24 The Poetry and Drawings of Stevie Smith June 2020

Coming across a poem I wrote long ago when the children were having swimming lessons (see Appendix), I suddenly became aware this month that although I, like many millions, have always loved the much anthologised "**Not Waving but Drowning**" by Stevie Smith (here is an excellent recording that introduces it perfectly https://poetryarchive.org/poem/not-waving-but-drowning/) and her almost equally (?) well known "**The Jungle Husband**"….

Dearest Evelyn, I often think of you
Out with the guns in the jungle stew
Yesterday I hittapotamus
I put the measurements down for you but they got lost in the fuss
It's not a good thing to drink out here
You know, I've practically given it up dear.
Tomorrow I am going alone a long way
Into the jungle. It is all grey
But green on top
Only sometimes when a tree has fallen
The sun comes down plop, it is quite appalling.
You never want to go in a jungle pool
In the hot sun, it would be the act of a fool
Because it's always full of anacondas, Evelyn, not looking ill-fed
I'll say. So no more now, from your loving husband Wilfred.

…I knew absolutely *nothing* about Florence Margaret Smith ('Stevie Smith' as she became), nor about the rest of her poetry. Worse, I hadn't a clue that she *drew* (excuse the 'S.S.' style throw-away rhyme). To rectify this appalling ignorance, I've now downloaded on to my Kindle the magisterial and utterly *delectable* "Faber and Faber" *Collected Poems and Drawings of Stevie Smith* for the princely sum of €15. (I marvel at what technology can achieve, because instead of waiting 10 days for the book-form which was far more expensive, I had this beautifully light-to-handle collection on my i-Pad mini within 3 minutes. Bliss!)

So, where should I start? Clearly, the loss of her father at the age of 3 - ran away to sea when his business failed and became a pantry-boy (what on earth is that?) on the White Line) - and later her mother's death when 17 were traumatising events as she grew up. In between, she spent *three years* from the age of 5-8 in a children's convalescent home in Broadstairs

after contracting TB. All of this sounds a disastrous way to begin your childhood and it is hardly surprising that she suffered from depression all her life.

The more I read, the more I began to see links with Emily Dickinson (obsessive fascination with Death), Edward Lear, James Thurber, Dorothy Parker and Spike Milligan: writers with depression, who masked their feelings with, or found relief in, zany, eccentric humour. I was interested to see that Sylvia Plath was particularly interested in her poems and had been wanting to meet her in 1962, just around the time Plath's tragic suicide. Indeed, for someone who was not in the full mainstream of poetry, Stevie Smith had connections with many important literary figures and was a far more prolific poet than I had ever imagined. She was close friends with Orwell in his later years, won praise from Ogden Nash and Marianne Moore when a selected volume was published in the USA, found favour with Larkin amongst others and later shared a stage with Ted Hughes, Basil Bunting and Brian Patten.

Though she seemed to have 'arrived' in the late Sixties, with lots of readings, BBC recordings and even an LP, her poetry never *quite* took off. Critics point to the fact that her poetry is/was never linked to any particular modern movement and so is/was difficult to 'position'. It is also highly idiosyncratic and sometimes puzzlingly slippery. Pain, anxiety, acerbic humour, condemnation, distress and a deeply subversive streak (both in subject and in form), often combine adjacently in startling ways that challenge her readers. Sometimes it feels like a cry for help ("Not Waving…"), at others her idiom can seem like lofty defiance – of men, suburbia, social roles, God, romance. Like Larkin, she often seems, in the poems, lonely and prone to near-despair (she attempted suicide once), which the grim humour deflects or tries to somehow make light of or discount. In "The Jungle Husband" (above), for example, the potentially serious theme of abandonment by a feckless 'husband' is simply turned into one big joke.

And how truly fascinating are her squiggly drawings - very reminiscent, at times, of Edward Lear, James Thurber or Spike Milligan (all of whom suffered coincidentally from depression). The childish pictures look as though they have just been dashed off, but they are cleverly full of ironies and ambiguities like the poems they illustrate. They reinforce the quirky humour of moments in the poems or provide another perspective on what is being commented on. Here, I'm merely going to offer up a selection almost at random (for there seems to be little 'progression' in her poetry or poetic technique over the years – the later poems might seem more weighted in spiritual matters). I'll start with 'earlier' and move on to 'later', later. (!)

This selection is taken somewhat at random from "**A Good Time Was Had By All**", her first collection (and *what* a collection!) dating from 1937. Eric Partridge "A Dictionary of Catch Phrases 1977" claims the phrase wasn't current at the time and that she lifted it from her parish magazine describing church outings. So the phrase apparently dates from then.

In "Papa Love Baby" she vents her contained rage at her abandonment when a child. The little girl in the picture gets no protection from the bare tree. Religion, which could also offer solace is down below. The child looks fed up and lonely; her clothes are outwardly smart, she seems to be lofty, but she has nobody around to impress or who might care for her. Yet, she doesn't seem to care, either… Is her expression sullen?

Papa Love Baby (1937)

My mother was a romantic girl
So she had to marry a man with his hair in curl
Who subsequently became my unrespected papa,
But that was a long time ago now.

What folly it is that daughters are always supposed to be
In love with papa. It wasn't the case with me
I couldn't take to him at all.
But he took to me
What a sad fate to befall
A child of three.

I sat upright in my baby carriage
And wished mama hadn't made such a foolish marriage,
I tried to hide it, but it showed in my eyes unfortunately
And a fortnight later papa ran away to sea.

He used to come home on leave
It was always the same
I could not grieve
But I think I was somewhat to blame.

The ambiguities start with the title. Is it a plea for 'Papa' *to love* his 'Baby'? The tone is grimly jokey. A romantic girl would, of course, *have* to fall for a man with a 'curl'! When we get to "But he took to me", we begin to suspect something more sinister. Did he pay the child more attention than his wife? The seriousness of the last four line is packed with a punch. The flat, unimpassioned, unrhetorical formlessness of the lines leads to "I could not grieve/ But I think I was somewhat to blame." – a terrible conclusion that seems left deliberately equivocal: are these just the feelings of the poet now, looking back, or did the very young child, even then, feel guilt and an inability to "grieve"? "I could not grieve" can be read as "I was unable to grieve" a well as "I wouldn't be able to grieve". Either way, the persona exposes her acute pain and her sense of somehow being made responsible for her father's betrayal of his family.

And, I like the dry wit of "**Progression**".

The poem's form *progresses* on the page and the word suggests a moving forward. The actual relationship, however, is laughably bathetic. Perhaps if the persona had given "a sign", things might have been different. Love has disappeared, and the news of his death evokes no feelings at all! The drawing seems to show a *male* friend paying his last respects to the "last of the Spruces" – I like the pictured gallery of ancestors! But the poem puzzles – is it just a joke, or does it mask a more personal and painful relationship. Poor Major Spruce (the

name is funny – clean and energetic) – and "the sweetest major in the force". What she had against him was that he'd "grown such a bore, such a bore". I suppose that IS pretty unforgivable…

Progression

I fell in love with Major Spruce
And never gave a sign
The sweetest major in the force
And only 39.

It *is* Major Spruce
And he's grown such a bore, such a bore,
I used to think I was in love with him
Well, I don't think so any more.

It *was* the Major Spruce.
He died. Didn't I tell you?
He was the last of the Spruces,
And about time too.

THE SONGSTER

Miss Pauncefort sang at the top of her voice
(Sing tirry-lirry-lirry down the lane)
And nobody knew what she sang
(Sing tirry-lirry-lirry all the same).

(?!?)

Some of the poems are beautifully epigrammatic:

Intimations of Immortality

Never for ever, for ever never, oh
Say not aeonial I must for ever go
Sib to eternity, to confraternity
Of Time's commensurate multiples a foe.

It takes a little bit of working out, but she seems NOT averse ("a foe") to the idea of eternity, though the plethora of negatives and the weight of the syntax falling finally on the word "foe" suggests just the opposite! I love the last line – worthy of Thomas Hardy, surely?

Infant

It was a cynical babe
Lay in its mother's arms
Born two months too soon
After many alarms
Why is its mother sad
Weeping without a friend
Where is its father – say?
He tarries in Ostend.
It was a cynical babe. Reader before you condemn, pause,
It was a cynical babe. Not without cause.

From the County Lunatic Asylum

The people say that spiritism is a joke and a swizz,
The Church that it is dangerous – not half it is.

Bag-Snatching in Dublin

Sisley
Walked so nicely
With footsteps so discreet
To see her pass
You'd never guess
She walked upon the street

Down where the Liffy waters' turgid flood
Churns up to greet the ocean-driven mud,
A bruiser in a fix
Murdered her for 6/6.

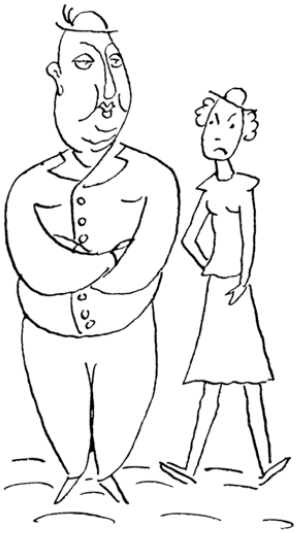
(based on the true story of a prostitute murdered in Dublin)

This Englishwoman

This Englishwoman is so refined
She has neither bosom nor behind

All Things Pass

All things pass
Love and mankind is grass.



Beware the Man

Beware the man whose mouth is small
For he'll give nothing and take all.

Quand on n'a pas ce que l'on aime, il faut aimer ce que l'on a –

Cold as no love, and wild with all negation –
Oh Death in Life, the lack of animation.

These are akin to James Thurber's cartoons and I wonder if her talents don't lie more in that direction, rather than in the more developed verse. She thought hard about her poetry and tinkered a lot before poetry readings – many of the poems changed over the years. So, let's then turn to poems where Smith tries to explore her thoughts and feelings, in a way that goes beyond just the short, bitter-tasting, ironic jokes, behind which she often seems to be hiding her deeper feelings.

Here is a serious reflection to match perhaps with John Donne's "Death be not proud" or Dylan Thomas's "And death shall have no dominion". Smith's archaisms have a jokey feel

about them, but they also point to a seriousness of phrasing, as if she wants to cast the poem as a conventional C of E 'prayer'. I'm still with the earlier volumes here and death, suicide and murder figure quite frequently, sometimes in a jokey way, sometimes more seriously, as here. She reprises this ("Come, Death (2)) for the last poem of her final published volume – see Appendix. Just like Emily Dickinson, Stevie Smith's fascination for, almost a love affair with, Death runs through all of her poetry.

Come, Death (1)

Why dost thou dally, Death, and tarry on the way?
When I have summoned thee with prayers and tears, why dost hou stay?
Come, Death, and carry now my soul away.

Wilt thou not come for calling, must I show
Force to constrain thy quick attention o my woe?
I have a hand upon thy Coat, and will
Not let thee go.

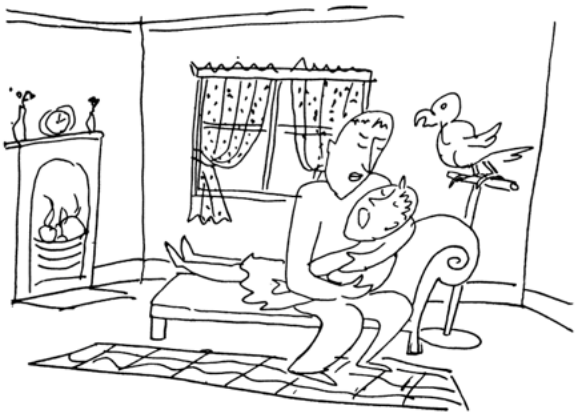
How foolish are the words of the old monks,
In Life remember Death.
Who would forget
Thou closer hangst on every finished breath?
How vain the work of Christianity
To teach humanity
Courage in its mortality.
Who would not rather die
And quiet lie
Beneath the sod
With or without a god?

Foolish illusion, what has Life to give?
Would man more fear Death than fear to live?

I find this actually quite impressive. The structure is deliberately casual but the questioning is uncomfortably serious. I suppose that the reservations I have concern more her range both of subject and expression. At times she seems somewhat strait-jacketed by her feelings of pain and early loss, failed relationships, her London suburbia background and her obsession with death. But, then, she is close to Emily Dickinson in this. Sometimes, I find she *plays* too far at being eccentric (because eccentricity can let you off the hook, somewhat).

Murder, for example? Let's have a taste of *murder*…

The Murderer



My true love breathed her latest breath
And I have closed her eyes in death.
It was a cold and windy day
In March, when my love went away.
She was not like other girls – rather diffident,
And that is how we had an accident.

The drawing alone lifts the poem alongside "Porphyria's Lover" by Robert Browning. It would be quite fun to pair the two for critical comparison – never much fun for the poor pupils, I'm afraid!

I Hate This Girl

I hate this girl.
She is so cold.
And yet her eyes say
She is not so good as gold.
I should like to kill her,
But what do I do?
Kiss her, kiss her,
And wish that she would kiss me too.

Would you agree with me, at any rate, that without the drawings a lot of the verse would lose its force? Before we move forward in time, let's look at a poem where she considers her Palmers Green suburban milieu. She lived there all her life, and, like Larkin with Hull, there seems to be a sort of love-hate tension in her feelings about her London 'suburbia' – its comfortable respectability hiding perhaps savage resentments, fears and loneliness…? In 1937 the suburbs of London were still expanding rapidly.

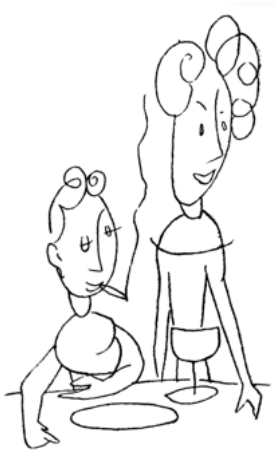
Suburb

How nice it is to slink the streets at night
And taste the slight
Flavour of acrity that comes
From pavements throwing off the dross
Of human tread.
Each paving stone sardonic
Grins to its fellow citizen masonic:
'Thank God they're gone,' each to the other cries
'Now there is nothing between us and the skies'.
Joy at this state transports the hanging heavens
And down to earth they rain celestial dew
The pavement darkly gleams beneath the lamp
Forgetful now of daylight's weary tramp.
Round about the streets I slink
Suburbs are not so bad I think
When their inhabitants can not be seen,
Even Palmers Green.
Nobody loves the hissing rain as I
And round about I slink
And presently
Turn from the sleek wet pavements to the utter slime
Where jerrybuilders building against time
Pursue their storied way,
Foundations and a pram,
Four walls and a pot of jam,
They have their sentries now
Upon a hundred hillocks.
Night watchman bad and old
Take rheumatism in exchange for gold.
Do you see that pub between the trees
Which advertises gin and cyclists' teas?
Down there I know a lane
Under the padding rain
Where leaves are born again
Every night
And reach maturity
In a remote futurity
Before dawn's light.
I have never seen
Anything quite so green
So close so dark so bright
As the green leaves at night.
I will not show you yet
Lest you should forget,
But when the time is come for your dismembering
I'll show you that you may die remembering.

Is there something rather petulant in "I will not show you yet". If she's addressing the reader, why *wouldn't* she "show"? Why withhold it, if you are bothering to write about your habitat? Is there just a hint of nastiness there, I wonder? I find the last few lines disturbing. Palmers Green clearly holds for her mystic secrets that are attractive ("the green leaves at night") but these places have a sinister side as well, a secret 'nature' that opposes the jerrybuilders and the modern amenities.

There is a wealth of surprises in all her volumes, I'm glad to report, and the poems refer widely to wide-ranging influences – operas, novels, made up ballad stories in the style of Blake or Coleridge (eg her "take" on "Little Boy Lost" for example). She is keen on Dogs, Cats and Parrots, and nothing is too absurd to avoid her scrutiny. But many poems are *so* enigmatic that they leave you puzzling over why…? What…? To take a very typical example:

La Speakerine de Putney



This heap of ashes was a learned girl;
Oh how the ashes shift to the words' smoke-curl!
Blow wind, blow, blow away the frightful form, scatter
The false girl-form and the words' mutter.

I had to look up what a 'speakerine' was – a dated term for a female radio announcer – but it didn't leave me any clearer about is going on here. Answers on a postcard, please?

Switching forward in time, through "**Mother, What is Man**?" (1942), "**Harold's Leap**" (1950), "**Not Waving but Drownng**" (1956) to "**Selected Poems**" (1962) and then the later volumes of "**The Frog Prince And Other Poems**" (1966) and "**The Scorpion And Other Poems**", I've been struck by the sheer *quantity* of poems and their sometimes bewildering terms of reference. Later volumes have some much longer poems, though I'm not at all certain that their length is justified. There is still a lot of moping about failed relationships, loneliness, the fascination with Death, still some laughs (always a bit *odd*), but the style is less epigrammatic and sometimes (but is this deliberate?) seemingly *too* erratic. I shall just copy three more that I found interesting and liked particularly:

Thoughts about the Person from Porlock (1962)

Coleridge received the Person from Porlock
And ever after called him a curse
Then why did he hurry to let him in? –
He could have hid in the house.

It was not right of Coleridge in fact it was wrong
(But often we all do wrong)
As the truth is I think he was already stuck
With Kubla Khan.

He was weeping and wailing, I am finished, finished,
I shall never write another word of it
When along comes the Person from Porlock
And takes the blame for it.

It was not right, it was wrong,
But often we all do wrong.

*

May we enquire the name of the Person from Porlock?
Why, Porson, didn't you know?
He lived at the bottom of Porlock Hill
So had a long way to go

He wasn't much in the social sense
Though his grandmother was a Warlock,
One of the Rutlandshire ones I fancy
And nothing to do with Porlock

And he lived at the bottom of the hill as I said
And had a cat named Flo,
And had a cat named Flo.

Thoughts about the Person from Porlock (cont.)

I long for the Person from Porlock
To bring my thoughts to an end,
I am becoming impatient to see him
I think of him as a friend

Often I look out of the window
Often I run to the gate
I think, He will come tomorrow
I think it is rather late.

I am hungry to be interrupted
For ever and ever amen
Oh Person from Porlock come quickly
And bring my thoughts to an end.

*

I felicitate the people who have a Person from Porlock
To break up everything and throw it away
Because then there will be nothing to keep them
And they need not stay.

*

Why do they grumble so much?
He comes like a benison
They should be glad he has not forgotten them
They might have had to go on.

*

These thoughts are depressing I know.
They are depressing,
I wish I was more cheerful, it is more pleasant,
Also it is a duty, we should smile as well as submitting
To the purpose of One Above who is experimenting
With various mixtures of human character which goes best.
All is interesting for him it is exciting, but not for us.
There I go again. Smile, smile and get some work to do
Then you will be practically unconscious without positively having to go.

The word 'faux-naïf' or here 'faux-naïve' springs to mind. Is this a serious reflection on the almost apocryphal story, that Coleridge, doped up to his eyes on laudanum, and in the middle of feverishly setting down "Kubla Khan", after his druggy dream/vision, was interrupted by someone 'from Porlock', and when he resumed writing, according to his story of what happened, the vision and inspiration had fled, leaving him to finish the poem as best he could. (and, in fact, the strength of the poem actually *depends* on the idea that "Khubla Khan"'s exotically sensual dreamscape is virtually impossible to recreate, and that the dramatic and artistic re-imagining of it is a dangerous activity ("All should cry, 'Beware, beware! Weave a circle round him thrice, For he on honey-dew hath fed and drunk the milk of paradise.'")

What is Smith getting at here? The persona at the end almost sounds as if *she* were on drugs. The tone and erratic structuring seem close to breaking down. Is this supposed to *mirror* in some way the interruption of Coleridge's writing? The persona's sprawling thoughts about how everyone *should* 'have' a Person from Porlock, it's a "benison" sound absurd on one level but make an interesting reflection on another. After all, the interruption did create the magnificent *tension* within the Coleridge poem originally. There is also a joke going on that art *needed* to be interrupted, otherwise it would have gone "on and on"! In amongst the absurd, disingenuous humour there is something arresting going on.

Phèdre (1966)

I wonder why Proust should have thought
The lines from Racine's Phèdre
Depuis que sur ces bords les dieux ont envoyé
La fille de Minos et de Pasiphaé to be
Entirely devoid of meaning,
To me they seem
As lucid as they are alarming.

I wonder why
The actresses I have seen
Playing Phèdre
Always indulge
In such mature agonizing.
Phèdre was young,
(This is as clear in Racine as Euripides)
She was young,
A girl caught in a trap, a girl
Under the enforcement
Of a goddess.
I dare say Phèdre
In fact I'm sure of it
Was by nature
As prim as Hippolytus,
Poor girl, poor girl, what could she do
But be ashamed and hang herself,
Poor girl.

How awful the French actress Marie Bell
Made her appear.
Poor Phèdre,
Not only to be shamed by her own behaviour,
Enforced by that disgusting goddess,
Ancient enemy
Of her family,
But nowadays to have to be played
By an actress like Marie Bell
In awful ancient agonizing, something painful.

How do we read *this*? It first seems impressively literary. Proust and Racine *and* Euripides are referenced, plus Marie Bell's acting of it (supposed, according to André Malraux, to be stunning). Where is the poem taking us in this casual, conversational, anti-rhetorical mode? Well, the ending looks like a joke, but it depends, to some extent, on whether the two "awfuls" actually mean 'dreadfully bad' or else 'full of awe'. Nevertheless, the poem leaves us with a typically throw-away last line. "ancient agonizing" could be seen as strong, but "painful" seems reductive. Did the audience find it (ambiguously) "painful" to watch (badly portrayed?) or "painful" to watch because it was brilliantly 'awe-ful'?

I'm actually, again, quite impressed. This is not just a one-off. Smith frequently references operas, novels, poetry across quite a dizzying range – a bit like old T.S.Eliot (who also suffered from depression - see No. 20 of February). And coolly, Smith is making her critique on the grounds that the "agonizing" is too old-fashioned. "Mature". She implies that her own response to Phèdre, who is caught up in her passion for Hyppolytus, is one of sympathy for her as a "poor girl", intimating some sort of common thread with herself, surely. The poem allows for more depth than meets the eye.

A Soldier Dear to Us

It was the War
I was a child
They came from the trenches
To our suburb mild.

Our suburb then was more a country place
They came to our house for release.

In the convalescent Army hospital
That was once a great house and landed estate
Lay Basil, wounded on the Somme,
But his pain was not now so great

That he could not be fetched in a bath-chair
Or hobble on crutches to find in our house there
My mother and aunt, his friends on leave, myself (I was twelve)
And a hearth rug to lie down in front of the fire on and rest himself.

It was a November golden and wet
As there had been little wind that year and the leaves were yet
Yellow on the great trees, on the oak trees and elms
Of our beautiful suburb, as it was then.

When Basil woke up he liked to talk and laugh
He was a sweet-tempered laughing man, he said:
'My dear, listen to this' then he read
From The Church Times, how angry the Bishop was because
Of the Reserved Sacrament in the church
Of St Alban's, Holborn.

'Now, my dear' he said, 'for a treat
Next Sunday I will take you to All Saints, Margaret Street; only
You will have to sit on the ladies' side, though you are not yet one really.'

Basil never spoke of the trenches, but I
Saw them always, saw the mud, heard the guns, saw the duckboards,
Saw the men and the horses slipping in the great mud, saw
The rain falling and never stop, saw the gaunt
Trees and the rusty frame
Of the abandoned gun carriages. Because it was the same
As the poem 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came'
I was reading at school.

Basil and Tommy and Joey Porteous who came to our house
Were too brave even to ask themselves if there was any hope
So I laughed as they laughed, as they laughed when Basil said:
What will Ronny do now (it was Ronny Knox) will he pope?

And later, when he had poped, Tommy gave me his book for a present,
'The Spiritual Aeneid' and I read of the great torment
Ronny had to decide, Which way, this or that?
But I thought Basil and Tommy and Joey Porteous were more brave than that.

Coming to our house
Were the brave ones. And I could not look at them,
For my strong feelings, except
Slantingly, from the hearth rug, look at them.

Oh Basil, Basil, you had such a merry heart
But you taught me a secret you did not perhaps mean to impart,
That one must speak lightly, and use fair names like the ladies
They used to call
The Eumenides.

Oh Basil
I was a child at school,
My school lessons coloured
My thoughts of you.

Envoi

Tommy and Joey Porteous were killed in France. Now fifty years later
Basil has died of the shots he got in the shell crater
The shrapnel has worked round at last to his merry heart, I write this
For a memorial of the soldier dear to us he was.

I find this (taken from "**Scorpion and Other Poems**" 1972 her last collection) unlike many of the poems in that it is clearly a precious memory from girlhood. The picture of her as a young 12-year old is movingly built up, again in her throw-away style. The repetitions and the details, however, of what these wounded soldiers talked of is telling – I like her unable to look at them, so she has to look "slantingly". It is as though she has let her guard down for a moment and we can sense both her shyness and her attraction towards these "brave ones", who are kind and protective of her. Particularly intriguing is the lesson she has learned. The Eumenides were goddesses of vengeance. Yet, Basil's secret for her had to do with using words "lightly". There are clues here, I think, for how we should read her poems.

To wind up, I will leave you with this beautiful self portrait and equally beautiful poem from "**Not Waving but Drowning**" 1957. According to the notes, she was careful about where she placed this 'throw-away portrait' and hoped it would be taken as a self-portrait. It suggests, I think, that her preferred way of viewing herself was as a young girl (see also above: "A Soldier Dear to Us"). She had a rotten start in life, never went to university, worked as a secretary most of her life (for George Newnes the publishers), never married, never moved from Palmers Green. But her imagination and her output were huge; her writing and pictures are always startlingly idiosyncratic, funny, painful and very sharply drawn.

I think she deserves a higher place in the pantheon.

Every Lovely Limb's a Desolation

I feel a mortal isolation
Wrap each lovely limb in desolation,
Sight, hearing, all
Suffer a fall.
I see the pretty fields and streams, I hear
Beasts calling and birds singing, oh not clear
But as a prisoner
Who in a train doth pass
And through the glass
Peer;
Ah me, so far away is joy, so near.

Break, break the glass, you say?
These thoughts are but a mood
Blow them away, go free?
They are my whole soul's food.

Ghost's food! Sepulchral ailment!
Thou sleekst in me Death's tegument
And so art bent
To do, and this I know.

Yet there are days, oh brief,
When thought's caught half-asleep
(Most merrily) and drowsing
Set in a meadow browsing.

Ah then, like summer breeze in lovely trees
That comes in little pants unequally,
Or like the little waves of summer seas
That push and fuss
In heaven knows what sort of busyness,

Idly, idly, my thoughts bring me to sleep,
On sunny summer day, to sleep. In sun
I fall asleep.

But I must wake and wake again in pain
Crying – to see where sun was once all dust and stain
As on a window pane –

All, all is isolation
And every lovely limb's a desolation.

Tennyson's "Tears, Idle Tears" seems to be referenced here, and there is a beautiful blend of pain and happiness.". I love her verb "sleekst" lined up with "tegument" (a sort of membrane or epidermis) that seems so sharply particularised. The emotion is controlled carefully, however, and never spills over into sentimentality. There is nostalgia for the past and for the sensuality sparked off by nature, but the poem delivers its cry of pain in a restrained and balanced way. Taken with the portrait of the girl, who here looks "slantingly" aside and seems to be yearning for LIFE, the poem movingly doesn't for once end with acerbic humour or comic bathos. I love it

APPENDIX

First Swimming Lesson (1995)

Across the dingy paving slabs from the pool
Side, we watched our three lined up
And eager, as Mrs Bennet,
Elderly, calm and chain-smoking
In her navy tracksuit, led the
Class through their splashing efforts.

Once we saw a little hand raised
(He was too small to peer over the edge)
In greeting to us -
Not drowning but waving.

Come, Death (2)

I feel ill. What can the matter be?
I'd ask God to have pity on me,
But I turn to the one I know, and say:
Come, Death, and carry me away.

Ah me, sweet Death, you are the only god
Who comes as a servant when he is called, you know,
Listen then to this sound I make, it is sharp,
Come Death. Do not be slow.

Not Waving but Drowning

Nobody heard him, the dead man,
But still he lay moaning:
I was much further out than you thought
And not waving but drowning.

Poor chap, he always loved larking
And now he's dead
It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,
They said.

Oh, no no no, it was too cold always
(Still the dead one lay moaning)
I was much too far out all my life
And not waving but drowning.

(N.B.The picture shows a *girl*, rather than a man)