Stevie Smith: Between the Lines. By Romana Huk. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 331 pp. $69.95 cloth.

Anyone doing research on *Stevie Smith* will have to read Romana Huk's new book. They will want to leave lots of time to digest dense, thoroughly researched, intelligent close readings of Smith's poetry and prose. Huk's thorough-going understanding of prosody, which manifests itself in her analyses of Smith's fiction as well as verse, distinguishes her book from every other piece of criticism published on Smith. Huk is what she calls "homophonically-minded," and this inclination allows her to hear intensities of meaning in Smith's compressed designs that have gone unexplored in previous studies. There are any number of brilliant explications I could quote to convey the offerings of Huk's text, but I'll settle for one that appears in the longest chapter on the second two novels of Smith's fictional "trilogy." Huk cites from the first page of *Over the Frontier* the seemingly throw-away story Pompey, Smith's narrator, retells about a man who "got funny in his head with drinking a lot of Schnaps," began stroking a classical plasteret of Venus, and was pushed by a man in uniform "down that flight of stairs where at bottom he fell victim to a horrible whore" (Smith 9-10). Huk points out that the last words in this story appear in Smith's earlier *Novel on Yellow Paper* and that in that context, Pompey "seemed to enjoy . . . the surprising phonetic symmetry between accusation ('horrible') and accused ('whore'). Here at the start of *Frontier*, the same symmetry obtains between 'high' and 'low'" (146). Huk then cleverly draws out the implications of this high-low symmetry for Smith's treatment of London's arts and political cultures, concluding with mention of "the prostituted dealings of government figures like the aptly-named Sir Samuel 'Hoare'" (146). Earlier Huk had glossed Sir Samuel Hoare's part in the Abyssinian crisis and his subsequent resignation for "behind the scenes improprieties" (134), so we are prepared for the play on his name that greets us in the discussion of *Frontier's* opening pages. This is great close reading, though perhaps not the "expansive 'close-cultural' reading" (9) that Huk intends.

The book's lack of committed cultural study is problematic because Huk claims to be the first to attempt to situate Smith in her cultural contexts. In fact, there are several studies that do just that, although they go unmentioned by Huk: Karen Schneider's *Loving Arms* (1997), and especially Phyllis Lassner's *British Women Writers of World War II* (1998) and Janet Montefiore's *Men and Women Writers of the Thirties* (1996). Huk would probably be as unforgiving of these as she is of other feminist studies, which in her opinion do Smith a gross injustice by focusing on the gendered meanings of her work instead of striving for the total scope of cultural reference to which Huk aspires. One wonders why Huk's concern with cultural context does not prompt her to situate this body of criticism in *its* historical frame of late 1980s and 1990s feminism. (Huk's abject disavowals of her own important early work on Smith are certainly the most bizarre of the repeated attacks on feminist criticism found throughout this book).

Huk states that her goal is to foreground "the incongruence of discourses in [Smith's] work" to show how Smith "engages in the most potent political critique a writer can conduct: the exposition of covert ideologies struggling for dominance through language, and her own subjection to their influences despite her many strategies of resistance" (4). This is an admirable theoretical aim, but it is only partially achieved because it is undermined by the author's rhetorical style. While Huk provides convincing arguments that Smith's work "is much less a 'telling about herself' than it is a 'telling about telling', or the problems of narrating in words (and thus, we infer, forming in thought) a self" (34), Smith has not been able to teach Huk to be happy with the necessity of incompletion, partial knowledge, silence, and stuttering. Huk's conviction that it is possible (and therefore desirable) to fill in all the textual-cultural gaps of Smith's texts, translates into a thinly veiled aspiration toward totalizing mastery over Smith's oeuvre and indirectly, Smith herself. The traces of this overriding fantasy of capturing plentitude and excess are evident throughout, but a few examples from the last chapter will be sufficient to illustrate my point.

Discussing a passage from *The Holiday* that Hugh Whitemore made famous in his play *Stevie*, Huk chastises earlier interpreters for suggesting that Smith is alluding to herself in any way, and insists that unless they see things her way, “no access to her poems’ real ‘subject’ will be gained” (220). No access? None at all? That’s a startlingly confident assertion that turns literary analysis into a high-stakes game of total revelation or total failure. It is especially interesting that the inverted commas in this sentence appear around the word “subject,” while the qualifier “real” goes unmarked. This insistence on access to a “real” subject of Smith’s writing sits ill with the argument Huk is making at this point of her study. She is trying to show how Smith foregrounds through her characters’ speeches inherent linguistic failures, inadequacies, and “inarticulacy.” In other words, she’s pointing out how clever Smith is to articulate the paradoxical condition of trying to speak the truth about the ever-impossible ambition of speaking the Truth or knowing the Real. Seemingly unaware of the contradiction between her theoretical point and her rhetorical effect, Huk continues: “And until we read all the lines, as well as between them, to understand that a specific situation . . . gives rise in her poems to the sense of being at a loss for words . . . we will not be able to fully read the complex ‘not waving but drowning’ that happens in her often facetious-seeming poems” (220, emphasis in original). This sentence shows Huk’s faith that a perfectly educated reader actually can read all Smith’s lines, suggesting they will thus capture every allusion and nuance and reference and meaning vibrating between them. Those readers who can encompass (control, master, better) the proliferating meanings of the text and its intertexts and contexts will have access to a “full” reading of the facetious-seeming poems. They will produce “the kind of reading that will do full justice to Smith’s work” (7). Those who offer a reading of parts of texts or who read only part of Smith’s oeuvre (say, a novel or selection of poems) have failed.

By the end of the book, we don’t have to read between the lines to feel the burden of Huk’s “comprehensive” approach to Smith’s writing. Huk reads Smith’s mature poems “with the *whole* of her cultural project in view” (238, emphasis in original); later we’re delivered into “Smith’s real meaning for the poem” (238); a few pages later we are confronted with a chastening lecture on other scholars’ failures to correctly read “Mrs. Simpkins”: “the whole will be lost” without consideration of “all the other competing languages that the piece harbours” (242). Yet books must end and even Huk finds herself in the position of having to entrust the work of her author with other interpreters: “But having discussed how poems in Smith’s earlier collections depend on such accompanying works [the other poems in the collections] to give them all their full polyphony and contextualized reference, I will leave most of the poems mentioned above to my readers to 're-read'" (285). Though Huk, like any poststructuralist worth her salt, knows very well that she is fated to "(forever only 'partial') explication" of Smith's texts (19), she still seems to believe that if the rest of us are given proper coaching, we'll be able to complete her project.

These are representative examples of what I see as a defining worry propelling Huk's book to its uneasy end. Anxiously contemplating her final chapter's discussion of Smith's poems, Huk remarks, "Her [Smith's] collections require reading as a whole, which will make addressing each one here in this chapter exceedingly difficult if I wish to do them anything like proper justice" (233). Isn't one of the benefits of reading in a poststructuralist age exemption from the belief that one can "read as a whole" or do "proper" (final, absolute) justice to the text through language? Alas, the effect on the reader and possibly the author, of such striving for a literary justice constructed as unique, all encompassing, and binding, is itself exceeding difficulty. One wonders if Huk had much fun writing the book. It certainly is more work than fun to read, which is saying something given that Smith was one of the twentieth century's funniest writers. Perhaps the most significant lapse deriving from Huk's self-appointed role as arbiter of "proper" readings of Smith is her inability to convey how Smith's proto-postmodern, poststructuralist prose and poetry is funny. Huk underestimates the ways Smith's performances of her poetry won her readers through inevitably minute, partial deliveries of her collections, and thus fails the popular readers and cultures that supported Smith all along. It's not clear to me that wholeness is worth the effort if it is bought at the price of laughter.

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