be read as 'finally

[24] *Novel on Yellow Paper* p. 63.

[25] 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', ll. 55, 58, in *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue, 2 vols. (London 2015) i. 7.

[26] Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence*, pp. 19, 17.

[27] William Howard, '"Obstinate Questionings": The Reciprocity of Speaker and Auditor in Wordsworth's Poetry', *Philological Quarterly*, 67 (1988) pp. 219–39: 220, my italics.

exclamations',[28] and Lesley Higgins, writing somewhat later, noted how questions in Hopkins carry so much of his trademark *energeia* that they 'collapse … into exclamation marks'.[29] I am indebted to many of these critics for raising good questions about questions, but Smith's work, grounded as it is in a radically different poetics, demands to be read against this grain. Smith seldom allows her questions to collapse into exclamations. Her question marks often serve to contain as much as to energise the questioning impulses of the narrators, a kind of 'captivity' as much as an impetus to the voice. In the poem above, Smith's punctuation marks out places where her agonised questioning can come back to rest in a familiar key; when she lands on her final ?, something is not so much being launched as gratefully winding up. Will the Lord forgive me, asks the lady in 'The Hostage', for not wanting to live, for wanting to be, if anything, something insensate and, because unresponsive, un-responsible? Being free, in other words, from the agony of being the kind of creature that can be tormented by these kinds of questions (compare: 'I should have been a pair of ragged claws … '[30]). It's hard not to think that one anticipatable answer to Smith's question in 'The Word', 'Why should my heart be full of joy / And not my mouth?' (p. 624) is: because your mouth is full of questions.

***

In 'Away, Melancholy', Smith's questions seem to be bent to the task of stirring up courage and hopefulness, although they have a tendency, obscured by their apparent listlessness, to let more logical problems out of the box than can easily be stuffed back in again. And this despite the fact that the questions in this poem do receive a response:

> Are not the trees green,
> The earth as green?
> Does not the wind blow,
> Fire leap and the rivers flow?
> Away melancholy.
>
> (p. 377)

A rhetorically questioning appeal is made to self-evident facts in order to support a conclusion: Look, are these things not so? Well, clearly these things are so; and given that they are so, come along now, away with melancholy. But the apparent flatness of punctuation in the final line is telling:

[28] Lensing, 'Questions as Conclusions', p. 7.

[29] Lesley Higgins, '"To prove him with hard questions": Answerability in Hopkins's Writings', *Victorian Poetry*, 39 (2001) pp. 37–68: 56.

[30] 'Prufrock', l. 73 (*Poems*, i. 7).

'Away melancholy', followed by a full stop, lacks the note of conviction, the decisive performative gesture of 'Away, melancholy!' Masud writes persuasively of the attraction, for Smith, of 'flat tones and feelings', a 'flat textual landscape':[31]

> A 'flat statement' offers itself in a tone that alienates everything that precedes or follows it. It is self-sufficient: it refuses mutual dependence or debate. One remark can join another without visible connection, as soon as it is called to mind, *a non sequitur rather than a response.*[32]

The peculiarity of Smith, especially when we set her against the Romantic tradition of interrogative lyric, to a large extent derives from her practice of orchestrating questions within this 'flat textual landscape', in which things do not carry quite the dramatic stresses we expect, and we are as likely to receive a non sequitur as a response. One danger of asking rhetorical questions is that the answers may not be obvious in the ways we expect, and so there's a danger they will backfire. What if the trees are *not* green, either subjectively (because I am blind, or colour-blind, or emotionally incapable of noticing or caring), or objectively (because it is winter, they are blackened by fire, they have been cut down)? What then? Is it 'away melancholy' *even then?* The trees and the earth being green are not givens in Smith's world of uncertainty ('Be warned, my child, *while* the grass is green', she writes in the magnificently sinister poem 'What is the Time? *or* St Hugh of Lincoln' (p. 74); and the green sward of 'Brickenden, Hertfordshire' (p. 121) is not what it seems either).

There is a toughness in the way the poem jumps to its refrain without framing it as a consequence of, or answer to, the questions that precede it. It is not 'Are not the trees green … *et cetera*? *If so*, or *given that*, then away melancholy'; rather, the poem gives the questions space to live and breathe and then moves on to what we can choose to regard as its conclusion or as something less than a conclusion, occasioned by them but not simply endorsed by them. Smith's poems take a kind of pleasure in imagining responses to questions that may or may not quite be answers, and she understands that one of the reasons it is so difficult to classify questions as simply 'rhetorical' or not is that it is often far from obvious what would qualify as an answer. In the case of certain kinds of questions – mostly 'interrogations' and 'queries', on Lennard's conceptual scheme – there are stable understandings about this ('What is the capital of Poland?' 'What

[31] Noreen Masud, 'Flat Stevie Smith', *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 67 (2021) pp. 215–34: 222, 231.

[32] Ibid., p. 221; my emphasis.

time is it?' '2 + 3 = ?'). In other cases, however – Lennard's 'percontations' and 'queries' – knowing whether a question has or has not been answered might be more like the difficulty which Wittgenstein diagnosed in Freud, of knowing whether or not a dream has been successfully analysed:

> Freud never shows how we know where to stop – where is the right solution. Sometimes he says that the right solution, or the right analysis, is the one which satisfies the patient. Sometimes he says that the doctor knows what the right solution or analysis of the dream is whereas the patient doesn't: the doctor can say that the patient is wrong.[33]

Questions can be like dreams in this respect, just as dreams for Freud so often feel like unanswered questions, calling out for a kind of analysis but not stipulating what kind. As Ernest Fontana writes of a very different questioning poet, 'Despite our repeated frustrations to find an answer, we persist in our interrogations, naively confident in a future response that will explain the mysteries.'[34] Questions are often attempts to find the right question, answers often attempts to try out possible answers, and who is to say when we have hit on the right one?

Smith's poems are good at leaving questions neither unanswered nor exactly answered, as in the question poem 'What is she writing? Perhaps it will be good':

> The young girl laughs: 'I am in love.'
> But the older girl is serious: 'Not now, perhaps later.'
> (p. 350)

The slippages of this poem's syntax and lineation repeatedly unsettle any certainty that we have arrived at an answer to the initial question. 'Perhaps it will be good' does not quite answer 'What is she writing?', but then, what would? It's not that it's a difficult question to answer, but that what constitutes the answer will depend on what the questioner wants to know ('a sonnet', 'an apology', 'Chinese', 'prose', 'the final chapter'). It may answer the question raised *by* the question, especially if we take it with the sneering emphasis: 'what *is* she writing?', i.e. 'what is she wasting her time on now?' Smith knew that questions could be as much pragmatic as semantic, and the motives of questioners are not always in good faith: '"Dost thou see the precipice?" Seneca said to the poor oppressed slave (meaning he could always go and jump off it).'[35] So

[33] Wittgenstein, 'Conversations on Freud', in *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1967) p. 42.

[34] Ernest Fontana, 'Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Interrogative Lyric', *Philological Quarterly*, 80 (2001) pp. 253–70: 267.

[35] Smith, *Me Again*, p. 129.

perhaps 'What is she writing?' really does mean (whether in a hostile or a friendly way) 'is this going to be any good?', and the answer really is 'perhaps it will …'. But 'Perhaps it will be good' is not allowed to stand alone as a response, running instead into the next line 'Perhaps it will be good / The young girl laughs'. Which seems to suggest that 'Perhaps it will be good' is what the young girl 'laughs', i.e. laughingly says, an ironic answer; until that suggestion is partially cancelled by the further continuation, 'The young girl laughs: "I am in love"', and the assertion of the hierarchy of quotation marks makes clear that the young girl laughs the thing following, not the thing preceding. With what studied simplicity Smith shifts the ground beneath our feet.

She can just as easily revel in moments during questioning and answering where the ground shifts under her own, or her speakers', feet. Consider, in this regard, the great question-poem 'Was it not curious?':

> Was it not curious of Aúgustin
> . . . . .
> When he saw the beautiful British children
> To say such a curious thing?
>
> (p. 454)

The poem refers to the famous remark 'non Angli sed angeli', purportedly uttered on seeing beautiful Anglo-Saxon boys for sale in the slave market in Rome, which according to Bede led to the evangelisation of Britain.[36] The second and third stanzas take 'Aúgustin' – presumably St Augustine of Canterbury[37] – to task for not condemning the moral outrage of slavery, but instead worrying about sending the gospel to the slaves' homeland. It is the final stanza that gives us the plot twist: it was not in fact Augustine who made the remark about Angles and angels at all, but Pope Gregory: Augustine was the leader of the mission that Gregory subsequently sent. The poem's question 'Was it not curious of Aúgustin' turns out to be the wrong question twice over. Not curious of *Aúgustin* (but rather of *Gregory* – which was *not* the point); not *curious* of Gregory (but rather *wicked* – which *was* the point). When the fourth stanza registers its error of fact, however, it only half-corrects itself: 'it was wicked of them'. But 'them' cannot be right:

[36] The phrasing 'non Angli, sed angeli' has become canonical, but in its source it is somewhat different: 'Rursus ergo interrogauit, quod esset uocabulum gentis illius. Responsum est quod Angli uocarentur. At ille: "Bene", inquit; "nam et anglicam habent faciem …".': 'Again he asked for the name of the race. He was told that they were called *Angli*. "Good", he said, "they have the face of angels …".' *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford 1969) pp. 132–5.

[37] A different confusion is hypothetically possible: the speaker is muddling two Latin Doctors of the Church (Pope Gregory and Augustine of Hippo). But the context strongly steers us towards Augustine of Canterbury.

Augustine can hardly be said to have had a share of the responsibility for something he didn't say, and this goes awkwardly and unexpectedly to the heart of the poem's anxious meditation about responsibility, honesty, answering the right questions, and about the potentially exposed and absurd position someone puts herself in when trying to arbitrate such matters – even, perhaps especially, when sure she is in the right. The poem's genius is for raising more questions than it answers, or even strictly asks. (There are plenty more: Why Aúgustin, with its non-English spelling and showboating accent? Does the speaker know – as Bede certainly did – that Anglo-Saxon children at this point were not 'British children'? Why is a speaker who wields the word 'curious' so pointedly incurious about matters of fact? And so on.)

Because Smith is so skilled at giving proliferating free rein to the questions in her poems, she can also undercut this by unambiguously answering them, to sharp, bathetic, and powerful effect. My favourite asked-and-answered question, for comic-sinister effect –

> Does Puff know this? Yes, Puff knows.
> ('The Choosers', p. 434)

– which comes in the midst of a poem full of mysterious question-and-answer refrains through which emerges a parable about England's relationship to education and the arts. The weight of 'Yes, Puff knows' here is a dark acknowledgement that everyone is in on these facts, and also, taken in the unfolding sequence of questions and answers by which the poem narrates these facts, a glimpse of a clarity which is, at that point, beyond us. A different and no less forceful directness comes in a kind of companion piece to 'Away, Melancholy' – not quite a reaffirmation and not quite a riposte – 'Is it Wise?':

> Is it wise
> . . . . .
> To weave a garland of sighs
> To abandon hope wholly?
> No, it is not wise.
> (p. 69)

Even in a world of uncertainty, there are brutal facts against which we run our heads, or on which we can slip like banana-peels. In part because she is a great asker of unanswered or semi-answered questions, Smith can be a remarkably forceful answerer of them, too:

> Had I the resolution or the art

To bear the smart
And drive it to my heart?
Not I.
('Death Came to Me', p. 46)

Perhaps 'No' would have been even more direct, but then it would not have had the symmetry 'Had I/Not I' which so terribly turns the key in the lock. And then there is 'Was He Married', a series of yes/no questions (in the Latin sense, *interrogations*) with answers, which is at the same time a parody of the Christian catechism and a sincere attempt to communicate why the speaker can't be doing with the Christian catechism. The poem's attempt to contain, in a series of interrogatives, 'mysteries that are accepted without being fully understood',[38] gradually breaks down:

Did he feel over-handicapped sometimes, yet must draw even?
How could he feel like this? He was the King of Heaven.
(p. 452)

Catechists are not supposed to be inquisitors; the catechised are not expected to be imaginative apologists for the faith, or to resort to counter-questions in response to their catechists' questions. But as the colloquy form collapses in still more comic ways ('A god is Man's doll, you ass …', p. 453) the poem suggests that the real questions and answers here are emerging in ways that are slightly misaligned with the grammatical forms.

'[My] doubts form a system',[39] Wittgenstein wrote, by way of pointing out that there are limits on what we can doubt, and on what it is even intelligible to doubt. To affect a radical scepticism, pretending that everything were up for question, would be as much a kind of naivety or sentiment as to imagine the world merely as made up of certainties, and Smith's temperament rebels against it. She is too much of a realist, and she knows that there is a point beyond which questions become forms of aggression, acts of power. 'Questioning I *held him* there', she writes in 'Parklands' (p. 38; my emphasis), a seriocomic riff on the Blakean and Wordsworthian traditions of interrogative lyric, which was perhaps already implicitly seriocomic.[40] Like most good poets, Smith is alive to the shortcomings, even the forms of

[38] Joshua Taft, 'Christina Rossetti's Questions: Riddles, Catechisms, and Mystery', *Victorian Poetry*, 60 (2022) pp. 51–70: 52.

[39] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (Oxford 1975) §126, p. 19e.

[40] Alan Richardson, for instance, argues that Wordsworth and Blake each in different ways ironise the secularised catechisms of eighteenth-century children's literature which sought to impose 'a monologic, hegemonizing master discourse as the price of literacy', noting that 'Ironically, the strength of the catechistic method lay precisely in its mimicry of an authentic dialogic process': 'The Poetics of Childhood:

violence, implicit in the linguistic devices she is most fiercely wedded to. Just as clearly and as characteristically as in her questions, we hear Smith's voice in the places where she shuts them down.

***

There are ambiguously rhetorical ways of asking questions, and there are ambiguously rhetorical ways of refraining from asking them, as suggested by the closing line – both arch and solemn – of Smith's poem 'The Angel': 'O forbear enquiry' (p. 670). Another of Smith's semi-theological meditations, 'The Angel' wants to pique, I think, precisely the kind of enquiry that it commands us to forbear: its dramatic gesture of refraining from asking further questions is a provocation to questioning. It turns out to be harder than it first appears to 'forbear enquiry': at any rate, for Smith. Enquiry has a way of shaping even those of her poems that do not explicitly seek to enquire about things, and they are sometimes haunted by the ghosts of the questions they don't ask. Her most famous poem, 'Not Waving but Drowning', in a case in point:

> I was much further out than you thought
> And not waving but drowning.
>
> (p. 347)

'In every punctuation mark thoughtfully avoided', writes Adorno, 'writing pays homage to the sound it suppresses.'[41] Will May has written revealingly of the way in which this poem, passing through different drafts, gained and lost marks of punctuation in ways that leave unsettling absent presences. In particular, he notes, an earlier version that appeared in *Medical World* in December 1956 added inverted commas around speech: '[i]n a poem that relies so heavily for its effects on various speaking voices [this is] a significant substantive variant'.[42] This certainly changes the way we read the poem, but I think there is a case to be made for seeing another punctuation mark as, in Adorno's words, 'thoughtfully avoided': the question mark. This is not one of Smith's question-poems, but it 'everywhere pays homage to the sound it suppresses', in this case the sound of the question that nobody thinks to ask in time, but that the poem answers anyway: 'Are you waving, or are you drowning?'

If we approach it as poem about an unasked question, particular details might catch our attention. Two past-tense verbs are given prominence in this poem: 'you thought' (l. 3) and then, still more marked because

Wordsworth, Blake, and Catechistic Method', *English Literary History*, 56 (1989) pp. 853–68: 856.

[41] Adorno, 'Punctuation Marks', p. 111.

[42] May, *Stevie Smith and Authorship*, p. 93.

occupying its own line, 'They said' (l. 8). They take on a new emphasis, and a new reproach: 'you *thought* I was so far out (but you did not ask)', 'they *said* it was too cold for him (when it was too late, but they did not ask)'. The choice of verbs becomes newly pointed. The deceased subject of the poem appears to speak from beyond the grave in the final stanza, confirming that he had been, indeed, out of reach of the shore for much longer than anyone had thought, and the poem ends with a reiteration of the four words of the title. When he begins to speak, his opening words 'Oh, no no no' stand in multiple dialogic relations to his interlocutors. With Smith's signature flatness of punctuation and tone, this does not read as high emotion ('no! no! no!') so much as stubborn, almost casual, correction, responding implicitly to the questions that those around him failed to ask. Both, that is, in the sense that his 'no no no' answers the underlying question for which all these other unasked questions are, really, place-holders ('Are you all right?') and that it meets their speculations ('It must have been … ') with an adamant clarity that the questions they are not asking are not even the right ones.

'Not Waving but Drowning', in other words, is a poem with no question marks, which contains no interrogatives, but in which the questions not asked become deafening, and intolerable. It might seem an odd place to conclude a discussion of Smith's uses of the interrogative: but it offers us a way of stepping back from questions, and taking stock of how far the questioning impulse shapes all of Smith's writing. This questionless poem demands to be understood in implicit dialogue with questions: it carries itself in a questioning shape. An unexpected analogue comes to mind here from Smith's oddly revealing, oddly withholding pot-boiler, *Cats in Colour*. There is a photograph of a ginger kitten approaching a bowl of strawberries. On the preceding page, Smith's caption reads:

> *The curiosity of cats wakes early, but so does their caution. Will these pretty strawberries bite him, or shall he risk biting them? Notice the beautiful thick baby-legs and the feet like an elephant's and the questing and questioning tail.*[43]

In Smith's hands 'Kitten and strawberries' (as the contents page styles it) takes on the mysteriously allegorical quality of a Renaissance print, the whole image emblematic of the complex dynamic of curiosity and caution that her writing repeatedly enacts and embodies. The three sentences of the caption – at the same time apparently free-associative, yet highly artful – adopt three grammatical moods: indicative ('The curiosity of cats wakens early … ') and imperative ('Notice the beautiful thick baby-legs … ')

[43] Smith, *Cats in Colour*, pp. 34–5.

punctuated by, and arranged around, a central interrogative ('Will these pretty strawberries bite him … ?'). Each sentence gives the impression of cohering with the others but only barely: the question grows tangentially out of the initial statement, less a development than an instance; the imperative leaves the question unanswered while just perhaps suggesting a kind of answer to it. Just a little off-centre stands one of Smith's curious, cautious question marks. Across the page, the kitten offers us a different model of 'questing and questioning': it asks no questions, but its tail is curled into a question-mark shape, and its whole body is full of suppressed inquisitiveness.

The Cambridge Quarterly, 2024, 53, 89–106
https://doi.org/10.1093/camqtly/bfae012
Article