

# THE PLOT AGAINST SMITH

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( . . . How came he poet?  
Who shall say? Yet read his verses as they're writ  
— Not with mind's calculating eye alone  
But with the heart's, and then the secret's out. . . . )<sup>1</sup>

AS EDITOR, CRITIC, ANTHOLOGIST, and literary historian, A. J. M. Smith belongs to the small handful of principal shapers of Canada's poetic tradition. But his reputation as a poet is less clearly and firmly established. Today it could even be said that at best Smith's poetry is more respected than read and enjoyed.<sup>2</sup> This constrained response is evidently due to what are perceived to be difficult, unpopular, academic characteristics of the poetry: first, its protean, metamorphic variations in form and imagery, subject, and attitude; second, its impersonality, ironic and distancing evasions of the subjective and autobiographical; and third, its classical austerity and restraint in style and feeling. These interrelated characteristics are certainly present. But at least in part the negative reactions of readers to them may be due to the strategies this strong-minded critic and editor of other writers' works has chosen, over the years since the mid-1920's, for arranging and presenting his own verse to the public. He has encouraged his readers to read his poetry in his way, or not at all.

Among the most interesting of A. J. M. Smith's many critical discussions and commentaries is the "review" dealing with his own poetry. "A Self-Review," which appeared in *Canadian Literature* in 1963, is a witty and urbane assessment of his first *Collected Poems*, published in the preceding year. In it there are many specific remarks of value to close readers of Smith's poems. But the most provocative passage is of a more comprehensive nature. In the following sentences Smith sums up explicitly the way in which (it seems) he has always wanted his readers to approach his poetry; and in so doing he states a problematical theory of poetry and raises an essential literary-critical dilemma:

My poems are not, I think, autobiographical, subjective, or personal in the obvious and perhaps superficial sense. None of them is revery, confession or direct-self-expression. They are fiction, drama, art; sometimes pastiche, sometimes burlesque, and sometimes respectful parody; pictures of possible attitudes explored in turn; butterflies, moths or beetles pinned wriggling — some of them, I hope — on the page or screen for your, and my, inspection. The "I" of the poem, the protagonist

of its tragedy or the clown of its pantomime, is not me. As Rimbaud said, *Je est un autre*, I is another.<sup>3</sup>

Smith goes on to acknowledge that some readers may resist this version of — let me call it, for simplicity's sake — T. S. Eliot's Theory of Impersonality. "Indeed?" Smith speculates that a reader may complain, "Then who is this collector of butterflies and bugs you have been describing? Your emblem ought to be the chameleon or mole, not the Phoenix or swan." Helpful as this wry imaginary challenge is in directing our attention to the poet's metamorphic imagery — I will want to take up that suggestion later — it does not succeed in provoking Smith into a direct answer. He recognizes that there is a "problem" to be solved, a "general problem of the role of personality." But the remainder of his discussion evades an answer. Or, rather, talks about how evasive his own poetry is, because of its ambiguities of wit and irony.

The objection to Smith's theory of poetry, or, to be more precise, his description of what his own poetry is and its relation to himself as author, is not that the theory is wrong, but that it is both right and wrong. That is, it belongs in the category of half-truths. There would be little advantage in going to the other extreme and asserting the opposite half-truth. If we try to answer the question, "Who is this collector of butterflies?" in biographical terms we can only say, "A precocious and cocky young McGill student who was reading a lot of modernist verse"; and as well, among other answers, "A middle-aged urbane and witty Professor of English in exile from Canada at a mid-west American university." The attempt to be more profound in this direction might well throw light on certain details of the poetry-making. "A Self-Review" already does a little, and that most distinguished of biographers, Leon Edel, does even more in his personal sketch of "The 'I' in A. J. M. Smith."<sup>4</sup> But in the end we will almost inevitably discover that, instead of solving a problem in literary criticism, we have only raised all the problems faced by biographers and historians. The critic's job must end, as it begins, with the poetry.

Smith is entitled to defend poetry in general against the naiveté of reading it as the direct rendering of personal experience, or his own poems against narrow interpretations based on an interest less in art than in intimate self-revelations. But, on the other hand, readers are entitled to their common sense view that *somebody* must have done the collecting; *somebody* must have selected those particular "pictures of possible attitudes," and considered them important enough to be "explored in turn." Such readers may not necessarily take the moral stance implied by the term "personal responsibility." They may simply feel that an artistic world — or a collection of poems, however varied and protean — presented as a set of aesthetic objects detached from the experience of any recognizable human being, and intended to be contemplated for its own sake without reference to author, places, or times, may constitute an environment too unreal

and rare for human habitation. Moreover, if they do indeed try to enter Smith's poetic world ignoring the author's admonitions, they may discover that they are, after all, not in the presence of a "pure poetry" nearly anonymous which he seems to want to offer them, but rather they are surrounded by highly idiosyncratic works that begin to echo each other, to establish recurrences with deepening patterns; and that gradually a total impression emerges that (as it grows stronger) sets up an interplay from the parts to the whole and the whole to the parts, a mutually illuminating interplay. In fact, before long, readers may find themselves reading Smith the way they read Yeats or Eliot, Vaughan or Sitwell, the Scotts (D. C. or Frank), and Anne Wilkinson, the way that Smith himself, on the evidence of his criticism, reads these favourite authors of his — with a powerful sense of their individual human qualities. This process may seem rather like the often subliminal assimilation of words, actions, and appearances that gradually make up the overall impression we develop of a friend (or enemy) who has changed over many years but who still answers to the same name. It was, Leon Edel tells us, "impossible for a biographer like myself, and such an ancient friend, to read Smith's poetry without reading the poet."<sup>5</sup> We may not look for or expect to find an "I" in Smith's poems in any simple sense, least of all "an ancient friend," but we certainly will be gratified to discover a human presence which, however complex and protean, has a recognizable coherence, and which engages our own human desires, fears, and dreams.

A TREATISE ON AESTHETIC THEORY would have to delve far more deeply into this problem of the relation between the author's self or selves and the poetry he writes. But for now, and for literary criticism, it seems enough simply to assert that somewhere between the extremes of the poem as crafted aesthetic object nearly anonymous and the poem as a document of direct self-revelation there must lie a third kind of reality, one for which a creator ultimately will have to take personal responsibility. This way of putting it might still invite a critic to preoccupy himself mainly with discovering the responsible poet *behind* the poem. I think, rather, that in this direction the critic's job, even the biographical critic, is to discover the responsible poet *in* the poem — and to use whatever may be known and brought to bear from an author's life to make clear what it is that found its way into the poems and how it found its way there.

What I have just said about the critic with biographical inclinations would apply equally to the critic whose concerns are editorial or textual. Anyone who has observed the editorial strategies of Smith's five separately published volumes of verse will have noticed what little encouragement this author gives to the reader who would like to follow his career chronologically, who might be interested in the development of the author's craft over a period of half a century, or

for that matter the growth of the feelings and ideas enmeshed in that craft, or the epochs of social and political change which were their public context. In "A Self-Review" Smith notes with evident satisfaction that, of the poems in the *Collected Poems* (1962), "a few were written when I was an undergraduate and published in journals as different as *The McGill Fortnightly Review* and *The Dial*. And a few were written just the other day. Which is which would be hard to tell."<sup>6</sup> More or less the same thing could be said about the poems and their arrangement (never chronological) in any of his volumes. The critic who wants to talk about "early" or "late" Smith will have to go around the road-blocks erected by the poet himself. These obstacles include his resort to pseudonyms in the 1920's (itself certainly a kind of impersonality), and his inveterate habit of revision, re-creation, and transformation, which he refers to in the same passage.

In time, Smith may well enjoy the fate of truly established authors, and find his rejected versions and variants published in a scholarly collected edition.<sup>7</sup> Before that time there are other tasks which critics can do and have been doing with the poems mainly as Smith presents them to us: revised, polished, finished, arranged as impersonal, timeless, universal aesthetic objects, "pure poetry." But it might be useful, before going any further, to add one key example of how reaching behind the facade the poet has so carefully erected helps in understanding and appreciating the nature of his poetry, and the dominant effect towards which he has typically tended to shape it.

In 1928 a still young, as yet not fully-formed poet (he was only "A. J. Smith" on this occasion) published a poem called "Proud Parable" in the first issue of the brash new magazine, *The Canadian Mercury* (1, No. 1, December). As the poem entitled "Like an Old Proud King in a Parable" that work was to take its prominent place as the first poem in each of A. J. M. Smith's last three collections, becoming probably his best-known single work. There are important changes from the earlier version,<sup>8</sup> even though the revised and thereafter unchanged form of the poem appeared only four years later (in *The Hound and the Horn*, 5, No. 2, Jan./March 1932). Some of the revisions are simply better realizations along the lines of what the earlier version was trying to do, particularly those in the first stanza, which in both versions begins with the familiar lines:

A bitter King in anger to be gone  
From fawning courtier and doting Queen  
Flung hollow sceptre and gilt crown away. . . .

Here the two versions begin to part company. The first drifts into relative wordiness and discursiveness, whereas the later is altogether more packed and concise, sharper and more vivid in its imagery — and no doubt wisely Smith elected to sacrifice the clever rhyming pun which readers would have noticed in the word "counterpane" in this passage:

... And took a staff and started out alone  
 And wandered on for many a night and day,  
 And came, at length, half dead, half mad with pain,  
 Into a solitude of wind and rain,  
 And slept alone there, so old writers say,  
 With only his Pride for a counterpane.

Here are the more familiar lines of the revised version :

... And breaking bound of all his counties green  
 He made a palace of inviolable air  
 To cage a heart that carolled like a swan,  
 And slept alone, immaculate and gay,  
 With only his pride for a paramour.

The second half of this poem, however, offers differences of greater interest. In the earlier version, the "I" in a quite simple and direct way, addressing the King himself, asks for the "Spartan" strength to be able to emulate in the activities of "love," "fellowship," and "art" an heroic model:

O kingly One! Divine Unsatisfied!  
 Grant that I too, with such an angry heart,  
 And in simplicity, may turn aside  
 From any love or fellowship or art  
 That is not a lying of Pride with Pride,  
 That is not colder than a rain-wet stone,  
 Sharper than winds that make the raw face smart,  
 And has not such a strength in blood and bone  
 As nerved the Spartan spearman when he died.

The reader is being invited to stand with the speaker and look with him at a rather naively, sincerely prayed-for goal. The later version seems to be presenting, instead, a fuller, possibly even more confessional, characterization for the speaker. The "I" prays to be freed from a "fat royal life" into a new asceticism. But in fact the clear, simple division between the "I" and the King, in the first version, is now complicated by the analogy implied in that word "royal," with its hints of self-conscious posturing. The reader here is being invited to look not *with* but *at* the speaker as he makes that self-deprecating comparison. And instead of insisting on the distinction, as it appears to do, the question-and-answer that becomes the turning point of the second version actually has the opposite effect: "O who is that bitter king? It is not I." The "I" of the second version emerges more vividly and strongly not as a clear and simple self-characterization but as a complex, self-aware, self-mocking persona bathed in ambiguity and irony. Readers of the first version would scarcely think of the relation between the relatively inconspicuous speaker and "A. J. Smith," the named author. Readers of the second will think of the authorial relation at once, and be wary. Far from being confident of the identification of this more prominent speaker and the poet "A. J. M.

Smith," they may even get the feeling that here we must have a case of the deliberate dramatizing and exploring of one out of a number of "possible attitudes."

A further consequence of the revisions is evident. The King whose behaviour in the first version was a model for "any love or fellowship or art" becomes in the second version a model only for the last — for art. Or to be more accurate, all three areas of life are subsumed under one, the singing of a "difficult, lonely music." The later version has become much more specifically a poem about poetry and its demands on the poet:

O who is that bitter king? It is not I.

Let me, I beseech thee, Father, die  
From this fat royal life, and lie  
As naked as a bridegroom by his bride,  
And let that girl be the cold goddess Pride:

And I will sing to the barren rock  
Your difficult, lonely music, heart,  
Like an old proud king in a parable.

Here the equation has been completed between asceticism and aestheticism, between the perfecting of a life and the perfecting of an art. They are seen as one and the same.

One further feature of the later version is hard to miss. In "A Self-Review" Smith suggests that in the giving up of the "fat royal life" a "story" is "hinted at" — "an antecedent unspecified source of the bitterness, remorse, and self-disgust." He links it to the condition of "savoury fatness" referred to and so fiercely examined in a later poem of meditation on the reality of death, "On Knowing *Nothing*." "Unspecified, of course, because irrelevant," Smith notes, thereby closing the door on biographical speculation about that "source," that motive for going into exile.<sup>9</sup> In "Proud Parable" the choice of so austere a form of self-discipline is related, in so far as a motive can be inferred, to a kind of romantic over-reaching ("Divine Unsatisfied"). The King, having tried the life of worldly gratification and found it wanting, now moves pendulum-like to the way of deprivation. But in "Like an Old Proud King in a Parable," the King is associated with the image of the "swan" — specifically a carolling swan — in his decision to abandon the "fat royal life" of worldly desires and satisfactions. The model from which the "I" seeks to learn in the second version, then, becomes a noble singer who, like the legendary dying swan, breaks into song only to sum up his life at a fatal moment. Not, to be sure, a literal death in this case, but a death of the heart — "a heart that carolled like a swan." We have entered the region of absolutes: "difficult, lonely music" indeed, that must be worthy of the challenge to create a swan-song. But more of this poetic ideal later.

In Smith's last and perhaps his most carefully chosen and arranged collection, *The Classic Shade, Selected Poems* (1978), "Like an Old Proud King in a Parable" is once again the entry point of the volume. Lest readers feel that my comments on this poem unduly emphasized the "death" theme, it should be noted that the other part of the frame, the last poem in the book, is the no less familiar sonnet, "The Archer." Here, of course, the theme is unavoidable. Moreover, it is again intertwined with a conception of art. This time it is a difficult, lonely art of sculpture, in which the archer described in the octave, embracing the self-discipline required to aim his arrow, himself is metamorphosed into a work of statuary, a perfect balance of poise and energy; and the "I" of the second part of the poem explicitly emulates the proud and regal figure of the archer in order to achieve for himself a statuesque serenity in face of the grave. Here the three main characteristics of Smith's poetry meet and fuse: the formalizing, distancing, or straining out of autobiographical elements so that even the "I," if one exists in the poem, becomes elusive and impersonal; the metamorphic thrust which transmutes a lower into a higher form of being; and the achievement of a classical poise in face of the severest challenge to self-discipline and control, the fact of death.

These two poems, the first and the last in *The Classic Shade*, are typical of the whole volume, and of all Smith's poetry, in provoking opposite reactions. On the one hand is the distancing and transforming effect of style and image, the elegance and balance of poses and structures, the emphasis on control and restraint — in neither poem are we ever tempted to hear an "I" crying directly and sincerely from the heart. On the other hand, there is to be felt behind, or rather through, the disciplined aestheticism of word and form and idea a strong, consistent, shaping authorial presence. In fact, paradoxically, it may well be that it is this presence that draws us most certainly and most deeply into the poetry. By following the lure we may come to know the poetry much more fully, its strengths and its weaknesses, its evasions, and its candour and courage.

THE WAY TO BE FOLLOWED is to look more closely at the nature and consequences, for the poetry, of Smith's tendencies towards impersonalization, metamorphism, and classical restraint. It matters very little in which order we consider these topics because, as may be obvious by now, I believe them to be simply three sides of the same coin (the advantage of poetic coins is that they are not limited to two dimensions).

First, one of the most distinctive features of Smith's verse needs to be accounted for: the substantial element of allusion to and imitation of other poets. Smith's "A Self-Review" implies, in the long passage quoted earlier, that one correlative

of his bias towards impersonality was a strong interest in "pastiche," "burlesque," and "respectful parody," in effect, masquerading in other poets' clothing. Perhaps the most instructive example of the connection between the desire to avoid the "autobiographical, subjective, or personal" and the resort to these impersonalizing forms is "A Hyacinth for Edith," that "respectful parody" of Edith Sitwell. An abstract account of this poem could describe it as a lyric celebrating the speaker's simultaneous re-discovery of the joys of childhood and the regenerative powers of spring, amidst an urbanized, technological society that painfully suppresses the beauty and freedom of nature and of human innocence. The poem seems to move towards a conclusion in which a subjective lyric cry can break out from the liberated heart:

. . . I am grown again my own lost ghost  
Of joy, long lost, long given up for lost,  
  
And walk again the wild and sweet wildwood  
Of our lost innocence, our ghostly childhood.

But the pastiche element that dominates the opening half of the poem, the playful extravagance of the metaphors, forbids this kind of simple response to its ending. The quest through the April countryside, which the poem takes us on, for the "candy-sweet sleek wooden hyacinth" of the title is also a tour of Sitwellian poetic imagery epitomized in that phrase — vivid, startling, witty, radically artificial, out of a landscape of the mind — which Smith lovingly and gently mocks while at the same time energetically re-creating. By the end of the poem, what might have been a straightforward celebration of spring and childhood becomes an exuberant tribute to the power of art to create its own fresh universe of perpetual renewal. The speaker is transformed, not into a joyful child, walking again "the wild and sweet wildwood" of authorial innocence, but a sophisticated poseur adopting an elegant, self-conscious aestheticism, in defiance, certainly, of the debased modern "tinsel paradise" of "trams and cinemas and manufactured ice . . .," but equally in defiance of naive, egotistical, romantic nature poems. It should be added that any reader who goes to the trouble of looking up an earlier version of this poem, printed in *The McGill Fortnightly Review* (2, No. 5, 1927), will notice that it has undergone revisions in exactly the same directions as those to Smith's "Proud Parable": that is, away from all that could be construed as naively personal and direct in reference and feeling.

Smith's most flagrant use of the sophistications of parody in dealing with what might otherwise seem highly personal material is to be found in "My Lost Youth," another hyacinth poem, but this time echoing T. S. Eliot, especially his "Portrait of a Lady." Again, an abstract account could make the poem seem almost confessional<sup>10</sup> in its revelation of autobiographical details about an urbane, Westmount-born professor now teaching in the Mid-West, with seductive man-



ners and a modest literary reputation to his credit. But the echoes of Eliot, amounting here to "burlesque" in their playfulness, allow the author to take away with one hand what he gives with the other. We are left with the multiple ironies of an "I" who recognizes himself as having been "a minor personage out of James / Or a sensitive, indecisive guy from Eliot's elegant shelf" when he left his over-enthusiastic lady behind in her drawing-room, swathed in the "modish odour of hyacinths," to flee to another "Reality." And so when the poem ends it is not on a note of rueful self-revelation (though that note is not entirely absent either), but rather with a flourish of dressing-up, of ham-acting, of adopting a pose which pays homage to the truths of Eliot's satiric insights while, through mocking exaggeration, denying their exact fit.

I teach English in the Middle West; my voice is quite good;  
My manners are charming; and the mothers of some of my  
female students  
Are never tired of praising my two slim volumes of verse.

And so, although the poem bears a superficial resemblance to confessionality, it is in fact just the opposite — a mocking picture of one of the "possible attitudes" towards a self who remains elusive, if is not invisible, behind the aesthetic mask: a mask as effective in its turn as that of a proud, heartsick king who leaves a "doting queen" behind to go into his own kind of exile.

Just how congenial to Smith was this device of ironic masquerading, especially in regal robes, is indicated by his playful self-portrait on the occasion of his triumphal return to Canada for the Keewaydin Poetry Conference, "Astraea Redux." There the speaker, like a Stuart monarch reclaiming his kingdom or a somewhat humbled "proud king" returning from exile, graciously acknowledges the homage of an unlikely court of "lordly ones" (the "Duke of Dudek," "His Grace of Layton") and vows: "*Not to go on my travels again.*"<sup>11</sup> The recipe for this poem obviously includes satire, self-mockery, affection, and a homecomer's delight. But the exact proportions of the ingredients are difficult to be sure of, and the taste will likely depend on those who test it.

That kind of elusive self-representation and ambiguous tone is a particular instance of the general tendency of Smith's poetry: we expect to find evidences of the protean character of reality, of the metamorphic thrust of natural and human experience. "Your emblem," Smith had his imaginary critic argue, "ought to be the chameleon or mole, not the Phoenix or swan." But in fact any one or all of these emblems will do. They have something in common. Everywhere we look in the poetry the chameleon is hiding itself in the shades of surrounding colours, the mole is digging out of sight, the Phoenix is turning to ash or being re-born (not necessarily in the same form), the swan is incarnating a different reality. The "I" is always becoming "another." As "Metamorphosis" puts it, the "energy and

poise" of life seem to be a child's game in which old forms are continually flung away as new, equally transient forms are born. The classical statement of this theme is "The Plot against Proteus," a poem which seethes with images of changefulness.

This is a theme for muted coronets  
To dangle from debilitated heads  
Of navigation, kings, or riverbeds. . . .

In the "muted coronets" of the first line we already have a fusion of the crowns which monarchs wear and the horns which sound the theme of beleaguered and diminished royalty. But "heads / Of navigation," whether "debilitated" or ascendant, can be both royal supporters of sea-travel and the highest points on rivers beyond which ships may not sail. So the flow and inter-flow of images continues, wittily and eloquently, through the poem, until Proteus himself, the "blind king of the water," appears, beached and ready for capture, if the hunter be cunning and fast enough.

. . . This cracked walrus skin that stinks  
Of the rank sweat of a mermaid's thighs  
Cast off, and nab him; when you have him, call.

But at the end of this poem a reader may be left standing empty-handed, wondering how close the capture of some tangible if slippery reality actually was, perhaps even a little resentful at the poem's beautiful trickery. Is it to be read as a literary exercise on a familiar Homeric subject, or as a cryptic commentary of a philosophical or social kind on some specific protean aspect of human experience? It is typical of Smith that a direct answer will prove elusive: when you know for sure, call me.

There are, of course many other shape-changers in Smith's verse besides Proteus. One of Smith's favourite quotations, a sentence from Santayana, which appears most recently as the epigraph to *The Classic Shade*, suggests a recurrent metamorphosis of the human into the form of a bird. From this sentence Smith gets the title for one of his "two slim volumes of verse," *A Sort of Ecstasy* (the other being a not unrelated title, *News of the Phoenix*): "Every animal has his festive and ceremonious moments when he poses or plumes himself or thinks; sometimes he even sings and flies aloft in a sort of ecstasy." It is not only the "old proud king" of Smith's parable who becomes a carolling swan. The same metamorphosis transforms the immortal poet of "Ode: On the Death of William Butler Yeats." "The white bird is flying / Forever. . . ." For a lesser and still living poet, Ralph Gustafson, who survives a not so threatening fate as poet-in-residence (in the "darksome Groves of Academe"), there is an appropriately more modest metamorphosis: where the "leaden Owl did erstwhile reign supreme" now "a marvel! a green laurel springs / And from its topmost bough

a linnet sings." The song heard in "The Two Birds" is not as pleasant, and is used by Smith to suggest the opposite of ecstasy: miserable, alienated entrapment in the self. The "angular creaking note" issuing from the "cat-bird's ragged throat" finds an echo, as the "I" of the poem recognizes the kinship of "that other foul bird, my black heart." In the portrait of a lady given in "Bird and Flower"<sup>12</sup> a doubled metamorphosis is hinted at — "Christian bird and Grecian flower." The woman's disconcerting fusion of "holiness and joy," spirituality and a "dangerous" tenderness, is captured in the images of the catapulting "spiritual pigeon" and the "loaded violet." In another poem a similar kind of disturbing combination — an "innocent heart" housed within a passionate human body — finds expression first in images of "a tiger's spring" and "the leap of the wind," but then in the "quick flame" which goes beyond nature altogether "to turn sensation's lode, / With animal intensity, to Mind," a metamorphosis which sums up the case which the poet puts in his vigorous appeal against prudery, "To the Christian Doctors."

In a more obviously tongue-in-cheek or hyperbolic tribute to the virtues of transformation or metamorphosis, the speaker of "The Sorcerer" invites the magician from Lachine (ironically a name which has lost its magic long ago) to perfect with a spell the all-consuming wordly love he feels for his beloved:

He will transform us, if we like, to goldfish:  
He shall swim in a crystal bowl,  
And the bright water will go swish  
Over our naked bodies; we shall have no soul.

Love is traditionally a potent force for transmutations. It is what changes the mind of the speaker of "An Iliad for His Summer Sweetheart" into a swarm of bees about Amaryllis' "golden head / And golden thighs, where love's best ore is found." Through the same cause the lover of "Angels Exist, and Sonnets Are Not Dead" becomes a "Salamander" who sleeps "in Paradisal flame / That coursed along my veins," so moved is he at the "coming" of his "Guardian Angel" — though not so moved that he feels it necessary to forego a sly play of words:

She knew when to come and yet she came unwilling  
And undeserved, and coming, called my name.

But "A Pastoral" achieves its celebration of the power of love by the opposite device, the denial of image, metaphor, metamorphosis, and it turns the denial into a hyperbole in praise of the beloved. Though at first sight the "shepherdess" appears so beautiful that the speaker "dreamed / She were a moonbeam, a fountain, or a star," closer acquaintance not only intensifies his admiration but confirms the human reality of its object:

She was no moonbeam, star, or dream,  
 Nor icy changing crystal stream,  
 But very woman, such (I say) as no man  
 Might not love, nor her misdeem.

It seems unlikely that anyone who has read many of Smith's poems would be tempted to accept the simple, earnest, worshipful tone of this lover at face value. The poem is too insistent on being the perfect and complete manifest of pastoral innocence for that. But even a naïve reader, if he were to encounter the poem in *The Classic Shade*, and then turn the page to read the next work, "Ballade un Peu Banale," would be shocked out of his romanticism by the ironic editorial juxtaposition it represents. In the "ballade" the pastoral lovers are transmuted into animals, "Master Bull" and "gentil Cow"; and the amorous scene is as ludicrous and randy as the preceding poem's depiction is sweet and charming: "Bull boometh from the briary bush, / Advanceth," but the "vestal turneth tail. . . ."

Where among all these fluctuating and sometimes downright discordant sounds are we to hear the true voice of feeling? There is little likelihood that this amorous Proteus will be nabbed in the nets and snares of sexuality, whether by the "rank sweat of a mermaid's thighs" or the more subtle appeal of "snake-bright hair" and "coral-tinted breasts" ("The Mermaid"), or by the still more remote lunar magic that draws the swimming lover or sea-king of "What Strange Enchantment":

. . . the shy glances of your eyes  
 Are the meshes of a net  
 For my limbs  
 And the dark sheen of your hair  
 Candle light  
 For my moth thoughts  
 And your white breasts  
 Twin moons  
 To draw my tides. . . .

This last love-goddess of tidal powers obviously belongs to the realms of mythical females conjured up by Smith in his attempt, in the "Introduction" to his posthumous edition of *The Collected Poems* of Anne Wilkinson, to define the "religious statement" of a remarkable Canadian poet whose work he found deeply sympathetic, especially her poems of love and death: "... hers is the classic religion of Empedocles, Heraclitus, and Lucretius. What it celebrates is a *metamorphosis*. Over and over again she descends into the earth like Flora or Eurydice or merges with white flesh, red blood, into the leafy green of a tree like Daphne."<sup>13</sup>

This sympathetic account of Anne Wilkinson's "classic religion," a faith that fuses the sensual and the spiritual, may make it seem less frivolous, less blasphemous.

mous, to put Smith's erotic, often tongue-in-cheek, secular visions of human love beside the poetic and religious vision he recreated in "To Henry Vaughan." It too is a love poem of sorts. The world of nature, as if through Vaughan's own eyes, is depicted as real and precious in itself, "heaven'd" by its own vivid beauty, passionately and sensuously loved in its pastoral innocence. In the end, however, even that beloved creation yields up to metaphor and to metamorphosis. The "sun's first quick'ning ray" becomes "the flaming hair / Of thy wish'd Lord, thy Bridegroom dear"; the "tall feathery trees" are changed to "Earth's angels" singing the creator's praises; the air itself, in which the "happy larks" climb and sing, like caged souls freed, is "a broad golden winding stair / To Heaven. . . ." In the final transmutation of this poem, the beautiful plenitude of nature and of mortal being is reduced to the "Nothing" of death, but this in turn for Vaughan is a dear exchange for the "All of salvation into which that nothing is to be transformed.

Among the many "pictures of possible attitudes explored in turn," this yielding of secular to religious ardour is one of the most vivid and memorable. But the "respectful parody"—indeed, the brilliant imaginative emulation—of Vaughan's poetic utterance and spirit simultaneously demonstrates and sets a limit to Smith's sympathy for the model. The reader's reaction is much more likely to be admiration for Smith's imitative genius than any sense that the author has identified with the religious passion he so eloquently evokes. The poem invites us to witness and applaud a graceful performance, not to read a personal testament to an ultimate metamorphosis.

The relation is obvious enough between Smith's emphasis, in theory and practice, on impersonality—his fending off of the "autobiographical, subjective, or personal"—and his self-obliteration within a protean variety of poetic modes, voices, and attitudes, which are his acknowledgements of the changeful and fluid natural and human realities his poetry seeks to capture. The poet of the elusive or evasive "I" is also the poet who tries to encompass a multitude of metamorphoses and transformations, or failing that at least to control himself in the midst of it, hard thing that that may be to do, even imperfectly. If we were to sum up what kind of poet and poetry would be the exact opposite, and find the word for it which Smith would want to apply, that word would undoubtedly be: Romantic.

The Romantic Poet is that "One Sort of Poet"<sup>14</sup> who yields himself up blindly to his own heart's cry, grandiosely lifting his voice "in a great O / And his arms in a great Y":

Whatever spring  
From the struck heart's womb  
He can only sing  
*Let it come! Let it come!*

This egotism and lack of self-restraint, "unenviously described"<sup>15</sup> in the poem, as Smith wryly says in "A Self-Review," has a still more extreme manifestation in "A Dream of Narcissus."<sup>16</sup> Peering into his own image reflected in the pool, Narcissus croons:

I pipe sweet songs of love and joy  
And pore upon his lovely eyes,  
And he responds, that godlike boy,  
And mine are his divine replies. . . .

Self-infatuation of this kind has a logical goal, which may never be reached in reality, but Smith's poem essays a version of it. Narcissus dives into the pool in quest of identification with his own reflected image:

I plunge into a crackling waste,  
And Chaos is unfurled.  
  
O horror! Incest of the soul!  
What reeling Furies! foul Abysm!  
  
O mad, inevitable goal  
Of proud Romanticism!

Against this abhorred enemy, Smith of course must pose its opposite, a humble Classicism.

THE WORD "CLASSICAL" is certainly a popular one, for Smith as well as for his critics. It is sometimes tempting, in face of the obvious difficulties of definition, to dismiss it as at best a vague gesture towards any of a variety of attributes in literature and life which might at the moment of its use seem desirable to Smith, or worth singling out for his commentators. In fact, the term had for this author a thin, clear thread of meaning which he liked to return to and which links several of his most significant applications of the word. By following that thread a reader can safely reach the heart of the labyrinth, or of the "classic shade," named so in "Ode: The Eumenides," where he may find himself crying out with the speaker of the poem: "I know that face!"

The word "classical" appears in the first piece of critical prose to gain a large and broad audience for Smith, his "Introduction" to *The Book of Canadian Poetry* (1943). There the clue to its meaning is already apparent in Smith's praise of the poetry of George Frederick Cameron. Cameron was only a minor Victorian figure in the history of Canadian poetry, perhaps, but one who, though he died at 31, left behind him a body of poetry sufficiently "individual and powerful" to catch the anthologist's attention — and for obvious reasons. "Cameron was a classical scholar, an internationalist, and a cosmopolitan." Sig-

nificantly climaxing a list of his themes is "an inescapable preoccupation with the idea of death." "In a romantic age," Smith goes on to say, "he maintained some of the classical virtues." And then Smith concludes with a specific illustration of Cameron's classicism in word and deed:

Passionate yet resigned, and enthusiastic yet disillusioned, he was able in the last month of his life, under the shadow of death, to write:

For we shall rest; the brain that planned,  
That thought or wrought or well or ill,  
At gaze like Joshua's moon shall stand,  
Not working any work or will,  
While eye and lip and heart and hand  
Shall all be still — shall all be still!<sup>17</sup>

Smith shows almost exactly the same kind of precisely and intensely focused interest when he sets out to praise the work of D. C. Scott in a public lecture a few years later. Like Cameron, Scott built his "classical virtues of restraint and precision" in part on "deep and sound scholarship, constant reading of the Greek and Latin classics." And like Cameron also, Scott especially clearly demonstrates "the perfection of his calm and classical style" when he writes in the elegiac vein: when he writes of death. Smith concludes his tribute to Scott by quoting two examples, a poem which reveals "an awareness of the life-enriching nearness of death," "In a Country Churchyard" — Scott's memorial to his father's death; and after that, the "fine elegy in prose with which Duncan Campbell Scott closed his *Memoir* of his friend and fellow poet," a sombre, measured, yet lyrical description of the graveyard where Archibald Lampman's body lies buried. Fine it certainly is, sad but beautiful and serene; it "might have come," Smith says, "from the *Greek Anthology*."<sup>18</sup>

Just how personal must have been Smith's interest in and sympathy for the "calm and classical style" that allowed Cameron and Smith to write of the "nearness of death" with such clear-sighted control and eloquence is indirectly suggested by a quite remarkable public confession he made in his lecture, "The Poetic Process," in 1964: "The general idea of death or Nothingness as a vague but yet disturbing and, if concentrated on, frightening concept has been hanging over my sensibility for longer than I can remember." Later in the same lecture Smith offers an extended commentary on his own poem "The Archer" as a work which arose from a "state of discomfort and frustration caused I suppose by an imaginative realization of the inescapable and unpleasant *fact* of death and the seeming impossibility of controlling it in any way . . .";<sup>19</sup> even more specifically, the poem had its origins in "ambivalent and very oppressive feelings about death (and especially about my own death)."<sup>20</sup> While complete "controlling" may never be humanly possible, Smith goes on to argue, poetic creation can provide a kind of purgation — "After all, Aristotle speaks of *catharsis*." And he ends by paying

special tribute to the "classical point of view with respect to poetic creation" as exemplified by T. S. Eliot among the moderns, a writer for whom poetry is not a Wordsworthian "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" but a "distillation of experience" in which there is a separation of "the man who suffers and the mind which creates," and in which "passion is transmuted" — these last remarks of course being quoted by Smith directly from Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent."<sup>21</sup>

The argument is not unrelated to the one he pursued on a more impersonal and universalized plane in his lecture, "The Refining Fire: The Meaning and Use of Poetry" (1954). There essentially Smith was agreeing with the critical tradition, running through Matthew Arnold, T. S. Eliot (whom once again he refers to approvingly), and F. R. Leavis, that sees a moral purpose in the creation and appreciation of art: "the training, developing, exercising, and strengthening of the sensibilities" and the development of "a corresponding purification and strengthening of the emotional and intellectual faculties."<sup>22</sup> The concept of the poet as being engaged in an athleticism of the spirit is clearly as attractive to Smith as it was to Eliot, though there is little to suggest that for Smith it had any consistent doctrine or religious implications. On the evidence of his poetry, however, the Canadian poet from an early stage in his career maintained his own strong senses of why a poet needed to be in training.

When the speaker in "To a Young Poet" formulates his advice, the terms of it will now seem very familiar. He recreates the classical tale of "Iphigenia in her myth," imagining that doomed daughter of Agememnon walking to her sacrificial death, which will free the Greek ships to sail to Troy, and accepting its necessity, with a "pace designed and grave," giving herself up in an "elegant, fatal dance." Such a bearing, the speaker says — "a hard thing done / Perfectly, as though without care" — is "alien to romance." In fact, it is the epitome of classicism as Smith seems to understand it. To equal that behaviour in the art of writing is the goal the speaker holds up for the "young poet" to attempt. The ascetic dedication to a "difficult, lonely music" worthy of the "Proud King" singing his swan-song in Smith's favourite parable, and the strenuous self-control and poise modelled on the statuesque athlete of "The Archer" and needed to sink an arrow in the heart of the grave, are obviously versions of the same discipline. To train yourself to write poetry in the "classical" manner is analogous to — is really the same as — training yourself to face death in the "classical" manner. To achieve that goal is to have achieved true impersonality; it is to have transcended romantic abandon and romantic egotism; it is to have undergone a transformation or metamorphosis. Above all, perhaps, it is to be rescued from terror, a state of mind the speaker describes himself as entering and then barely escaping ("A Narrow Squeak") in Smith's feverish "variation" on a powerful, death-obsessed poem by Anne Wilkinson.<sup>23</sup>



... the day was gone;  
 A bloodshot moonlight crept along,  
 And the green hills were caked in ice.

Who was it wavered in the frosty air,  
 Looked back and hesitated, turned away,  
 But waited — with a word to say?  
 She moved her lips. I could not hear,

I could not hear the word she said.  
 It was a word of life or death.  
 It stoned my heart, it stopped my breath.  
 I dropped like stone, I dropped down dead.

“How came he poet?” Smith asks in his slyly witty eulogy of Ralph Gustafson.

Who shall say. Yet read his verses as they're writ  
 — Not with mind's calculating eye alone  
 But with the heart's, and then the secret's out,  
 The secret many a cryptic poem shouts  
 — An *ars poetica* in two small words:  
   *my love!*

If we were to apply this proposal for literary decipherment to Smith's own poetry, we might first of all expect to find it quite rewarding. After all, the vein of eroticism running through the poems is long and rich. But as we have seen, almost always Smith's love poetry is clearly hedged with irony, self-mockery, comic exaggeration, dramatic distancing, undercutting banter, and sophisticated parody, an urbanity which hardly allows us to take seriously the possibility that Smith's Venus might ever really manifest herself once and for all before us, or before this “Poor Innocent,” whether as very woman or as goddess, “foam-born rising, / Maybe, nude and swell.” Certainly the key “my love” would seem to open fewer doors and have less chance of being the “secret” of Smith's *ars poetica* than the “two small words” of another cry undeniably shouted from poem after poem: *my death!*

No doubt we should see the characteristically exuberant sensuality and eroticism of, for example, “An Iliad for His Summer Sweetheart” (“I love to see my Amaryllis toss her shirt / Away and kick her panties off”), of “Thomas Moore and Sweet Annie” (“Tip me and tup me and bed me down tight”), along with the superannuated memories of “Brigadier” (“I had a doting mistress, full of tang”), as part of that “fat royal life” that needs to be renounced in the effort to achieve a clear-sighted and disciplined classicism. But such a renunciation would be difficult for someone who throughout his career mocked the puritan denials of the flesh and the world, who was remarkable as a young man (Leon Edel tells us) for the “ease with which he picked up girls in London coffee shops,”<sup>24</sup> and who posed with a wine bottle for the back cover of his *Poems New and Collected*

(1967). Therefore it is not surprising to discover a "savory fatness" being acknowledged as still part of the life so sombrely examined in the poem "On Knowing *Nothing*." In fact this poem, along with several like it among the last poems of *The Classic Shade* — "My Death" and "Watching the Old Man Die," notably — take their strength in large part from their candid admission that the passionately desired metamorphoses of "Like an Old Proud King" and "The Archer" have never taken place. There has been no renunciation. The spiritual athlete to the very end remains unfit, is unprepared for the ultimate challenge. The classical restraint in face of mortality has proved too difficult a discipline to achieve.

The voice of these poems is trying deliberately to eschew urbanity, polish, elegance. Metaphor is still hard to avoid, however: death is a cancerous seed that "lives on its own phlegm," "grows stronger as I grow stronger" like a flower on its stem; a wound with a scab to be picked at between the intervals of "blank surcease" provided by escapes such as the "surgeon's jab" or "a woman's thigh." But then at least once, in "Watching the Old Man Die," it becomes more simply itself: a reality afflicting the body of the "old man" which turns the abject observer into a "cowardly egotist":

The body cannot lie.  
I savoured my own death  
And wept for myself not him.  
I was forced to admit the truth  
It was not his death I found grim  
But knowing that I must die.

The lame, bald rhyming of these lines can hardly be inadvertent. No one would know better than Smith how awkward and inelegant they seem, how remote from the "hard thing done / Perfectly, as though without care." Are they perhaps as close as this eminently civilized poet can come in poetry to a primitive, naked encounter with the one raw absolute that casts its "shadows" over his whole literary career? The poem "Shadows There Are" called them "shadows I have seen . . . / That backed on nothing in the horrid air"; but even in that "truly terror-inspiring" poem (to use a phrase Smith applies several times to the death-poems of Anne Wilkinson<sup>25</sup>) they were still the stuff of graceful cadences. The same shadows were no doubt the elected study of that troubled student of "In the Wilderness" who

. . . walks between the green leaf and the red  
Like one who follows a beloved dead,  
And with a young, pedantic eye  
Observes how still the dead do lie.  
His gaze is stopped in the hard earth,  
And cannot penetrate to heaven's mirth.<sup>26</sup>

But here, of course, the title invites us to dress the speaker not in the personality of the poet but in the guise of a Christ whose vision may yet be restored in time. Perhaps the death contemplated by the "pedantic" student is closer to that alluded to in "My Death":

It lies dormant at first,  
 Lazy, a little romantic  
 In childhood. . . .

Certainly as a child himself Smith knew what it was to brood romantically over death. "I do remember," he says in "A Self-Review," "not any one specific moment, but as in a dream many times, always at evening or in the early morning, the swallows skimming over the rapids by the old mill at Laval-sur-le-Lac near Saint Eustache where we used to go for the summer when I was a child. I remember August 4th, 1914, there, and I remember helping to search for the body of a young man drowned in the rapids. And so the swallows, associated with loneliness and death by water, swerve into one or two of the more intimate of the poems and become a source of simile and metaphor." When the swallows reappear in Smith's poem "Hellenica," Leon Edel says, commenting on this passage, the "original child's sense of horror" has been distanced, the "starkness of death has been aestheticized . . . ; it has been washed clean and made classical."<sup>27</sup>

A kind of youthful romanticism is suggested by the image of "Death, the voluptuous, calling" so seductively from the last line of "Prothalamium." It lies behind the part of "Ode: The Eumenides" which holds out the possibility of an escape from visions of death by returning to "the classical shade" where "the casual dead / In their stained shrouds / Would not find us." But then that possibility gives way to a darker adult realization that no one shall escape

The stench of the dead  
 Emptied and butchered hope  
 In lives and deaths made  
 Meaningless froth.

This is the same aftermath-of-war rejection of romantic idealism that fills out the implied context of the minimalist lyric "A Soldier's Ghost" and especially its companion piece, "What is that Music High in the Air," with its nightmare ending in which the "heroic" and the "sacred" are supplanted by the "inconsequential dead."

Images associated with dying are a central nerve running through the whole body of Smith's poetry. Harsh and brutal as these images can sometimes be, they too are usually subject to the paradox that death is unspeakable, that writers despite themselves continue to "prettify, / Dress up, deodorize, embellish, primp, / And make a show of Nothing . . .," as "The Wisdom of Old Jelly Roll" puts it.

Only in "Watching the Old Man Die" does A. J. M. Smith come close to completely foregoing if not poetry then at least the poetry of "high-falutin' woes and shows" — foregoing even those poetic characteristics that dominated his work throughout his career: impersonality, metamorphism, and the classical poise that faces death with clear eyes and steady nerves. They are almost all gone, or so it seems; though even here is there not, in the bitterly ironic word "savoured," a fleeting gesture of restraint, as if to remind us of the civilized taste of one who would be a connoisseur of life to the very end?

I savoured my own death  
And wept for myself not him.

It remains for the reader to decide whether, in such bleak and unpoetic lines, the protean wordsmith has for a moment put by all his beautifully crafted masks so that we can see his face; or whether he has simply enlarged his gallery of pictures with one more possible attitude explored in its turn.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> A. J. M. Smith, "Poet in Residence, Bishop's University," *The Classic Shade, Selected Poems* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1978). References are to this edition, unless otherwise noted.
- <sup>2</sup> The special issue of *Canadian Poetry* (No. 11, Fall/Winter 1982) devoted to the work of Smith opens its critical discussion with a comment that sets the tone for the volume: "the poetry of A. J. M. Smith is unfashionable and uninfluential." P. 1.
- <sup>3</sup> From the version reprinted in Peter Stevens, ed., *The McGill Movement* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1969), p. 139.
- <sup>4</sup> *Canadian Poetry*, pp. 86-92.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 86. See also Sandra Djwa, "A. J. M. Smith: Of Metaphysics and Dry Bones," *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 3, No. 1 (Winter 1978), p. 18: "As a critic of his own poetry, Smith has always discouraged the identification of poet and persona."
- <sup>6</sup> Stevens, p. 137.
- <sup>7</sup> See Michael Darling, "A. J. M. Smith's Revisions to His Poems," *Canadian Poetry*, pp. 7-25.
- <sup>8</sup> Darling chose not to study them in his review of Smith's revisions.
- <sup>9</sup> Stevens, p. 138.
- <sup>10</sup> Leon Edel makes the somewhat misleading comment that "in his confessional poem 'My Lost Youth' . . . the 'I' is unmistakeable," *Canadian Poetry*, p. 90.
- <sup>11</sup> *Poems New and Collected* (Toronto: Oxford, 1967), pp. 110-11.
- <sup>12</sup> "Bird and flower, too, must die of love," wrote Anne Wilkinson in "Nature be damned," a poem Smith included in his *Oxford Book of Canadian Verse* (Toronto, 1960). But there, as Smith later noted in his posthumous edition of the *Collected Poems of Anne Wilkinson* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1968), the author replaced this line with one which is "inferior" — and in Smith's edition of her

collected poems he restores the original version echoing the title of his own poem. P. 211.

- <sup>13</sup> P. xv, my italics. See also ll. 17-18 of Anne Wilkinson's "Nature be damned," with their verbal echoes of Smith's "What Strange Enchantment" (and possibly "Noc-tambule"):

I hide my skin within the barren city  
where artificial moons pull no man's tide . . . (p. 109).

- <sup>14</sup> *Poems New and Collected*, p. 54.

- <sup>15</sup> Stevens, p. 136.

- <sup>16</sup> *Poems New and Collected*, pp. 74-75.

- <sup>17</sup> The "Introduction" is reprinted in Smith's *On Poetry and Poets, Selected Essays* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1977). See pp. 28-29.

- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 56-58.

- <sup>19</sup> *The Centennial Review of Arts and Science* (Vol. III, 1964), p. 353.

- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 367.

- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 369-70.

- <sup>22</sup> *On Poetry and Poets*, pp. 65-66.

- <sup>23</sup> "Variations on a theme," *The Collected Poems of Anne Wilkinson*, pp. 112-14.

- <sup>24</sup> *Canadian Poetry*, p. 89. See also Leon Edel, "The Worldly Muse of A. J. M. Smith," *UTQ*, 47, No. 3 (Spring 1978), pp. 200-13.

- <sup>25</sup> *The Collected Poems of Anne Wilkinson*, pp. xviii, xx.

- <sup>26</sup> *Poems New and Collected*, p. 96.

- <sup>27</sup> Stevens, p. 141.

## THE YEAR

*Harold Rhenisch*

When the year comes in your door,  
closing the blank, creased wood

behind him on the cold blue fire  
of his wildest fears, shaking

the snow off his face  
and off his boots; pulling off

his gloves, his fingers stiff,  
and rubbing his face slowly