STEVIE SMITH'S ANGELS

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ABSTRACT: Angels appear regularly in Stevie Smith's poems and drawings. The latter show disturbing, cruel or cynical figures, whereas the former exhibit a wider range of considerations. Nevertheless, the predominant sensation is that angels are rather disquieting than helpful beings. Thus an uneasy tension is created between God and (His) angels who, according to traditional lore, are His messengers, therefore subordinated to Him. In Stevie Smith's poems angels do not in general fit regularly in the orthodox pattern. The purpose of this paper is to analyze these contradictory insights and to examine the accompanying drawings. A classification of different "types" of angels is presented, which does not necessarily match the categories known through traditional angelology. Since discussions of Stevie Smith's stance as regards religious feeling and dogma are accessible in an extensive bibliography I intend rather to contribute a specific treatment of angels within the general framework of Stevie Smith's concern with religion.

KEYWORDS: Stevie Smith angels religion poems drawings

RESUMO: Os anjos aparecem regularmente nos poemas e desenhos de Stevie Smith. Os segundos mostram figuras perturbadoras, cruéis e cínicas; os primeiros exibem uma categoria maior de considerações. Porém, a sensação que predomina é que estes anjos são mais seres inquietantes que auxiliares. Cria-se, desta maneira, uma tensão entre Deus e [Seus] anjos, que, de acordo com o conhecimento tradicional, são mensageiros e, por isso, subordinados a Ele. Nos poemas de Smith os anjos não se adaptam normalmente a esse padrão. Às vezes parecem se comportar de maneira completamente autônoma em relação a Deus; às vezes aparecem interferindo mais nas relações entre os homens e Deus que colaborando nelas. O propósito deste artigo é analisar estas visões contraditórias e examinar os desenhos que acompanham os textos. Apresenta-se uma classificação de "tipos" de anjos, que não necessariamente correspondem às categorias conhecidas pela angelologia tradicional. Na bibliografia sobre Smith há discussões a respeito da posição da poetisa diante do sentimento religioso e ao dogma. Com este artigo procuro contribuir para um tratamento específico dos anjos dentro do marco geral do interesse de Stevie Smith pela religião.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Stevie Smith; anjos; religião; poemas; desenhos.

That angels occur frequently in the poems of Stevie Smith is indeed notable. The word appears more than fifteen times throughout the *corpus*. Four titles of her poems include the word *angel* (one of them in French, *anges*). Many of the illustrations or drawings by Stevie Smith represent winged "human beings"—*i. e*., humanoid figures

having either evident features from the common iconography for angels, or some touches that make us suspect that they are actually angels. The number of poems concerned with supernatural creatures increases significantly throughout her output if ghosts, witches, spirits, and personifications are counted. Because Stevie Smith shows an insistent concern about matters religious, not only in her poems but also in her novels as well as in other writings, the occurrence of angels seems to be logical. Angels, according to traditional angelology, are messengers—*i. e*., mediators between God and men. Stevie Smith no doubt became aware of angelology through the many theological books she read and frequently reviewed for several magazines (*e. g.*, SMITH, 1983: 129, 158, (*a*); SPALDING, 1988: 215-216).[1]

Traditional angelology, even the portion restricted to the Christian doctrine, has become a complex matter. The Christian lore about angels derives from the Jewish one. The general meaning of angels as messengers has been enriched and qualified. Significantly in *Luke* 22:43 an angel fortifies Jesus during the Agony in the Garden, whereas in *Matthew* 28:5 an angel speaks at the empty tomb after the Resurrection of Jesus. In *Matthew* 4: 11, after Jesus has been tempted by Satan, the Gospel says that the "angels came and ministered unto Him". These passages illustrate the fact that angels behave as mediators between God and men, and that they perform different offices. The ending "-*el*," characteristic of many proper names of angels, means God. Although their names are masculine, they are obviously neither male nor female.[2] The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) declared that angels were created and that men were created after them. ("Angels": 1). This declaration implies that angels are not omniscient or almighty, attributes that belong exclusively to God. The statement also indicates that angels are

[1] According to contemporary interviews and surveys (2002, 2008) more than 60% of British, American and Canadian people, particularly young ones, declared that they believed in angels. ("Angel": 8)

[2] Stevie Smith takes advantages of this ambiguity, which is a common feature device in her writings. (Huk, 1999: 510) Angels sometimes are sometimes represented as male, sometimes as female, and sometimes as undistinguishable in terms of gender.

superior to men. *Psalm* 8:6 says "Thou hast made him (man) a little lower than the angels". Angels can also punish and destroy following God's commands. For example, the pestilence which devastated Israel is attributed to an angel (2 *Sam* 24: 15-17). Likewise *Revelation* 9:15 depicts devastating angels. Evil angels are usually attributed to fallen angels, *i.e*. the ones that according to Church tradition rebelled against God and were consequently banished from Heaven, as Milton narrates so vividly. One of the earliest individualizations of the fallen angel is Satan, who asks God for permission to tempt Job (*Job* 2). This means that even as evil-doers fallen angels are utterly subordinated to God. The following passage in *Zechariah* 3:1 may help to clarify the meaning of some images and concepts shown by Stevie. It says: "Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the Angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right to oppose him." Of note is that this pair of angels–one good and one evil–is sometimes transformed in such a way that the two appear as evil or mischievous in Stevie's poems and drawings. In any event, the theological concept about angels is clearly developed in the course of time accompanied by the gradual unfolding of God's revelation. Pope John Paul II emphasized the role of angels in Catholic teachings in his 1986 address entitled "Angels Participate In History Of Salvation", in which he suggested that modern mentality should come to see the significance of angels. ("Angel": 4)

My purpose here is to examine in Stevie Smith's poems and drawings the different ways angels behave with respect to God and to human beings. Since some angels cannot be termed "orthodox" according to traditional Christian doctrine, a provocative question that I propose here is why Stevie chooses them as spokesmen (or spokeswomen) of heterodox points of view on such subjects as the purposes of the Creation, human fate, sin, and the like eschatological issues. It is my contention that Stevie Smith, a keen observer of human behaviour, uses traditional and popular lore about angels to propose a specific, sometimes cynical, insight into human actions.

Unorthodox and Negative Angels

My first example is "Tableau de l'Inconstance des Mauvais Anges". The first line shows these creatures as the “brightest and best”, but the last states that “they will do as they will”. Human beings are subordinated to these angels, whose power appears absolute. God is not mentioned, but traditional angelology states that all angels, even the malignant ones, are subjected to God. (DAVIDSON, 1971: xvii; COOGAN, 2009, Part Six). The notion that the brightest angels “show us no ill” is qualified by the somehow ominous statement that “they wait on our footsteps”. The drawing shows a winged female creature floating above mountains during the night. A star and a crescent moon are represented. An extra gap is provided between the text and the drawing because the former speaks of “sons of the morning”, a clear indication of light; whereas the latter suggests a nightly apparition. The countenance of this angel is in fact mischievous, and the sharp angles of the wings give the figure the appearance of a menacing bird. Angels have been traditionally represented as winged. Saint John Chrysostom refers to the significance of the wings: “They manifest a nature’s sublimity. That is why Gabriel is represented with wings. Not that angels have wings, … the wings attributed to these powers have no other meaning than to indicate the sublimity of their nature”. (“Angel”: 4). The Roman Catechism according to the Council of Trent says that angels are represented as human beings and sometimes they have wings, so that the faithful may understand that they do what God commands them to do. (*Catecismo de Trento*: III, 2, 19). Traditional iconography shows round-winged angels, whereas the sharp, bat-like wings are a common feature in the representation of the fallen angels. That these *mauvais anges* might be compatible with the protector angels seems improbable. Since traditional angelology emphasizes the connection between angels and light (DÉNYS L’ARÉOPAGITE, 1970: 151), Guardian Angels, or any others, must have light and day as their customary environment. Evil angels should accordingly be associated with

darkness. Stevie Smith's *mauvais anges*, however, are “brightest” and “sons of the morning”. In other poems Stevie's consideration of angels is openly negative. In “The Violent Hand” the angel is qualified as “most cynical” and he opposes the speaker particularly when the former grabs the speaker's rosary. The “violent hand” does not belong to the angel but, paradoxically, to the woman who grips the rosary. The angel dangles “out of reach from me”. The rosary is a form of devotion implying concentration and veneration to the Virgin Mary. The smiling angel proves to be inimical to this devotion and, as such, threatening to the woman. This angel must be a fallen or an evil one, unless he personifies some mischievous tendency of the woman who cannot pray in the proper manner. The idea of clutching the rosary with a violent hand suggests that the woman is searching desperately for some religious object in order to resist the angel's attack. The drawing placed over the text is eloquent. The depiction shows the entrance of a church, a row of seats or a staircase culminating in an altar in the rear part. The foreground is occupied by two female figures: on the left, a woman whose outstretched arm and hand give the impression that she has just released the rosary; on the right, an “angel” with the sharp wings typically portrayed by Stevie. The face is a bit disdainful. The rosary is hanging from the left hand. The ring and pinky fingers are folded whereas the other fingers make the gesture of benediction typical of the Byzantine icons. A religious image is seen on the left side of the church depicting the Virgin holding her Child. The angel, nevertheless, prevents the woman from praying.

Hierarchical Angels

The main evidence for Stevie Smith's notion of the angelic hierarchy, paradoxically enough, is a poem in which angels seem to disobey God. “No Categories” is pervaded by a theological atmosphere. The very beginning, “I cry I cry / To God who made me”, has reminiscences of the *De Profundis* psalm. The speaker invokes God, contrasting Him with the angels: He is the one “who created me”; they are those “who

frustrated me". Angels not infrequently impersonate shortcomings in Stevie's poems: whatever is dogmatic, rigid, and dictatorial is rejected by her. "That is what the Creator meant", refers to the "Angels' scholarly grimaces", while "exasperating pit-pat" indicates the surprising gulf that divides God from His distinguished creatures. The poetic voice invites the angel to perform a similarly contradictory action: to "aspire higher" and "to be like us/ or those next below as, / or nearer the lowest /or lowest."— *i. e.*, giving the impression that the higher these angels should aspire, the lower will be their status. Since the difference between human beings and angels is that angels are pure spirits, the poet's command entails a *reductio ad absurdum*: angels will prove to be better to the extent that they become worse, *i.e.*, subject to the limitations of the flesh. Addressing these unpleasant creatures the poetic voice declares: "Oh no no, you Angels, I say / No hierarchies, I say". The celestial hierarchy described by Denis the Areopagite consists in the transfer of light and intelligence from the higher members to the lower through the successive triads of intermediate levels.[3] In Stevie Smith's poem, hierarchies do not constitute a presence of love, but an entity of oppression.[4] We may guess that these angels are in fact human beings who command other people to "do this and that" and admonish them. Doing away with those categories would be tantamount to dethroning these unpleasant personages and making them "be like us".[5] In Smith's poem the contrast between God and the angels is most clear. If these angels embody human behaviours—*i.e.*, if the winged creatures are human beings disguised as angels—their interpretation would be allegorical. In my opinion, these angels are best being considered as angels *per se*. The awkward theological element would be that they are interfering with God rather

[3] This is what the *Catholic Encyclopedia* says about St. Denis the Areopagite: "Though the doctrine it contains regarding the choirs of angels has been received in the Church with extraordinary unanimity, no proposition touching the angelic hierarchies is binding on our faith". ("Angels": 4)

[4] In Stevie Smith's writings we can find textual evidence for a censuring or satirizing of authoritarian or dogmatic behavior.

[5] Perhaps these personages can be compared to the ones that Shakespeare depicts in sonnet 94, "Who moving others are themselves as stones / Unmovèd, cold and to temptation slow". Shakespeare's sonnet, though, is ambiguous because of the difficulty in ascertaining which of the temperaments is the "recommended" one.

than collaborating with Him. The last stanza reveals another contrast: one between God's indifferent, even humorous behavior, ("laugh[ing] aside") and that of the angels, whose main characteristic is pride. The poetic voice invites God to do away with these angels. That these angels are proud is not surprising: this attitude is consistent with the narrative of rebellion. Pride is the taproot sin in traditional theology insofar as that transgression embodies all the other sins by implying that the sinner wants to supplant God. No trace in Stevie's poem, however, can be found indicating that she is referring to rebellious or evil angels. The notion that "this is not what the creator meant" suggests that when God created the universe, the angels were the primary object of His decision, although He "laughed to see them grow fat". Since the poetic voice urges the angels to "plod on", the sense is that these fat creatures are worldly and of palpable substance; *i. e*., are deprived of their most conspicuous and traditional characteristics of levity and grace. Dismissing hierarchies or categories entails the abandonment of the hierarchical organization of celestial beings. The hierarchy put at stake here, however, seems to be the one that makes angels superior to men. At all events, that God's collaborators or messengers are in fact heavy and authoritarian beings who interfere with human life is striking. The illustration features a somehow grotesque angel. Its wings appear directly on its shoulders, not on its back, be it male or female. Two arms can be seen behind as if arising from the very wings themselves. The arms are grasping the angel's halo, which is not thin and circular, but rather big and irregular: perhaps a stone or a massive weight. As happens not infrequently, the drawing corresponds accurately to the depiction of the angels in the poem.

A triadic, but also heterodox, presentation of angels is found in the poem "From the Coptic": an animate lump of red clay is successively addressed by three angels.[6] Long

[6] The presence of an angelical triad is supported by Denis the Areopagite and undoubtedly by popular lore and iconography. Neither the Catechism of Trent nor the modern Catechism, however, states anything

lines organized in couplets, one stanza in monorhymes and a tercet for each angel help contribute to create a psalm-like, even liturgical atmosphere. The red clay is described as formless and lazy. Since some etymologies claim that "Adam" means "red clay", the strange creature that is kneeling on a tomb might be interpreted as the first man. This Not-yet-Man is summoned by the first angel, who urges him to become Man foretelling him a predictable fate: he will alternate happiness with pain. The second angel repeats the same, while the red clay remains under the falling rain refusing to become a man. The rain obviously suggests that the clay may be disintegrating, thus descending to an inferior stage, to that of the "formless". The third angel repeats the conjuring, but also identifies himself as the Angel of Death, *i. e*., the one who shall warrant the end of the "future bones" of the prostrate clay. When the clay listens to its definite vocation, it becomes Man, and as Man declares the Angel of Death to be his friend. The poem can be read in a sort of Heideggerian key: Man is a-being-in-order-to-die. Like Mr. Simpkins, (in "Mrs. Simpkins"), who cannot stand the idea of an afterlife, the red clay is satisfied only when the third angel predicts his final extinction. Stevie and her critics have extensively written about Stevie Smith's sense of death (SMITH, 1983: 110, 112 (*a*); SPALDING, 1988: 15, 273, HUK, 2005, *et al*). The final impression is that Death is the very justification of Man. Two puzzling elements remain to be interpreted. The first is the drawing: Stevie's stereotypical angels here are tall and wear a kind of petticoat. Their heads are bald, manly, and severe; one of them is glancing aside. The "red clay", in contrast, is turning its head towards the angels but is kneeling on a tomb. A small (proleptic) crucifix can be seen on it, and the red clay's hands are clutching the stone. The crucifix reveals that the stone is in fact a tombstone. Does the crucifix suggest a further commitment on the "red clay's" part? What is the purpose of featuring a crucifix when, to begin with, no man has yet died since "red clay" = Adam is the first man to be created? The second puzzle is the

about this number to refer to angels. On the other hand, the triad of Archangels must have impinged upon the general idea of "three".

title: “From the Coptic” suggests a translation. An extinct language of Egypt, Coptic might correspond to some exotic place in which the Creation is described in *Genesis*. Is there a Coptic account of the creation of Man? Did angels intervene in that creation? This possibility does not sound plausible. If Christ was a man only, Death had an absolute power on him: in this way Christ (*i. e.*, the crucifix) and Red Clay-Man would share man's conclusive destiny, *i. e.* death. These three angels can nevertheless be understood as messengers of God, thus subordinated to Him, and prepared to submit their terrible questions for Man's consideration. Notwithstanding, Man's final decision would be contrary to the Biblical account of the creation of Man, because only after the Fall did Man become mortal.[7] In the last analysis, we never know if Stevie Smith supports the Coptic doctrine or not.[8]

“Absent” (Intertextual) Angels

The poem “Fuite d'Enfance”, in the collection *Tender Only to One*, deserves some consideration even though no angel is mentioned. Angels here are found intertextually with Shakespeare's Sonnet 144 being the hypotext. The sonnet refers to two loves who

[7] It should be noticed that the same episode narrated in “From the Coptic” occurs in a short story written by Stevie Smith, “Sunday at Home”. One of the characters, Greta, is talking with Glory, her friend: the conversation touches on some concerns about Hell, the Christian idea of punishment, mortality, and the like. Greta mentions a reading of the Coptic which reproduces in a prosaic way what is poetically stated in “From the Coptic”. There are slight differences, however: in Greta's account the angels coax red clay trying to make it stand up and be Man. Red clay refuses the offering of the ups and downs during life. After an interruption by Glory, Greta finishes the tale: the Third Angel is the one who promises death. Then red clay agrees to become Man. The background of this conversation is twofold: on Greta's part, a peculiar worry about evil, war, and the use of force beleaguers her, and Death does not prove to be an escape from evil. Glory's trouble derives from her thorny relationship with her husband, Ivor. In the end the Christian idea that death is not forever makes Glory hopeless. The basic coincidence between this passage and the poem reinforces the notion that these angels, if subordinated to God, belong to the type *mauvais anges*: they do not tell exactly the truth; and when one of them manages to persuade red clay to become Man, this persuasion happens under the promise that Death shall be the end of everything —which contention is just the opposite of what Christian doctrine affirms. At all events, Ivor dismisses the Coptic manuscript as spurious and ends his laconic comment saying “all bosh”.

[8] The Archangel Michael is the object of a special devotion in the Coptic Church. One can guess that the three angels who visit the red clay are in fact the three Archangels, Michael along with Gabriel and Raphael. Nevertheless, none of them can be Death according to Christian dogma.

are in fact angels representing the man and the woman who, along with the poet, form a *ménage à trois*. "Fuite d'Enfance" evokes provocatively the first line of the Shakespeare sonnet. The former starts "I have two loves"; the latter, "Two loves I have of comfort and despair". Whereas in the sonnet one angel is good —the male one— no positive impression can be derived from Stevie's presentation, it declaring that "one is my father // And one is my divine". In fact, the girl who speaks in the first person seems to be oppressed by the two and does not know which one to follow. The drawing shows a small girl flanked by two male, ugly figures. The two male heads are almost at the same level as the girl's, as though she were being "lifted". In a way, these figures can be interpreted as Guardian Angels, but neither of the two a good one. The idea of adult patronizing oppression is clearly felt both from the lines of the poem and from the drawing. It is interesting to observe that according to traditional angelology each human being is accompanied by an angel who protects and guides that individual (*Catecismo de la Iglesia Católica*, 1993: 89). There is o doctrinal evidence that an evil angel is also there to tempt a person. The distinction between good and bad angels appears in the Bible, but clearly no conflict or dualism can be cited; the confrontation takes place on Earth between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of the Evil One. ("Angels": 5). Stevie shows the girl almost overwhelmed by two malignant forces, regardless the fact that one is her father and the other, her divine.

Allegorical Angels

In certain other poems an angel can personify some abstract entity. "The Choosers" features the Angel of Posterity. The poem is a satire on artistic or poetic reputation. The Choosers are the ones who decide on poetic values, *i. e.*, the critics. The poetic voice in the first person is included in this group. They, however, are contrasted with that of the Great Ones —*i. e.*, those who are going to assess the definite value of an artistic creation. The latter are in turn chosen by the Angel of Posterity. The first group of

judges becomes irrelevant in comparison with the second. The poem contains a significant turn in the last stanza: the poet complains that England cherishes "her arts in this wise": using some folk refrains, like "with a hey-ho and a yah", the poem satirizes English tastes or the way these tastes (the Choosers') condition the arts. In any event, the contrast between the two types of judges is highlighted through the intervention of the Angel of Posterity, who contributes a transcendental judgement of the poetic merits. Thus, the figure of the angel resembles those angels sent by God to provide revenge, justice, or punishment—for example the one who will come to purify the world, as in *Revelation* 9: 11 (the "angel of the bottomless pit"). Stevie's angel is not so majestic, but all the same administers justice in matters of poetic fame. We can obviously read Stevie's own dissatisfaction in this poetic complaint.

Another example is "How do you see?", a long invective against Christianity, which religion in the poet's opinion is not more than a fairy story: if the Spirit of God must be in fact the Spirit of Good, then the poet finds many contradictions, particularly in the example of the Catholic faith. After considering what *Genesis* says concerning the Spirit of God, the poetic persona discusses the figure of Christ as Redemptor, Savior, Son of God, Perfect Man, and God. There is only one occurrence of angels. The poet researches into the cause of the doctrine of salvation and of damnation. Those that are damned must prepare for "the devil and his angels". This happens to be compatible with the notion that the Devil has the fallen angels at his command and is prepared to inflict eternal punishment on sinners.[9]

Legendary Angels

The "matter of England", together with a ghostly intervention of a mysterious angel, occurs in "The English Visitor". Here Stevie Smith has cultivated the folk ballad,

[9] The agents of punishment, however, are not necessarily the evil angels: in *Matthew* 13: 41, angels are sent by the Son of Man to punish ill-doers; whereas in *Matthew* 25: 41, ill-doers depart "into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels."

telling macabre stories of frustrated love and posthumous retaliation. A facet of mocking appears obvious in Stevie's recycling of the old lore: the last lines, uttered by the angel and justifying the lady's behavior, are clearly ironic: “she is not less sorry than you are // only she was brought up differently”. The poem is built upon the contrast between a Scottish dead man and his English lover. The Scottish mountainous landscape is opposed to the “busy town”, which location the female partner would prefer for her lover's tomb. People react against the English visitor, who is in turn chased out of the cemetery. She eventually is transformed into what seems to be a buzzard. The transformation of lovers into birds that manage then to achieve a transcendental union is a topic in traditional balladry and classical mythology. The problem here is that the “English visitor” flies alone while asking why people are so hostile to her. Thus, the people's curse or prohibition to see the dead man again is countermanded by the angel, who ensures that the woman will think of him freely. The angel's intervention serves the purpose of mitigating the differences between the two cultures, life-styles, and creeds. This angel is neither godly nor devilish. The slightly malicious remarks of the first stanzas stress the incompatibility of the two sensibilities and the common repulsion for foreigners. Stevie's resorting to an angel seems to serve the purpose of calming down the natives, although that she is holding her tongue in her cheek while telling this tale is not difficult to imagine.

A strange legend whose protagonists are a man and (possibly) the angel of Death is the one depicted in “The Crown of Bays”. The story starts *in medias res*: some people seem to be celebrating a man by giving him a crown of bays. The man turns to the Winged Form—*i. e*., the Angel, who introduces himself as “the Angel of the Considered Bays”. The man decides to follow the angel and therefore must be dead. The man is eventually stabbed by the angel. While agonizing, the man recollects his past life showing repentance. The angel leaves the corpse with the following words: “Briefly // In

my opinion for what is with you, you die trivially".[10] The angel has posed a conundrum, and the idea may be applied to the very poem itself. The whole tale appears as a kind of frustration about life, not only social life but also "National Beauties", to which the man must say farewell. The last comment by the angel indicates that even the man's voluntary death is trivial, as though nothing were worthwhile, neither in life nor in death. The figure of this angel is consistent with many others presented by Stevie: the angel as an uncompromising, implacable being.

Angel of Death

The coupling of "angel" with "death" attracted Stevie Smith. Such an association is not necessarily a sign of evil. Death is not a frightening apparition in Stevie Smith's experience but rather a synonym of definitive liberation. Whereas in biblical and folk lore "Angel of Death" evokes a sinister, retaliating presence, normally associated with punishment or transcendental justice, Stevie brings about the figure of an angel who sometimes restates order, human justice, and peace. This type of restatement is what happens in "Angel Boley". It is proleptically tricky that she picks the proper name "Angel" to refer to the lady "Angel Boley", who turns out to be the Angel of Death in the very last line of the poem. Angel Boley forms part of a very queer triangle: her mother, Malady Festing, and (Angel's) husband, Hark Boley, contrive to attract the children of the neighborhood into their kitchen. There they kill them. This macabre activity recalls frightening folk tales and ballads about children killed by ogres, monsters, or witches. Angel Boley, who is extremely absentminded, has never paid attention to what is happening in her own house. The poetic persona states that her absentmindedness stems from a desire to ignore her awful relatives. (She is not absentminded after all). The clue is given by the middle of the poem: "I know now, she said, and all the time I have known / What I did not want to know, that they killed all children". The reputation of the sinister

[10] The drawing represents a very annoyed and grotesque angel.

family is poor in the village. Angel verifies that the villagers make a sign to protect themselves from evil, but they do not protect their children. Angel promises that "Mother Lure and my husband Hark" will kill no more children. Their faces become dark at the moment when Angel reveals that she is the Angel of Death. The poem raises some critical issues: one is to conjecture why the husband and mother are chosen by the poet to plot such macabre activities. Is there any hidden symbolic meaning in these characters? There might be an answer in the mother's name: "Malady Festing" can be understood as the illness of celebrating killing people: a festival is a celebration of something.[11] The son-in-law's name is more opaque: "Hark" is in fact an archaic word meaning "listen".[12] One possibility may be that she is the principal celebrant of these atrocities and he, as a weak imitator, is just listening/harkening to *her* and going along with the whole thing. Another problem concerns the villagers' psyche. According to Angel they are "selfish wretches". They are afraid of witchcraft, but they do not prevent their children from being lured by the evildoers. Angel's declaration of her real identity as the Angel of Death results in a decisive change in her personality. Her reputation with respect to the murderers was that she was half-witted and never knew "or wanted to know, what was going on around her". At the moment of her proclamation, though, she becomes clever and determined: she gathers poisonous mushrooms and kills her mother and husband. Then she goes to the police and declares herself guilty although she has saved many children. The dead children are not to appear; their parents are afraid. Conveyed to an asylum, Angel merely states, "I am the Angel of Death". Soon she dies and the townspeople have an inscription written on her tombstone: "she did evil that good // Might come". Attempts to erase the inscription fail. The words reappear. A vigil is placed on the grave, but the words recur on the tombstone. Eventually the Vicar accepts that the hand of the Lord is there and the tombstone is left in peace. The format of Stevie's

[11] The suffix *-fest* indicates the same, or else an intense immersion in an activity (*e. g.*, *songfest*).
[12] But "Listen to illnesses" is probably a farfetched deciphering of this strange association.

narrative is that of a legend, particularly the one of the etiological-type —*i. e*, one that "explains" a phenomenon that everyone can currently see. What I want to stress in this instance is the performative quality of Angel's declaration. Whether she proclaims herself the Angel of Death because she has become clever or whether she does so after uttering her decision to avenge the murdered children is difficult to ascertain. At all events, Angel's new consciousness is inextricably bound to an act of speech. The revengeful exterminator Angel is sent by God to punish the impenitent evil doers; and as such Angel Boley, or the Angel of Death, achieves what presumably God has told her to do. The supernatural intervention is shown in the last part of the poem with the narration on the failure to remove the epitaph. This miracle is reminiscent of the narration of Jesus's burial, in which a vigil "fails" as well. The conclusive prayer of the poem, "May God be merciful" reverberates with the awesome atmosphere of the traditional folk legend.[13]

Ironic Angels

A different turn in angelic functions is shown in "The Galloping Cat". The poem illustrates two recurrent issues in Stevie Smith's writing: her concern about animals along with and her preoccupation with morals. Animals embody human behavior but the moralistic aspect of her work is not so explicit. Moreover, Stevie Smith mixes the description of the animal with apparently nonsensical remarks as well as sayings. The first person cat "likes to // Gallop about doing good", implying a strange combination of actions. The general meaning is clear: this animal is a well doing cat. His good intentions are contradicted by a mysterious figure who opposes him just because he is a well-doer. Then, another mysterious voice pities him and he feels a soft stroke on his head, whereupon he becomes suddenly bald. The phrase "a martyr of doing good" shows Stevie's clear irony. The angels appear with their conventional paraphernalia: "a swoosh

[13] It is interesting to observe how Stevie manages to give the real, historical event a legendary aura. Her poem is indeed based on the 1966 murder case in which a man and a woman, whose names are not the ones that Stevie uses in her poem, were convicted for the sadistic killings of two children. (SPALDING, 1988: 291)

// As of wings" and a shining halo. The angels do not encourage the cat to do well, rather the opposite: they stand in the cat's path. The poet becomes suspicious: is this cat a well doer after all? What are the implications of a demand to have "An experienced eye of earthly sharpness" in order to do good; and what is exactly the implication of, as it were, galloping to do good? Finally, why is the cat chosen among other animals to perform good deeds?[14]

Irony or black humor pervades "The Toll of the Roads". The poem depicts somebody killed in a car accident. The angels pity him. The drawing shows three distressful figures but only one has wings. Tolley, the person, is lying on the street and a presumptive traveller is seen in the back seat of a car. The angels' grimaces suggest that they really failed to protect "poor Tolley", "a simple creature without a thought in his head".

The poem "Will Man Ever Face Fact and not Feel Flat?" has some intertextual links with *Hamlet*, particularly the line "Oh what an artistic animal is our little Man", which might recall Hamlet's "What a piece of work is man" (II, 2, 303). Stevie's poem displays a triad which is not very far from the Renaissance worldview: God, Nature, and Man. Man, *nexus et naturae vinculum*, is frequently depicted in a very uncomfortable stance. In Stevie's impression what man causes in nature is rather pitiful and scornful since he is so weak. Then an angel intervenes to say that this tender creature (Man) needs love. Man turns out to be a destroyer, but natural beings start to admire him. God intervenes declaring that man's true need of love is the love for God; if not, "for lack of love he'll die". A little breeze brings about the frustrating conclusion: "It is wonderful how he can // Invent fairy stories about everything pit pat". This wind, "older than all infamously strong" seems to be more powerful than God and his angels. There is a hint that God, the angels, the need for love, and other associated elements are but fairy stories

[14] Stevie Smith wrote extensively on cats in "Cats in Colour", included in *Me Again*.

invented my men. The angel, however, is the one who needs to justify man when perceiving man's violence. The angel weeps for him, suggests an explanation, and is eventually neglected by God Himself; who, for His part, happens to be derided by the breeze.

Angelical Angels

A significantly different status of angels is displayed in the poem “Angel Face”. The invoked angel here is a type of eerie or dreaming being, an idealized lover and a beneficent creature. The poem's atmosphere is pervaded by the whiteness of falling snow. In the first person, the poet asks the angel to love her whereas the angel's face beckons telling her to “Come soon”. Thus, there is a vertical tension: the lady demands the angel to come down, since its face is “so close above me”; while the angel summons the lady to come soon, *i. e*. to join him in the air. The angel's second intervention, as imagined by the lady, is to “Come away”; but this stanza describes him as “appealing, teasing // Smiling”; and there is a certain seductive, even deceptive, hint in the angel's voice. Eventually we learn that the lady herself might be deceived by her own imagination: when doubt arises, she tells the angel to love her and to cover her “in thy bosom”. This angel can therefore be the Guardian Angel. The doubt about her vision can imply a doubt about faith, and her search for protection has a traditional religious suggestion close to the bosom of Abraham or God, entailing definitive calmness and relaxation. The couplets, feminine endings, and repetitions contribute to a support of the sensation of peace. “Angel face” is far from the turbulent and macabre overtones of the poems already commented on. This one seems so simple that a child could possibly be imagined as uttering it. Nevertheless, in terms of Stevie's attraction for death, a more serious reading is probable. In this instance, the lady asking the angel to love her and to cover her in his bosom would become equivalent to an oblique way of asking the angel (of death) to take her away. This reading does not appear to be inconsistent with the whiteness and vacancy of the landscape.

The orthodox notion of angels reappears in “Why do you rage?” The poetic persona challenges someone else who is raging against Christ, he who is Love. The poem states that before Christ “the angel's brightness grows dark”. Stevie is taking from traditional angelology the notion of light, which characteristic in that lore becomes more tenuous as the angelical hierarchy goes downwards. The seraphim (meaning “fire”) are the highest and mightiest of the angels but their light is not their own: God is the ultimate source of light (DÉNYS L’AREOPAGITE, 1970: 107; “The development of Jewish ideas of angels”: 1). Christ must be brighter than the brightest angels. The idea that God may feel disappointed about His creation is not remote in Stevie's work. Angels are bound to feel the same disappointment when they perceive Man's upsetting nature. Another orthodox view of the mythical rebellion against God is displayed in “Fallen, Fallen”. The rebel angel is identified with a falling star, possibly “Luciferum”. Stevie's diffident comments never disappear completely: the last line, “A tale told by the fireside”, with a slight echo of Macbeth’s soliloquy, suggests that the whole myth might be, after all, just a legend.

Ominous Angels and black humor

The ominous deeds of certain angels are further explored in “A Man I am” and in “The Magic Morning”. In the first the sinister atmosphere is somehow checked by an angel. The speaker confesses that he has torn a newborn child's throat. After many centuries the wolf-man feels remorse and is apparently released from his sin by God (or whoever is “Him”), “before whom angel faces dim”. The strange creature is then transformed again into a man. His extraordinary longevity and cruelty can be associated with the Dracula legend, while killing children is an aspect this poem has in common with “Angel Boley”. The denouement in this poem is that of repentance and forgiveness whereas the outcome of the other is retaliation and superstition. The figure of the angel here, though, is less prominent than in “Angel Boley”, and the angel's function is to

emphasize God's might and pity. Since God "takes the burden of man's sin", this poem can be linked to the Christian creed without difficulty. If the Christian premise of redemption is evoked, the poem can symbolize the very history of humanity, men being wolves against each other until the Christ comes to redeem them.

"The Magic Morning" likewise shows again an ominous angel who focuses on the trespasser's horrible end. The legend involves Lady Marion, the Duke's daughter, and Charley Dake, who row across a mysterious lake. A swan admonishes Charley not to go on with the Lady. Eventually a dark angel appears flying across the Duke's park. Charley does not listen to this angel, who happens to be the "angel of consternation", and he plucks a flower. So he must be drowned as punishment: while the lady returns safely to land, Charley is dragged away by the current. This angel can perhaps be equated to the archangel who guards the entrance of Paradise after the Fall preventing any soul from entering Eden. That Stevie Smith treats the motif of the grove in a ballad-like way —*i. e.*, as a threatening and dangerous place— becomes readily apparent.[15] Sinister news conveyed through an angel is exemplified in "Upon a Grave": this poem parodies the tune to which the work should be sung. The tune is "Upon a bank in the greenwood I lay". The angel, similar to the one who stops Abraham when he is about to sacrifice his son, comes from heaven to tell the speaker that her child is dead. Since the speaker is at that point on the grave and in a churchyard, one might think that the son is already dead and that the speaker is mourning him. In that instance the angel would not be reporting any news, but rather reconfirming a verified fact. An angel, however, would not seem to be necessary in such a circumstance. The lack of any indication of punctuation is puzzling: either the three last lines of the first stanza are part of the angel's speech, or they are uttered by the speaker. In the former possibility, the one who "singeth far away" would be the child, and the angel would go on saying "In death is sorrow dead"; in the

[15] The swan addressing Charley Dake may hearken back to the Swan-Lake legend.

latter, the one who sings far away would be the angel and the speaker would say “In death is sorrow dead.” Both readings could obviously be combined as well. The macabre atmosphere of the poem contrasts with the lyrics of the tune inspiring it. Again, angels bring about ominous forebodings and tidings.

Black humor—a sardonic contemplation of mankind and of angels—is exemplified by the poem “No More People". The speaker, an aviator, reveals a close contact with angels. The airplane flies gently, but the angels, whose attributes are predominantly negative, are dispirited. In spite of being heaven-born they "plod the heavens over": their wings are sore and heavy. The pilot guesses that these angels had been “earth-born more and more”. The earth-born speaker’s lightness contrasts ironically with the heaven-born angels’ density. The pilot speculates that the angels' diffidence might originate in their foresight of general destruction, perhaps with a hint concerning apocalyptical catastrophe. The anticlimactic end confirms that omen. The aviator drops bombs on a church. The sarcasm is intensified through the rhyme: “[no more] people” – “[church] steeple”. Why does the pilot choose the church instead of some other building and why does either he or she choose angels to highlight the contrast between the two flights? Stevie was not at her ease with institutionalized religion although she never abandoned the Anglican Church completely. The association with “No Categories” comes to one's mind. Whereas in that poem the poetic voice wishes that the angels had become more earthly, in “No More People” they seem to be indeed earthly; therefore lacking their aerial quality. The angels of the former are apparently too heavenly, too dictatorial, to be of any help for human beings; those of the latter too earth-like. The final result is the same: angels are not messengers from God, and they perform nothing to support and promote human souls. Stevie's angels personify human beings, especially those who effect spiritual oppression, as in her view the established Christian churches do.

Guardian Angels

The figure of an angel can be ambiguous. The accompanying drawing might help to decipher the true meaning. Some ambiguity derived from gestures nevertheless remains. This drawing pertains to a short poem, "Angel of Grace". A child is talking with a joyful lady when the child's Guardian Angel takes him away. This child wonders where the lady is of whom he has grown "fonder and fonder". The first interpretation consistent with the drawing is, I believe, that the angel is interfering with the child: the lady is a benefactress and the *mauvais ange* prevents the child from obtaining pleasure or guidance from her in that capacity. In the drawing an elegant and smiling young woman appears; whereas the angel, another feminine figure, is grabbing the youth's arm and dragging him away. The boy smiles at the woman and offers an open hand to her. The quality of the angel is consistent with previous experiences of these creatures: they meddle in human affairs, notably discouraging any hope and reminding human beings of hierarchies and dogmas. Nevertheless, since Stevie's writing is subtle and ironic, perhaps the opposite meaning can be entertained—*i. e.*, the lady is coaxing the child to follow her, whereas the austere angel intervenes to help the boy resist the fatal attraction. In the first instance the title becomes ironic: "Angel of Grace" is, as a matter of fact, "Angel of Disgrace" for the child. Nonetheless, the irony can be conceived of in a subtler way: since the two adult figures are women, the "angel of grace" would be the beneficent lady instead of the angel itself.

Any slight mention of an angel suggests that the poet may have the image of a traditional one in mind. The example is "But Murderous": a woman has killed her unborn baby to protect it against the evil that dominates life. The poet is severe in rejecting the woman. Stevie asks, "Did she think it was an angel or a baa-lamb // that lay in her belly furled?" The rejection implies the notion that a human being is not superior to the rest of those creatures that populate the world. In any event, the figure of the angel, coupled with

that of the baa-lamb, is consistent with a somehow childish notion of "angelical" innocence and candor. That this angelic stereotype is not, however, the predominant perception of angels that Stevie exhibits is self-evident.

Drawings of Angels

I want to finish with a brief consideration of the drawings that "illustrate" certain poems, even though angels are not necessarily mentioned in those texts.[16] "A dream" depicts figures in a ballad-like, macabre situation: two angels are represented on the tombstone. Both of them are angry and crossing their arms, while the visitor looks rather silly and improvising an explanation. A star and the moon indicate that this incident happens in the night. In "Suicide Epitaph" another tombstone appears: a human being with a bleeding heart is on it and very nearby the figure of an angel dressed as a woman and pointing downwards with her swords. In "King Hamlet's Ghost" the figure of the King appears like an angel—*i. e.,* without any trace of the armed warrior that haunts the castle of Elsinore. His expression is somehow sad, and he holds a circular object that could be a mirror. Another illustration of angels is inserted between two poems in *Tender Only to One*, "Longing for Death because of feebleness" and "My Heart Goes Out". Both are concerned with death: a male angel is taking a female one by her hand. The female angel appears as dead or asleep. Leaving aside drawings that are undoubtedly representations of the Devil or of death, I emphasize here that the drawings of angels represent spirits that are normally evil or angry and that seem to be particularly interested in conveying human beings to the netherworld.

Conclusion

A poem is *poeisis*—a bringing-forth to reconcile thought with matter and mankind with the world: any quest for biographical evidence is accordingly suspicious. That the mention of angels can be taken as a poetic device without any implication of

[16] The relationship between poems and drawings is a complex one: "For the most part, Stevie Smith's poems did not inspire her drawings, nor did her drawings inspire her poems". (BARBERA, 1985: 223)

faith or the lack of it therefore would follow directly. Angels would be just messengers sent by God and sometimes independent supernatural beings, and not by definition under the Devil's command. It is difficult, however, not to take into consideration Stevie Smith's strongest attack on Christianity in her essay “Some Impediments to Christian Commitment”:

> And I thought: How could a God of Love condemn anybody at all, even a person as wicked as the most wicked person could be, even a great angel so rebellious as Lucifer Star of the Morning Sky, to eternal fiery punishment? I began to think that a God of Love should rather slay altogether a creature gone irremediably wrong, than keep him alive to torment him for ever. I read my bible and I saw that the lofty Christ believed, too, and taught this monstrous doctrine of eternal hell: "depart from me ye cursed into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels"…"and they went away into everlasting punishment." (SMITH**,** 1983: 155, *b*)

Stevie Smith's invective against Christianity touches central dogmas: the Incarnation, the dual nature of Christ, the doctrine of eternal Hell. All these denouncements inspired certain poems included in this article. Starting from biographical evidence, then, I would conclude that Stevie Smith was certainly at pains to accept and believe what she had been taught. If she really rejected these dogmas, which denial implies the rejection of an essential part of Christianity; angels would have been no more than a poetic device that she used at random. The very insistence on the topic of angles *per se*, however, leads me to the conclusion that Stevie was never plainly satisfied with her own invective, so that these issues continued to upset her. Nevertheless, Angels, leaving aside some ironical or slightly humorous touches, are almost always disturbing

presences in her *corpus*, very seldom sent by a loving God and much more frequently the very ministers of evil.

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