

## Stevie Smith: Not Waving but Drowning

*The voice that speaks to us in the poem is not necessarily the voice of the poet. It is not the voice of the commentator, either. Yet we all have voices within us that we need to recognize as a part – part – of who we are. Poets remind us of the multiple voices within that complexity that is the self. “Homo sum,” said Terence, “humani nihil a me alienum puto.” ‘I am human, and nothing human can be alien to me.’*

### Not Waving but Drowning

#### Stevie Smith

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.

There are times when a poem speaks to us so powerfully, so directly (or it seems that way) that we cling to it as if we are a boat linked by its anchor to the bottom below the sea: grounded. Such poems are a recognition that this is the way life *is*.

So it has been, for me, with this poem by Stevie Smith. It says something about what sometimes goes on in the lives of people around us. It has a power that is almost unmatched. That power comes in large measure from the title, which

is the fourth line, which is the final line of the poem. Each time the line recurs, “not waving but drowning,” it is deeper, more resonant, more profound.

Let’s start with Stevie Smith. Despite the seeming gender-linkedness of her name, Stevie Smith was a woman. She acquired the ‘Stevie’ when she was young, a nickname. Her route into poetry was unusual, a secretary who wrote verse and published it. Her lines are simple and not ornate (although that puts her in a line of significant poets, from Wordsworth through William Carlos Williams, to Philip Larkin and late Pablo Neruda, all of whom I have written about in these letters.) She lived in that most unpoetic of places, the suburbs. This poem before us was written in 1957.

What we are considering is in fact her most famous poem, and justly so. The title is interesting, but little more. We encounter it in the first stanza. (The poem is comprised of three stanzas, all quatrains, rhyming ABCB. It is worth noting, and I shall return to this in this letter, that in the first and third stanzas the speaker speaks in the first person – “I” – while in the second stanza the speaker speaks in the third person plural –“they.” )

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

The first line is unexceptional: of course no one heard him, for the man is dead. But in the second line, we discover, counter to what we think we know about the dead, that he is making sounds: moaning. The dead, the poem insists, can speak to us if we will but listen. In this case, the drowned man tells us that he was far from shore, far from whatever groundedness we think we have in our lives. And as he waved his arms, he was not waving as a greeting but as a sign of his helplessness. Mortality was encroaching upon him. He was in distress and wanted aid. “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.

Then comes a radical shift of voice. The second stanza is the view from ‘outside,’ the spectator’s view. All-too-knowledgeable, a bit dismissive, it ends

with a two-syllable line, “They said.” What was it that they said? He loved to joke (“larking”) so his waving arms must have been the silly game of the “poor chap” who was out in the water and pretending at being in trouble. They said, if he drowned, medicine would be certain to reveal that he had a heart attack since the water was cold and his heart could not stand it. The scientific view. The normalized view, which is that death came upon him as it so often comes, as the result of physical frailty. (Notice the verb form, the “must have been” of insistence regardless of actuality. Not of facts, but of intellectual will – and denial?)

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.

“Oh, no non no” is the astonishing rejoinder of the dead man who is, here, moaning as a response to what “they said.” It is a truly remarkable series of three unpunctuated single syllables of denial, “no no no:” as emphatic a denial as language is capable of. At first the “no” refers to the cold. Not just cold in this instance, but it was “too cold always.” Life is inhospitable, and we are, as the words of Conrad’s *Lord Jim* tell us, “In the destructive element immerse.” The water is always, was always, too cold. He has always been freezing to death.

The penultimate line poignantly bangs home this theme. “I was much too far out all my life.” In my last letter I cited Emily Dickinson, who wrote of inner devastation, “How often foundering at Sea/ Ostensibly, on Land.” We drown even as we seem to be on sure ground. Stevie Smith goes farther: The drowned man was always drowning, always too far from land, always cold when warmth would give him life and comfort.

(Let me confess to a great leap I am about to make here. This poem is about a person, a drowned man. I re-encountered, re-read, the poem because I was thinking about the predicament of a friend, a particular friend, who is facing very great difficulties. But there is a strange thing about poems, and perhaps about life. We begin with the particular – one person – and expand to ‘some people’ and expand more to ‘many people’ and then expand to the general, to ‘people’ or ‘all people.’ I will do that with this poem, which is about a particular drowned man, for in reading my analysis will expand to reading the poem as Stevie Smith’s evocation of the human condition. From one instance to the situation of all men and women. A leap, and I shall make it through the rest of this essay. Maybe the

leap is unjustified? Maybe the poem is merely about one particular person? Maybe I am wrong to leap to the general? You decide....)

This morning my friend Fred pulled his car out of a parking spot so I would not have to step into a puddle. "After all," he said, "you can't walk on water." True. But it made me realize that this poem contrasts human mortality with Christ, for after all He could walk on water. Us? We drown. We do not walk on water.

"And not waving but drowning." This is the third iteration of the line, which we first encountered in the title. By now it is hammered home: this is what the dead would tell us if they could speak, if we could decipher the murmuring still coming from their dead slips. We, like the dead man, are always in perilous danger of sinking beneath the waters, always imperiled by the inhospitable cold.

Life is not what we think it. Not only is there no transcendence, there is not even immanence. Always, the danger of drowning, always the cry for help. And we? No one listens, and if they do, they think we are playing around, "larking," or that crying for help is a one-time event with proximate causes.

There is an old, old joke about life: no one gets out alive. For Stevie Smith, even living is drowning. All our actions, all our gestures, all our speaking, are cries for help. But, like the spectators in the second stanza, we do not recognize this. All we want is love, as the Beatles sang so eloquently: "All you need is love." Well, Stevie Smith goes farther. She is with Gerard Manley Hopkins, although he wrote about a moment of despair, and for her the despair is ubiquitous and as long and deep as life: "My cries heave, herds-long; huddle in a main, a chief/ Woe." We need love, and help, and salvation. Everywhere and always. Everything we do and say is a cry for help.

Every one of our gestures, all our speech, all our actions, are pretentions. They are not what we think they are. It all comes down to this: everything we do is a cry for help. We are not waving, but drowning. All of life, according to this larger view of Stevie Smith, is series of actions in which we call out to stave off the sense that everything is too much for us, that we are sinking, that our very existence will 'go under' and we will perish.

This is very, very sad. Yet we discover again and again about our friends, and sometimes realize about our own selves, the possibility that here is the great truth of existence: we are in peril at every moment, and this peril rules all that we do. To those who would cry out, 'That is not true,' Stevie Smith replies like the dead man, "O, no no no." "It was too cold always."

All we say and do is a cry for help, because we are not waving but drowning.