

Female Authorship in Modern Fiction: Stevie Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936) and the History of Fictional Women Writers

INGO BERENSMEYER

Abstract: Female Authorship in Modern Fiction: Stevie Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936) and the History of Fictional Women Writers" reads Stevie Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper* in the context of modernist literary authorship and against the historical background of scenarios of female authorship in British fiction. It focuses on strategies of women's writing as embodied in Smith's protagonist, Pompey Casmilus. In a period in which the category of "woman writer" was firmly associated with middlebrow sentimentality, Smith explores formal and material constraints on women as authors of fiction. In its diagnosis of the publishing world, the segregation of readerly tastes, and the constraints of established generic forms, *Novel on Yellow Paper* confronts the modern(ist) predicament of female authorship in novel ways.¹

Contributor biography: Ingo Berensmeyer is Professor of Modern English Literature at the University of Munich (LMU). He is currently working on a short media history of literature from prehistory to the present, a book on literary representations of authorship since the eighteenth century, and a database and quantitative study of British women writers active between 1945 and 1960.

Stevie Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936), her first foray into narrative fiction, has always had its admirers but never enjoyed the kind of canonical standing that is usually accorded to her poetry. As a lyric poet, Smith has been frequently anthologised; the title of her 1957 poem "Not Waving but Drowning" even attained proverbial status. If her poetry has eclipsed her novels—which also include *Over the Frontier* (1938) and *The Holiday* (1949)—these are nonetheless worthy of more sustained attention. In this article, I read *Novel on Yellow Paper* as an intervention in the tradition of the female *bildungsroman*, more specifically of novels by women writers whose protagonists are women writers, and I situate the

Copyright Ingo Berensmeyer. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

¹ Acknowledgements: Research for this article was supported by a grant from the German Research Foundation (DFG). I would like to thank Dorothee Birke for Elizabeth Justice, Koenraad Claes for Fiona Macleod, Tobias Gabel for P. G. Wodehouse, Gero Gutzzeit for Agatha Christie, and Richard Jaggard for *The Hand of Ethelberta*. For their helpful comments, I am grateful to Authorship's anonymous readers.

Novel in the material and institutional contexts of British interwar literature, rather than reading it as merely another “experimental” novel of the 1930s that plays with language. Smith creates an impressive character in the fictional woman writer Pompey Casmilus, a figure that is even more impressive if read not only in its own moment but in the broader historical context of women writers as characters since the eighteenth century.² Furthermore, she intervenes in the contemporary debate about the industrialisation and mechanisation of literature—and I argue that it is important that she does so as a woman writer carving out a niche for herself in the embattled literary field between “highbrow” and “middlebrow” authorship.³

Female authorship used to be the exception to a norm defined as masculine.⁴ This marginal position makes it useful for questioning the centre from the periphery and for deconstructing the hierarchy of values implied in this confrontation. This article is intended as a contribution to a history of literary authorship ranging from the eighteenth-century expansion of print culture, via the genre of the nineteenth-century *bildungsroman*, to modernist questionings of the value of female authorship in the “battle of the brows” and the increasingly industrialised world of modern publishing. Stevie Smith’s *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936) takes its readers into a pitched battle against literary conventions and a long tradition of gender inequality in literary authorship. In order to understand the place of this novel in the history of female literary authorship, it is necessary first to survey this tradition at some length (in part one of this article) before applying it to a reading of Smith’s novel (in part two).⁵

I

The “fictional women writers” in the title of this article do not refer to pseudonyms. It is to be noted, however, that when not publishing under their own name, women tend to choose male or gender-neutral pseudonyms (“George Eliot”, “Currer Bell”, “Lucas Malet”), whereas men almost always opt for a male pseudonym.⁶ Male authors with female pseudonyms are very rare indeed. Exceptions are Thomas Sedgewick Whalley, who in 1781 published his moralistic poem, *The Fatal Kiss*, as written by “A Beautiful but Unfortunate Young Lady”; the “obscure nautical novelist Alexander Christie (1841–95) who wrote as ‘Lindsay

² For a reading of *Novel on Yellow Paper* in the context of experimental modernism, see Wheeler, *Modernist*, 141–61; for a critical perspective on strategies of “authorial self-construction” and “tactics of concealment” in the *Novel* and its early reception, see May, *Stevie Smith*, 7, 115–117, who also points out that at least one early reader assumed the *Novel*’s real author to be Virginia Woolf (117). Comprehensive accounts of Smith’s work include Civello, *Patterns of Ambivalence*; Severin, *Stevie Smith’s Resistant Antics*; Huk, *Stevie Smith*; and Walsh, “Stevie Smith”.

³ On the “battle of the brows”, see Humble, *Feminine Middlebrow*; Brown and Grover, *Middlebrow*; Ehland and Wächter, *Middlebrow*.

⁴ See Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman*.

⁵ Readers who know this tradition well are encouraged to skip to part two.

⁶ On Victorian pseudonyms, see Jung, “Critical Names Matter”. Use of initials as in “J. K. Rowling” is a similar strategy to make an author’s name ambiguous with regard to gender.

Anderson”;⁷ and the Scottish writer William Sharp (1855–1905), who also published under the pseudonym Fiona Macleod. The name “Stevie Smith”, itself a pseudonym of Florence Margaret (“Peggy”) Smith (1902–1971), is at least as ambiguous as “George Eliot” and has confused many readers about her gender.⁸

While there is certainly something of a masculine tradition of authorial self-reflection in the novel, often with an autobiographical background, the case of a woman writer reinventing her own position in literary discourse is as rare, almost, as a male writer inventing a female one. The classic examples of authors as characters can be found in the Victorian literary *bildungsroman*, most famously in Dickens’s *David Copperfield* and Thackeray’s *Pendennis* (both 1848–50), written in the wake of earlier examples such as Bulwer-Lytton’s *Ernest Maltravers* (1837). Thackeray’s satirical take on London’s literary bohemians in *Pendennis* inspired many later writers (and inspired them to become writers themselves). In George Gissing’s *New Grub Street* (1891), next to the two main writer characters Edwin Reardon and Jasper Milvain, there is Marian Yule, the daughter of a literary critic who does research—and also more than a bit of writing—for her father, but she is not in a position to follow any literary ambitions of her own.

The relative absence of women writers from these representations of literary life certainly has historical causes. But it is still difficult to understand why, although there were many women writers in the nineteenth century,⁹ there were so few fictional women writers in their novels and stories. The question why women writers refrained from imagining themselves or their peers as authors in fiction does not have a simple answer. When they come close to doing so, as in Charlotte Lennox’s *The Female Quixote* (1752), it seems as if they avoided the topic as soon as possible: Arabella, the protagonist of that novel, is cured of her vivid literary imagination at the end and chooses marriage instead of authorship. A notable exception is Margaret Cavendish, whose *The Blazing World* (1666) includes a fictional version of the author; another is Elizabeth Justice’s autobiographical novel *Amelia, or the Distress’d Wife* (1751). As Dorothee Birke points out, Justice’s novel is ambivalent about female authorship, wavering between assertions of a woman’s “enterprising spirit and assertiveness” on the one hand and “protestations ... of Amelia’s reluctance to expose herself to the public eye”.¹⁰ In France, one can point to Félicité de Genlis’s *La femme auteur* of 1802.

An English Victorian novel about a woman writer is *The Young Authoress* by Rose Ellen Hendriks, published in 1847. This novel, published in the same year as Charlotte Brontë’s immensely more famous *Jane Eyre*, traces the life of its heroine,

⁷ Behrendt, “Romantics and Media”, 10; Sutherland, *Victorian Fiction*, 168. In one episode of the classic BBC sitcom *Blackadder* (“Ink and Incapability”, 1987) the butler Edmund hopes to publish his autobiographical novel under the female pseudonym “Gertrude Perkins” to sell more copies, assuming that all women authors of his time are in fact men in disguise, with the exception of James Boswell, whom he takes to be the only living female writer in England.

⁸ See May, *Stevie Smith*, 115–117.

⁹ In a sample of 878 Victorian novelists, 312 are women (Sutherland, *Victorian Fiction*, 168).

¹⁰ Birke, “*Amelia*”.

Rosalie de Rochequillon, from orphaned girl to literary genius, apparently with more than a few autobiographical touches. Most interestingly, this novel includes a direct reference to its empirical author, as Rosalie “seemed always in a wild, fluttering ecstasy of literary hopes and fears—always talking of Dickens, or Bulwer, or Rose Ellen Hendriks”.¹¹ Hendriks’s overt self-advertisement is in stark contrast with the Victorian stereotype of feminine modesty and reticence, but the metafictional transgression of the boundaries of decorum to some extent anticipates Smith’s—or her writer-protagonist Pompey’s—authorial self-consciousness in the *Novel on Yellow Paper*.

The female literary *bildungsroman* and *künstlerroman* of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries not only focuses on the heroine’s development and self-assertion as an artist, but also needs to contend with patriarchal stereotypes of femininity,¹² not least with the question whether a literary career can be reconciled with the duties of marriage. At the end of *The Young Authoress*, Rosalie gets married, and the narrator comments:

She began her career as a genius, and found that, after all, she was but a woman.... [S]he began, as many a creature of genius does, relying upon the strength and reputation of her own talents, and ended by the wisest of all reparation for her mistake—namely, acknowledging that man has the superior power of guiding the talents of youth, and that none will do so, as willingly, gently, and efficaciously as he to whom she pledges her faith.¹³

Rosalie feels that there is a contrast between being an artist and being a woman, but this will not make her give up writing as a married woman. Having to choose between love and fame is a constant struggle in these narratives, as Barrett Browning’s verse novel *Aurora Leigh* (1856) testifies. In a key passage in book five, the eponymous writer-protagonist explains to her cousin Romney that “fame” and “love” are not coterminous, and that “the love of all / ... / Is but a small thing to the love of one”:

You bid a hungry child be satisfied
With a heritage of many corn-fields; nay,
He says he’s hungry, -- he would rather have
That little barley-cake you keep from him
While reckoning up his harvests. So with us;
(Here, Romney, too, we fail to generalise!)
We’re hungry.¹⁴

¹¹ Hendriks, *Young Authoress*, 3: 207.

¹² Lazzaro-Weis, “Female Bildungsroman”; Maier, “Portraits of the Girl-Child”.

¹³ Hendriks, *Young Authoress*, 3: 291.

¹⁴ Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, 150–51 (bk. 5, ll. 478–80, 481–87).

As Richard Salmon explains, the classical notion of fame as a medium of bourgeois recognition is here replaced by the suspicion that the pursuit of fame may be no more than the symptom of an emptiness inside: “hunger”.¹⁵ For women, the desire for both personal and professional fulfilment is often presented as bound to be frustrated. For men, apparently, the autobiographical representation of their own situation of writing or the depiction of their difficulties in finding a foothold in the literary scene are acceptable literary subjects: they can celebrate the (male) author as a hero overcoming difficulties, even if he sometimes behaves in a less than heroic manner. By contrast, the “masculine vocation plot”¹⁶ remains largely inaccessible to women. Even in novels by women, the possibility that a woman writer could be the heroine of a story appears to be almost unthinkable in the nineteenth century. For a long time, the profession of authorship is associated with shame for women, not only because of the gender ideology of separate spheres but also because of a dominant prejudice against women’s “literary fecundity”,¹⁷ their overproduction of what is seen as low-quality popular trash. Hawthorne’s invective against the “d—d mob of scribbling women”¹⁸ of 1855 is merely the tip of the iceberg.

For example, Thackeray, in his satirical sketch “The Fashionable Authoress” (1841), mocks the boundless creativity of the fictional woman writer Lady Fanny Flummery, explaining that women “possess[] vastly greater capabilities” of writing than men: “while a man is painfully labouring over a letter of two sides, a lady will produce a dozen pages, crossed, dashed, and so beautifully neat and close, as to be well-nigh invisible”.¹⁹ Like the mythical horse Pegasus, her writing “runs so fast that it often leaves all sense behind it; and there it goes on, on, scribble, scribble, scribble, never flagging until it arrives at that fair winning-post on which is written ‘Finis’, or ‘The End’; and shows that the course, whether it be of novel, annual, poem, or what not, is complete” (ibid). What is more, Thackeray denies the existence of the word “authoress”: “*Auctor*, madam, is the word” (p. 305). He even envisages a “Golden Age” (p. 311) when there will be no more “writeresses” (p. 306): “No more fiddle-faddle novels! no more namby-pamby poetry! no more fribble ‘Blossoms of Loveliness!’” (p. 311)

Perhaps the century between 1850 and 1950 really was such a “golden age” for male novelists, who gained in reputation as they “edged out” women from the literary profession after the novel had become more acceptable as a literary form for men.²⁰ A much-noted recent quantitative study supports this hypothesis: it shows a general decline in female fiction-writing in proportion to male authors

¹⁵ Salmon, *Formation*, 182–83.

¹⁶ Salmon, *Formation*, 188.

¹⁷ Thackeray, “Fashionable Authoress”, 304.

¹⁸ Hawthorne, *Centenary Edition*, 17: 304.

¹⁹ Thackeray, “Fashionable Authoress”, 304. Subsequent references are given parenthetically in the text.

²⁰ See Tuchman and Fortin, *Edging Women Out*.

between 1850 and c. 1970, when this trend is dramatically reversed.²¹ There may be many plausible explanations for the relative paucity of fictional women writers in Victorian and Edwardian fiction compared to the great number of real women writers during these periods. There are many stories about female characters, but few to none about female characters who write stories or novels. Supposedly feminine values such as modesty and self-sacrifice may have inhibited such navel-gazing tendencies, or there may have been a general lack of interest in such sociological questions, or a sense that stories about struggling women writers would not sell. If that latter point required proof, one only needed to turn to the commercial as well as critical failure of Thomas Hardy's *The Hand of Ethelberta* (1876).

It should not come as a big surprise, then, that there are not many fictional women writers in British modernist fiction, either. There is the rather positive example of Agatha Christie's Ariadne Oliver, a writer of detective novels who resembles her author in many details (as Christie invented the Belgian detective Hercule Poirot, her fictional alter ego invents a Finnish detective called Sven Hjerson). She makes her first appearance in the story "Parker Pyne Investigates" (1932) and subsequently features in a number of Poirot novels between 1936 and 1972. A far less sympathetic picture of a woman crime writer emerges in *The Little Nugget* (1913) by P. G. Wodehouse. Nesta Ford, who reappears in *Piccadilly Jim* of 1917, is there described as "familiar to all lovers of sensational fiction", as someone who writes "voluminously" and who has "a strong literary virus in [her] system".²² Her ambition to be a "Well-Known Society Leader and Authoress" (p. 18) is a cause of much pain to her husband, as is her running a literary salon. The pathological metaphor of the "virus", the emphasis on quantity, and the focus on her husband's suffering make this a classic example of humour at the expense of a (fictional) woman writer. Another woman writer, later in the same novel, is briefly introduced as "Lora Delane Porter, the feminist writer" (p. 146) – probably not a term of endearment in this context. Moreover, women and writing are further associated in this novel, as they are in E. F. Benson's *Secret Lives* (discussed briefly below), with the typewriter and an office setting: Mr Pett, Nesta's husband, does not object against the activity of writing as such. He hears "the tapping of a typewriter" (p. 10); not his wife at work, it turns out, but his niece Ann Chester "copying out a story" for her (p. 11). To this he responds with "benevolent approval. He loved to hear the sound of a typewriter: it made home so like the office" (p. 10). When a man's home is invaded by a literary salon, in other words, he still has an office in which to feel at home. The same possibility of escape is not afforded to women in the novel; in fact, the home library is clearly marked as a male haunt, as having "that peculiar quality which belongs as a rule to the dens of men" (p. 10).

²¹ Underwood et al., "Transformation of Gender".

²² Wodehouse, *Piccadilly Jim*, 5. Subsequent references are given parenthetically in the text.

Novels in which such characters are taken more seriously are few and far between. In the first half of the twentieth century, there are a few obvious candidates among female artist novels, but there are few women writers among these, or their writing is not essential for the narrative. For example, the events of Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* (1915–1938) end in 1915, when Richardson published the first instalment of the sequence; she does not pursue her protagonist Miriam Henderson's role as a writer beyond this point. This is in keeping with the tradition of the female bildungsroman, as inaugurated by *Jane Eyre* (1847): we are told, in Jane's own words, about her own life up until ten years after her marriage to Rochester – in the famous words “Reader, I married him”.²³ Jane has grown into a woman writer in order to tell her own life story, but she does not disclose whether she has any further literary ambitions. Virginia Woolf's famous manifesto *A Room of One's Own* (1929) raises awareness for the special plight of women writers but it does not have an immediate impact on the under-representation of female authorship in literary fiction, even by women. (Stevie Smith, by the way, is known to have been an avid reader of both Richardson and Woolf.)²⁴

Even in novels and stories written in the first fifteen to twenty years after the Second World War, one finds only a handful of women writers as characters. In the period that saw the rise of the “angry young men” as a new literary movement, celebrating aggressive masculinity as a form of social renewal and anti-establishment revolt (most fully embodied in the character of Jimmy Porter in John Osborne's 1956 play *Look Back in Anger*), there are few women writers in fiction before Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962).

In this context, the gendering of fiction has an impact on categorisation as “serious” or “sentimental”, separating fiction that aspires to the status of art—written by and for men – from fiction that is mere entertainment—written by and for women. In this period, in the words of Mark McGurl, “‘woman writer’ was precisely the category against which modernist authorship had originally defined itself”; it was a category that embodied “middlebrow sentimentality”.²⁵ If Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* can be read as a document of women's hard-won liberation (also as authors) in the early 1960s, Stevie Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936) is a literary record of their struggle against such conventions and categorisations during the interwar years.

II

Many women associated with the literary world during the later modernist period held jobs in the publishing business, mostly as office workers, typists or secretaries. As Lawrence Rainey points out, in the early twentieth century the

²³ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 474.

²⁴ Severin, *Stevie Smith*, 25.

²⁵ McGurl, *Program Era*, 59; see also Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man's Land*.

word “typewriter” could denote both the machine and its (usually female) operator.²⁶ At the time, Stevie Smith worked as private secretary to Sir Neville Pearson with Newnes Publishing Company, a large firm that produced newspapers and magazines like *The Strand* (1891–1950) and the *Lady’s Companion* (1892–1940). This situation is the background to her first novel and its narrator, young Pompey Casmilus, who works as a secretary for a publisher called Sir Phoebus Ullwater. The novel is written—typed—on yellow paper because, as Pompey tells the reader, she sometimes types in the office and does not want to confuse parts of her novel with the letters she has to type and post for Sir Phoebus, which are typed on blue paper.²⁷

Novel on Yellow Paper (1936) is a subversive variation on the genre of the *künstlerroman*, as embodied by works such as Knut Hamsun’s *Hunger* (*Sult*, 1890), Rainer Maria Rilke’s *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910) and James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). In the later modernist period, it is contemporaneous with George Orwell’s *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936), which traces the attempts of out-at-elbow “middle-middle-class” writer Gordon Comstock to enter the literary world, and it follows on the heels of E. F. Benson’s *Secret Lives* (1932), which depicts a woman writer who makes the transition from working as a secretary in an office to writing novels. Both *Secret Lives* and *Novel on Yellow Paper* set creative writing in juxtaposition to the material and technological environment of offices and their mechanical routines. In Benson’s satirical take on female authorship, however, the writer can only create when she is subjected to a noisy environment, because that is what she is used to from her previous office work. In her case, writing is all about quantity rather than quality,²⁸ similar to the stereotype of the “lady novelist” so viciously caricatured by Thackeray and still very prevalent as a synonym for bad writing in the 1930s. This is attested (to give only one example) by W. H. Auden complaining about a changed book title making his poetry sound “like work of a vegetarian lady novelist”.²⁹ For Smith’s protagonist, like Benson’s, the office is an institutional space conducive to creative writing: typing on yellow paper is an enabling condition of literary expression. It is the symbiosis of writer and machine that allows Pompey to structure her digressive, exploratory narrative into the form of a novel.

As many critics have noted, the modernist period was a time when mechanisation entered the sphere of literary creativity, and many writers deplored

²⁶ Rainey, “Pretty Typewriters”.

²⁷ Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper*, 6. Whereas “Phoebus” clearly designates Apollo, God of knowledge, oracles and the arts (and is thus an apt if certainly ironic name for a newspaper owner), the potentially “pompous” implications of “Pompey” are less unambiguously tied to Roman origins; in the 1930s, Pompey would also have been known as the nickname for Portsmouth and the name of a famous American racehorse, among other possible associations. “Casmilus” was the name of one of the Cabeiri, ancient Greek deities associated with fertility (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Cabeiri#ref195535>, accessed 22 Feb. 2021). He was often identified with Hermes/Mercury, god of messengers and thieves. On Smith’s choice of “a composite of names borrowed from two male figures” as a subversion of gender hierarchies, see Schneider 1997, 63–64.

²⁸ Cf. Stewart, “Woman Writer”, 23.

²⁹ Auden, letter to Bennett Cerf, Nov. 1936, in Faber, *Faber & Faber*, 119.

technological and cultural changes in the literary world that, in their view, betokened a separation of authorship from inspiration or genius through its association with mechanical labour. Many of the “high priests” of modernism like T. S. Eliot and Wallace Stevens knew office work at first hand and feared that the impending “industrialization of writing”³⁰ would degrade their status to that of office workers. Rudyard Kipling, in one of his late stories, satirically envisages a “Fictional Supply Syndicate to meet the demand” for “standardised reading-matter”.³¹ In the dystopian world of Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, such novels are mass-produced by machines. It is this change of writing “from a cultured pursuit to an industrialized and ... increasingly mechanized activity”³² that lies at the heart of Smith’s novel. Its major insight, as Sean Latham argues, is that “authorship is no longer a self-evident category; it has become so commercialized, mechanized, and distributed that the book itself can no longer be clearly distinguished, from the memos, advertisements, articles, and correspondence that constitute the new surround of writing”.³³

Novel on Yellow Paper foregrounds the hybridity and insecurity of Pompey’s/Smith’s writing in trying to find a genuine voice of her own in this context. In the process, it confronts a romantic ideal of authorship as self-expression with a modernist despair at the impossibility of realising such an ideal in the industrialised world of writing. The appeal to the reader to “read on and work it out for yourself”³⁴ not only opens the text up to various interpretations but also signals the writer’s failure to reconcile her writing with the formal and material constraints of books in a modern book market; she tells readers, only a few lines earlier, that the word “book” means “magazine” in the newspaper business.³⁵ References to typing abound in the novel, for instance when Pompey self-critically reveals that she can only type with one finger of each hand (p. 15) or when she assures readers that a particular word is “no slip-up of the typewriter” (p. 18). She frequently refers to the world of newspaper publishing and its trend for market consolidation, as when she invokes the publishing mogul Lord Beaverbrook, the “baron of Fleet Street”, who “knew [his] public to a T” (p. 21)—unlike the novel writer, who frequently imagines a reader inimical to or not interested in what she has to say, calling for this reader to put the book away (p. 24).³⁶ But she also worries about her book’s layout (p. 25) and about the inability of writing to represent the spoken voice: “Oh talking voice that is so sweet, how hold

³⁰ Latham, “Industrialized Print”, 180.

³¹ Kipling, “Dayspring Mishandled”, 391.

³² Latham, “Industrialized Print”, 173.

³³ Latham, “Industrialized Print”, 174.

³⁴ Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper*, 1. Subsequent references are given parenthetically in the text.

³⁵ Earlier readings of *Novel on Yellow Paper*—rare as they are—have focused on the ways in which Smith handles literary form to call attention to the instability of language and meaning (Nemesvari, “Language”), or on her transgressive disruption of conventional narrative forms (Wheeler, *Modernist*, 142–153).

³⁶ Max Aitken, 1st Baron Beaverbrook (1879–1964) was a major player in the British newspaper business in the early 20th century, the Rupert Murdoch of his time. He is memorably portrayed as Lord Monomark in Evelyn Waugh’s *Vile Bodies* (1930).

you alive in captivity, how point you with commas, semi-colons, dashes, pauses and paragraphs?" (p. 25) Here the voice is "alive" as an immediate expression of the self; it is threatened with death when it is imprisoned in what Max Weber famously called the "iron cage" of modern routines of representation, "bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production".³⁷ The contrast between a romantic cult of authorship and the modernist condition of impersonality is, in Smith's novel, literally materialised in the pointing of a text.³⁸

There are other difficulties that Pompey has with writing a novel and meeting an audience's taste, especially a middlebrow audience "which won't stand for highbrow nonsense" (p. 47) and is more interested in interior decoration than in high-minded ideas. Pompey, however, gets "bored" by the expectation of having to write conventional novelistic descriptions of interior spaces: "I am not an interior decorator", she writes, and "I find it difficult to look at furniture and remember to tell other people" (p. 47). Likewise, she is not enthusiastic about stories involving family histories, "those cradle-to-the-grave novels that never let you out under three volumes" (p. 56). She is highly critical of Victorian novels of romance and adventure (naming Mrs. Humphrey Ward and James Payn), for reasons that are ideological as well as formal.³⁹ Instead of such old-fashioned narrative conventions, she offers her readers a feast of non-linearity—moving between recollections of travel in Germany and reflections on food, culture, sex and class in Britain (for instance, p. 111).

In a passage that anticipates Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) by two decades, she even provides a sociological analysis of popular fiction, the twopenny weeklies that are mostly read by young women (p. 115–116). She divides these into "Fiction for the Married Woman" (p. 115) and "stories for unmarried girls", the latter "full of pretty ideas that are all the time leading to washing-up" (p. 117). These she despises for their ugliness and triviality, their "negation of human intelligence" (p. 118). Later, she tells readers about a young man, a reader of Swinburne, Kipling and the Bible, who develops a taste for writing and then turns it into a profession, working as "a Lady Novelist. The only surviving lady Novelist" (p. 143) "writing those chic little middles for girlies' papers, the tuppenny weekly girlies' papers that are always having emotional crises, and wondering about their young man" (p. 144). This writer has internalised the idea of writing as a job like any other: "Oh yes you know I *write*, you know, just straightforward and honest. It's a job like any other job, isn't it? Only harder, harder than a navy's job. It's just a job JOB JOB." (p. 143)

³⁷ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 181.

³⁸ May notes that the manuscript Smith submitted to Cape was "unpunctuated" and that she "added the requisite number of full stops and speech marks" only at her publisher's demand (May, *Stevie Smith*, 101). On Pompey's voice in the novel, see also Nemesvari, "Language" 27, 32–33, 36.

³⁹ Severin, *Stevie Smith*, 25.

For Pompey, by contrast, literary authorship is not a “job” but a private exertion and a compulsion to create outside of pre-existing formulae or generic conventions. As she explains towards the end, returning to the question of her book’s form and format:

People have said to me: If you must write, remember to write the sort of book the plain man in the street will read. It may not be a best seller—but it should maintain a good circulation.

About this I pondered for a long time and became distraught. Because I can write only as I can write only, and Does the road wind uphill all the way? Yes, to the very end. But brace up, chaps, there’s a 60,000 word limit. (p. 179)

The form of Pompey’s writing—in the procedural sense of *écriture*—and the format of the published book are in conflict, just like the vivid “talking voice” (p. 25) is in conflict with the fixed format of the typed and printed text. The first-person novel as individual expression is here staged as permanently resisting the generic fixity of any established literary form.

In the years after the war, only Doris Lessing will return what I suggest one might call the “woman writer novel” to a concern with structural constraints of the novel form, while remaining within (or parodying) the realist tradition and the politically committed type of the socialist bildungsroman.⁴⁰ This seems a far cry from Smith’s open embrace of a form that appears to be formless and is certainly unpredictable —more similar in its metafictional spirit to Muriel Spark’s debut novel *The Comforters* (1957), whose protagonist is a female writer at work on a study of *Form in the Modern Novel*, who discovers that she is herself a character in a novel.⁴¹ Yet *Novel on Yellow Paper* shares with *The Golden Notebook* the confrontation of the modern predicament of female authorship. Its brutally honest diagnosis of the modern publishing world, the segregation of readerly tastes according to “brows”, and the constraints imposed on writers working in established generic moulds, make for a strong engagement with the material conditions of literary production in 1930s Britain, while its radical self-reflection and formal innovation make it a prime example of experimental modernist fiction that engages with the literary and cultural expectations of its time. At its back, as I hope to have shown, is a long and frequently problematic history of female authorship as reflected in narrative. Far from merely being another experimental novel that plays with linguistic indeterminacy, *Novel on Yellow Paper* critiques the material, cultural as well as formal and genre boundaries of literary writing in the

⁴⁰ See Kohlmann, “Toward a History”. For the view that *The Golden Notebook* “parodies conventional realism”, see Waugh, *Metafiction*, 71.

⁴¹ Waugh, *Metafiction*, 121.

interwar years. With its irreverent author-protagonist, Stevie Smith positioned her individual talent at the end of a long alternative or “minority” tradition of women’s writing, all the while transcending restrictive narrative conventions and intervening in contemporary debates on the impact on literature of new technologies and new audiences for fiction.

References

- Behrendt, Stephen C. “The Romantics and Media”. In *Romantic Explorations. Selected Papers from the Koblenz Conference of the German Society for English Romanticism*, ed. Michael Meyer, 7–21. Trier: WVT, 2011.
- Benson, E. F. *Secret Lives*. 1932. London: Hogarth Press, 1988.
- Birke, Dorothee. “*Amelia, or The Distress’d Wife* (1751).” In *The Cambridge Guide to the Eighteenth-Century Novel, 1660–1820*, ed. April London. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming.
- Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. 1847. Ed. Q. D. Leavis. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985.
- Brown, Erica, and Mary Grover, eds. *Middlebrow Literary Cultures. The Battle of the Brows, 1920–1960*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.
- Browning, Elizabeth Barrett. *Aurora Leigh and Other Poems*. Ed. John Robert Glorney Bolton and Julia Bolton Holloway. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995.
- Civello, Catherine A. *Patterns of Ambivalence: The Fiction and Poetry of Stevie Smith*. Columbia: Camden House, 1997.
- Ehland, Christoph, and Cornelia Wächter, eds. *Middlebrow and Gender, 1890–1945*. Leiden: Brill, 2016.
- Faber, Toby. *Faber & Faber: The Untold Story*. London: Faber & Faber, 2019.
- Gilbert, Sandra, and Susan Gubar. *No Man’s Land. The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*. 3 vols. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988–1994.
- : *The Madwoman in the Attic. The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. 1979. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*. Ed. William L. Charvat, Thomas Woodson et al. 23 vols. Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1962–97.
- Hendriks, Rose Ellen. *The Young Authoress*. London: Darling, 1847.
- Huk, Romana. *Stevie Smith: Between the Lines*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Humble, Nicola. *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s. Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004.
- Jung, Daun. “Critical Names Matter: ‘Currer Bell,’ ‘George Eliot,’ and ‘Mrs. Gaskell’”. *Victorian Literature and Culture* 45 (2017): 763–81.

- Kipling, Rudyard. "Dayspring Mishandled." 1928. *Stories and Poems*. Ed. Daniel Karlin. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 391–409.
- Kohlmann, Benjamin. "Toward a History and Theory of the Socialist Bildungsroman". *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 48.2 (2015): 167–189.
- Latham, Sean. "Industrialized Print: Modernism and Authorship". In *The Cambridge Handbook of Literary Authorship*, ed. Ingo Berensmeyer, Gert Buelens, and Marysa Demoor, 165–82. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.
- Lazzaro-Weis, Carol. "The Female 'Bildungsroman': Calling it into Question". *NWSA Journal* 2.1 (1990): 16–34.
- Lessing, Doris. *The Golden Notebook*. 1962. London: Harper Perennial, 2007.
- McGurl, Mark. *The Program Era. Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Maier, S. E. "Portraits of the Girl-Child. Female Bildungsroman in Victorian Fiction". *Literature Compass* 4.1 (2007): 317–35.
- May, William. *Stevie Smith and Authorship*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Nemesvari, Richard. "'Work it Out for Yourself': Language and Fictional Form in Stevie Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper*." *The Dalhousie Review* 71.1 (1991): 26–37.
- Rainey, Lawrence. "Pretty Typewriters, Melodramatic Modernity: Edna, Belle, Estelle". *Modernism/modernity* 16.1 (2009): 105–22.
- Salmon, Richard. *The Formation of the Victorian Literary Profession*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Schneider, Karen. *Loving Arms. British Women Writing the Second World War*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997.
- Severin, Laura. *Stevie Smith's Resistant Antics*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997.
- Smith, Stevie. *Novel on Yellow Paper*. 1936. London: Virago, 2015.
- Spark, Muriel. *The Comforters*. 1957. London: Virago, 2009.
- Stewart, Victoria. "The Woman Writer in Mid-Twentieth Century Middlebrow Fiction: Conceptualizing Creativity". *Journal of Modern Literature* 35 (2011): 21–36.
- Sutherland, John. *Victorian Fiction. Writers, Publishers, Readers*. 2nd ed. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- Thackeray, William Makepeace. "The Fashionable Authoress". 1841. In *A Shabby Genteel Story and Other Writings*, ed. D. J. Taylor, 299–311. London: Dent, 1993.
- Tuchman, Gaye, and Nina E. Fortin. *Edging Women Out. Victorian Novelists, Publishers, and Social Change*. London: Routledge, 2012.
- Underwood, Ted, Bamman, David, and Sabrina Lee. "The Transformation of Gender in English-Language Fiction". *Journal of Cultural Analytics* Feb. 13, 2018. DOI: 10.31235/osf.io/fr9bk.

Walsh, Jessica. "Stevie Smith: Girl, Interrupted". *Papers on Language and Literature* 40.1 (2004): 57–87.

Waugh, Patricia. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*. London: Methuen, 1984.

Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Trans. Talcott Parsons. New York: Scribner's, 1958.

Wheeler, Kathleen. *'Modernist' Women Writers and Narrative Art*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1994.

Wodehouse, P. G. *Piccadilly Jim*. 1917. N. p.: The Floating Press, 2012. Google Books. https://books.google.de/books/about/Piccadilly_Jim.html?id=Y46CsOK2ZqIC&redir_esc=y (accessed 10 Feb. 2020).