

A. J. M. SMITH: OF METAPHYSICS AND DRY BONES

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Although A. J. M. Smith was the most accomplished poet publishing in Canada from 1924 to the mid-forties, the extraordinary versatility of Smith the metaphysical ("Metamorphosis"), the lyricist ("Field of Long Grass"), the tender ironist ("Far West"), the social satirist ("Son-and-Heir: 1930"), and the fine translator ("Brigadier: A Song of French Canada") has not been generally recognized. The dazzling poetic craftsman, who makes every word — and every sound — count, has not been given any sustained consideration at all. Indeed, Smith's claim to be a metaphysical poet has been dismissed by Milton Wilson, who playfully suggests that the term "cavalier" might be a better one for describing the Proteus-like Smith. Wilson argues that when Smith is set beside John Donne, "from whom our basic concept of a metaphysical poet must necessarily come," Smith does not possess the qualities that characterize metaphysical poetry: "the sheer argumentativeness, the sequential pressure of intellectual give and take, the involvement in conceptual definition and differentiation."¹ As Wilson also remarks, during the past twenty-five years the critical myth of Smith's "lonely, difficult music" has developed. Through W. E. Collin's romantic appreciation in his 1936 book of critical essays *The White Savannahs*, the poet has become identified with the persona of the first of the *Collected Poems* (1966), the Yeatsian inspired "Like an Old Proud King in a Parable":

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.

An extension of this view characterizes Smith as apart from the mainstream of Canadian poetry, to use terms borrowed from his criticism, as a "cosmopolitan" rather than a "native" poet and, as such, an academic, intellectual poet out of touch with contemporary social reality. Such identification is tempting, for in earlier years, an idealistic and imperious Smith had urged fledgling Canadian poets to "set higher standards . . . than the

¹Milton Wilson, "Second and Third Thoughts about Smith," *Canadian Literature*, No. 15 (Winter 1963), p. 16.

organized mediocrity of the authors' associations" and declared that poetry "is an intelligent activity. . . . If it is a good, it is a good in itself."² In the light of his subsequent achievements in poetry, however, such labelling is restrictive.

As a critic of his own poetry, Smith has always discouraged the identification of poet and persona. He argues that his poems are a form of dramatic exercise: "None of them is reverie, confession, or direct self-expression. . . . 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." If Smith's poetry is seen as a series of animated vignettes (and quite a few of the poems, such as "Souvenir du Temps Bien Perdu" and "An Iliad for his Summer Sweetheart," do seem to fall neatly into this category), it is difficult not to succumb to the temptation of completely divorcing the poet and his persona. Yet, as Smith wryly observes in "A Self Review," the matter of poetic "impersonality" is a little tricky in practice; the intelligence may choose what is to be expressed, "but what a lot escapes it — or cajoles it, or fools it!"³ If, then, we are to think of Smith's poetry as "fiction," a better approach might be through Wallace Stevens' description of poetry as a "supreme fiction": one to which the imagination gives assent but one which holds the possibility of supreme value.

Much of the early verse written between 1924 and the mid-thirties is self-consciously concerned with poetry and the nature of the poetic process. The romantic, but ironic, portrait of the artist, "Punchinello in a Purple Hat" (1926),⁴ and "A Hyacinth for Edith," drafted in 1927 as "Homage to E.S.," reveal a developing irony and a growing interest in pastiche. The latter poem began as a *jeu d'esprit* in the manner of Edith Sitwell's Troy Park poems and of John Crowe Ransom's "Little Boy Blue." However, when revised and published in *The Canadian Forum* in 1930, it moves beyond pastiche to stand as a commentary on the times, prefiguring Smith's later poetry of the thirties and forties. Beginning with the familiar April reference ("Now that the ashen rain of gummy April / Clacks like a weedy and stain'd mill"), the poem is structured in terms of the hyacinth myth from *The Waste Land*. But here it is the contemplation of the wooden hyacinth — the artifact of the imagination — which restores the wasted land of the trivial present:

And in its creaking naked glaze,
And in the varnish of its blaze,

The bird of ecstasy shall sing again,
The bearded sun shall spring again—

²A.J.M. Smith, "Canadian Poetry — Past and Present," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 8 (October 1938), 10.

³A.J.M. Smith, "A Self-Review," *Canadian Literature*, No. 15 (Winter 1963), p. 23.

⁴"Punchinello in a Purple Hat," published in the *McGill Fortnightly Review* in 1926, became "Varia" (*The Canadian Forum*, 1927), then "Three Phases of Punch" (*Collected Poems*, 1962).

The meaningless, contemporary world, a merely "tinsel paradise / Of trams and cinemas and manufactured ice," is left behind and the persona transported to the innocent world of childhood:

Till 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.

However, despite the plaintive vowels, it might be a mistake to limit this poem to the Sitwell persona. The sense of a "tinsel paradise" — the fake, not the real spiritual or poetic, presence and an accompanying yearning for a lost innocence — permeates Smith's poetic imagination. This theme recurs through the thirties and forties and is absorbed into the fine poems on death which predominate after 1950. In a later poem, "Ode: The Eumenides" (1942), there is a similar desire to return to the "innocent wood" of childhood, "the significant dark of poetry and fear"; but this longing is now generated by a horrified recognition of the dead of World War II.

In the widest sense, Smith's play of opposites, the "tinsel paradise," becomes a comment both on the nature of the times and on the way in which this "reality" is to be reflected in poetry. This is a question of poetic subject, technique, and diction, a matter of finding new modes and new metaphors to express the new world of the thirties: the world of depression, unemployment, fascism, the fear of war. We find in the poetry of the early thirties a new ironic mode and direct comment on a society that prefers the comfort of illusion — the celluloid fake — to the real. The young girl of "Far West," cocooned in a popcorn paradise, substitutes for poetry, love, and God the sexual thrill of the movies with their climactic "bang! bang!" in the "holy name" of Buffalo Bill. In "Son-and-Heir, 1930" (1935), a later and more satiric treatment of the same theme, the depression is personified as the long-awaited offspring of the comfortable bourgeoisie who instinctively censor "any real [reel?], as too forlorn / Preview of coming attractions." As the pun on "real" implies, they project a future that endows their boy with the attributes of a film star Christ "Striding over the very veldtlike veldt / In a bandolier full of Kodak films / . . . Walking in rightwiseness, always au fait." Yet, as the reference to the Spanish "bandolier" implies, a more likely suggestion is that the bandolier will be filled with bullets and the veldt replaced by the barren landscape of the Spanish civil war. The comfortable illusion projected by the decade is suddenly broken with the interjection of a new and angry voice:

Who will turn the lights up on this show?
You will find something has gone wrong with the switch,
Or their eyes, used to horse opera, cannot grow
Used to an ordinary sonofabitch

Like you or me for a son, or the doom
 We discern—the empty years, the hand to mouth,
 The moving cog, the unattended loom,
 The breastless street, and lolling summer's drouth.

"Son-and-Heir: 1930" and several other poems from this period, including the Audenesque "News of the Phoenix" (1933) with its overtones of an ominously totalitarian society and the surrealist "Noctambule" (1936), were first published in Geoffrey Grigson's *New Verse*, one of the more important English little magazines of the thirties. Much of Smith's seemingly flippant but serious verse and the more soberly religious "The Offices of the First and Second Hour" (1933) were first published in *New Verse*. Smith's poem "Noctambule" is very much in the magazine's tradition of vigorous colloquial satire on the contemporary. A series of surreal images culminates in the first stanza with a direct comment, "Perhaps to utilize substitutes is what / The age has to teach us," and in the last stanza with a sardonic observation, "Reality at two removes, and mouse and moon / Successful." We might suspect that the poem is an anti-romantic commentary on the modern age, suggesting that "reality" is now to be associated with "substitutions" and "success." Looking a little more closely, we find that the poem progresses through a series of substitutions — paper moon for real moon, treacherous day for innocent night, mouse for lion, florist's display for nature, shell shock for normalcy. With the words "Shellshock came on again, his skin / Twitched," we begin to see that these images are presumably the thoughts of a returned soldier taking a Joycean look at the moon during a night walk. In a larger sense, however, it is not only the narrator but the whole world that is shell-shocked.

All the images introduced are conditioned by the primary substitution, that of false moon for real, and the subsequent loss of beauty, innocence, strength, nature, and poetry that were once associated with night and moon. That a betrayal has taken place is suggested by the allusion to night as a "great black innocent Othello of a thing / . . . undone by the nice clean pockethandkerchief / Of 6 a.m." Since the moon, "Poxy old cheat!" (and, by extension, love), is not now what it once was, the narrator concludes that we might as well try to make the best of what we have, "to utilize substitutes." Here Smith's diction, the ubiquitous "utilize," captures the ersatz quality of the new reality. The real — that is, "the loud / Unmeaning warcry of treacherous daytime" — is substituted for the older, tender, but "witless" vision of night and moon. In Smith's metaphor, night is an Othello, day an Iago. As the terms of this metaphor show and as the nostalgia inherent in some of the references to night indicates, the narrator, although accepting necessity, is not fully convinced. Having taken the modernist stand of accepting the substitute, he promptly has a fit of shell shock. His eye glazes and withdraws "Like a lake isle in a florist's window; / Reality at two removes." Yeats, nostalgically gazing at a display in a florist's window, was moved to write "The Lake Isle of Innisfree,"

and his poem was thus a reflection of nature through the artifact — reality at two removes. George Herbert in “Jordan (I),” who wanted to “plainly say, My God, my King,” protested against the prevailing “conceited” style of seventeenth-century poetry: “Must all be veiled, while he that reads, divines / Catching the sense at two removes?” Smith’s persona, now associated by allusion with the poetic function, must also face reality and poetry “at two removes”; but, in contrast with the worlds of Yeats and Herbert for whom beauty and spiritual truth were still living principles, the operative term in the world of “Noctambule” is “success.” The poem, then, which might at first appear to be a repudiation of the romantic or metaphysical vision traditionally associated with the term “Noctambule,” is actually governed by a nostalgia for those older values — now lost to an ersatz world; the thematic contrast is that of an “unmeaning” present to a more meaningful past.

The implications of the contrast between real and ideal, past and present, may be seen more clearly with reference to the literary tradition from which the poem evolves. Behind Smith’s moon, “Poxy old cheat,” is the denuded moon of Eliot’s “Rhapsody on a Windy Night”: “The moon has lost her memory. / A washed-out smallpox cracks her face.” But, more importantly, at a still further remove, the ideal vision which informs the satire of “Noctambule” is the night walk described by Henry Vaughan in “The Night” where wise Nicodemus saw the “Sun” (the Son of God) by moonlight. Common to both poems is the concept of substitution, the collocation of moon and sun at night and the contrast between the blackness of innocent night and, in Vaughan’s terms, the “mire” and “ill-guiding light of day.” For Vaughan, night is still the time of “spirits,” the time when man can best approach his God; as such, it is associated with the death (mystic and real) that it anticipates: “Oh for that night, where I in Him / Might live invisible and dim!” But for the modern metaphysical, what a falling off there has been! Night, moon, and love are all ersatz — fake. Because of this deprivation, the central preoccupation of Smith’s poetic imagination — death — must be faced without Vaughan’s spiritual assurance.

The emergence of this metaphysical theme in Smith’s work is best seen in the poem “To Henry Vaughan,” first published in *The Tamarack Review* in 1959 but originally written in 1931 as a tribute to Sir Herbert Grierson and presented to him along with Smith’s dissertation, “Studies in the Metaphysical Poets of the Anglican Church in the Seventeenth Century.” In this poem, images from Vaughan’s spiritual biography (as recorded in “Regeneration,” “The Retreat,” “The World,” “Cock-Crowing,” and “The Night”) are presented. Vaughan’s characteristic longing for eternity is expressed within an audaciously homely conceit — that of homesickness:

Homesick? and yet your country Walks
Were heaven’d for you. Such bright stalks
Of grasses! such pure Green! such blue
Clear skies! such light! such silver dew! —

The poem develops through a series of analogies which show that nature, because infused by God, is Heaven on earth; and Smith's poetry is fully worthy of the metaphysics it expresses, especially when echoing Vaughan's lyric and mimetic sweetness: "one small bird / In three clear notes his Name prefer'd." From "bird" to "soul" to "larks" — "singing as they climb / Lifting the rapt soul out of Time" — the progression is a natural one and expresses Vaughan's growing other-worldliness. The religious paradox with which the poem ends is both a recognition and a resolution:

Yet art thou Homesick! to be gone
From all this brave Distraction
Wouldst seal thine ear, nail down thine eye;
To be one perfect Member, die;
And anxious to exchange in death
Thy foul, for thy Lord's precious, breath,
Thou art content to beg a pall,
Glad to be Nothing, to be All.

To be dead, to be no thing, is to be gathered into the "All" of God — as such to be a part of all, of every thing. Behind Vaughan's joyful anticipation to be "Nothing" is the seventeenth-century universe of correspondences; behind the "All" stands the certainty of the Bridegroom Christ and the wedding feast of the Resurrection.

As this concluding paradox might suggest, Smith's strongest poetic and critical impulse works in terms of pairs of opposites: the "tinsel paradise" of "A Hyacinth for Edith," the sun-moon, false-real series of "Noctambule"; the "sensibility"-"intelligence" opposition of an early critical article, "Wanted — Canadian Criticism"; the "native"-"cosmopolitan" divisions of *The Book of Canadian Poetry* which he edited in 1943. In fact, his most characteristic poetic technique is the use of the paradox: references such as "the beauty / of strength / broken by strength / and still strong" that we find, for example, in "The Lonely Land." Smith's impulse towards paradox and hyperbole would have been encouraged by his seventeenth-century studies. Certainly, "To Henry Vaughan" shows that he had mastered the metaphysical sensibility. More importantly, however, his fondness for the paradox seems to be the product of a deeply felt sense of the contrast between a more ideal past and a tawdry present; and certainly there was a modernist antecedent for this attitude and technique in Eliot's *The Waste Land* and "Gerontion."

The central importance of the paradox in Smith's imaginative world may best be seen by tracing some of the implications of the concluding paradox of the Vaughan poem, "Glad to be Nothing, to be All." Smith's early preoccupation with the metaphysics of "nothing" is to be found even in one of his first imagist landscape poems, "The Creek" (1928). Here the musical progression of sound and image echoes the movement of the water; the eye moves from the "stones," "roots," "wisps of straw," and "green soaked crushed leaves" of the first stanza to the disintegrative "nothing" of the last stanza:

foamfroth, waterweed,
and windblown bits of straw
that rise, subside, float wide,
come round again, subside,
a little changed
and stranger, nearer
nothing.

The whole poem is a description of the process of reductive metamorphosis. In the fine late sonnet "The Wisdom of Old Jelly Roll" (1962), the implications of death as "nothing" are explored through a metaphysical conceit which equates death with the holes of a net:

... Parson, poetaster, pimp,
Each acts or acquiesces. They prettify,
Dressup, deodorize, embellish, primp,
And make a show of Nothing. Ah, but met-
aphysics laughs: she touches, tastes, and smells
—Hence knows—the diamond holes that make a net.

The holes in the net are "nothing," dependent upon "thing," the cord, for their existence; cord, in turn, is delineated by "nothing," and both are inseparably part of the one web. The wisdom of old Jelly Roll Morton, the black jazz musician "on whisky, ragtime, chicken, and the scriptures fed," is as inclusive as this catalogue; it is the humanist affirmation of death which recognizes the "all" — its inseparable connection with life and birth.

The opposite pole of interpretation is the horror of death — the vision of nothingness — which is the subject of the poem "On Knowing Nothing" (1962):

I cannot let the hollow
Interval alone,
But pick it like a scab
To probe the wound within—
As deep, as nothing, as the grave.

For the modern metaphysical, for whom Vaughan's universe has broken down, to glimpse even a shadow of this death is to recognize that it is a "wound," a "grave," a "nothing" — in existential terms (and the poem was written after Smith read Camus' *The Plague*), the void. The old religious symbols — angels' wings, the implication of Christ's wounds, and the rising from the grave — together with their modern correlative, sexual love, are ironically brought down to earth, to the grave itself. Except through death, escape from this knowledge is not possible, although "the surgeon's jab, a woman's thigh / Give blank surcease," a connection explicit in Smith's frequent use of the pun "to die."⁵

⁵The title of the *jeu d'esprit* "Quietly to be Quickly or Other or Ether: A Song or a Dance" puns on the seventeenth-century distinction between the quick and the dead and on an "either"-"other"-"ether" series; if one is not "quick" or "other" and does not wish to be "either," why not take "ether"?

The decay of the body, which for Donne and Vaughan signified the return of the soul to God, was reinterpreted by Eliot in the twenties in terms that accommodated the parallels between Christianity and the fertility myths set out by Fraser and Weston. It is this accommodation which we find in Smith's fine early poem "Prothalamium," first published in *The Dial* in 1928:

My sister, whom my dust shall marry, sleeps
 Alone, yet knows what bitter root it is
 That stirs within her; see, it splits the heart—

.....
 Tree fumbling pane, bell tolling,
 Ceiling dripping and the plaster falling,
 And Death, the voluptuous, calling.

As shown by the sonorous incantation of the last line, one of Smith's best, it is the union of eros and thanatos, the metamorphosis of death, that strongly attracted him. The movement between this "nothing" of death and a redefined "all" of physical resurrection is explored in "Metamorphosis," a poem published some thirty years later:

This flesh repudiates the bone
 With such dissolving force,
 In such a tumult to be gone,
 Such longing for divorce,
 As leaves the livid mind no choice
 But to conclude at last
 That all this energy and poise
 Were but designed to cast
 A richer flower from the earth
 Surrounding its decay,
 And like a child whose fretful mirth
 Can find no constant play,
 Bring one more transient form to birth
 And fling the old away.

"Metamorphosis" was not written before 1951, but may have had a subliminal genesis in an earlier period, perhaps about 1930 when Smith was writing "A Hyacinth for Edith"⁶ and reading John Donne's enormously powerful sermons on death. The "livid mind" — a mind both angry and decaying — is an inspired piece of diction. Here the disintegration of death, a kind of Heraclitean flux, produces "a richer flower from the earth." The cyclical nature of Smith's thought can be seen from the fact that the flower, a sign of emergent new life in "Prothalamium," is a metaphor for the growth of death in "My Death." The characterization of man as a flower is also to be found in "Good Friday" where Christ, "a faded flower," is described as taking on a greater chivalry — "as man to die." This equation of the flower and frail flesh is the familiar biblical

⁶The "hyacinth"-"plinth" rhyme of "A Hyacinth for Edith" is from Edith Sitwell's "Metamorphosis," an earlier treatment of the same subject as Smith's "Metamorphosis."

one: "All flesh is grass; and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field: the grass witherith, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it." "Epitaph" (1926), the poem with which Smith invariably concludes his collections of poetry, is a modernist transmutation of this passage:

Weep not on this quiet stone,
I, embedded here
Where sturdy roots divide the bone
And tendrils split a hair,
Bespeak you comfort of the grass
That is embodied me,
Which as I am, not as I was,
Would choose to be.

For the modern, the grass and the flower still symbolize the continuity of the life cycle, but they are now rooted in the physical rather than the spiritual. It is this aspect of the flower that is presented in the poem "Walking in a Field, Looking Down and Seeing a White Violet."

the eye

plays Jackstraws
to disentangle
the skywhite skyblue
first shy white shoot
of a white violet
lifting a graygreen stalk
out of the welter
of leafgreen grassgreen
folded over the old
grayblack earth's
mothermilky
breast

In this imagist description, the eye makes distinctions between "skywhite" and "skyblue," between "graygreen" and "grayblack," and between "leafgreen" and "grassgreen." The colour symbolism is religious — white for purity, blue which is Mary's colour, and green the colour of life and growth — but the treatment is secular. Yet with reference to the literary tradition, behind "earth's / mothermilky / breast" is the discovery of physical and spiritual regeneration symbolized by the flower in Henry Vaughan's poem, "I Walked the Other Day to Spend My Hour," and underlying both poems is the "mother-root" of George Herbert's lovely poem "The Flower." If Smith can write of the flower as new life, he can also perceive its connection with death:

My death is a thing
Physical, solid, sensuous, a seed
Lodged like Original Sin
In the essence of being, a need
Also, a felt want within.

Life must, wants to, issue in death; it "grows stronger as I grow stronger / As a flower grows with its stem. / . . . Progressively illuminating / What I know for the first time yes, / Is what I've been always wanting." However, as the last false rhyme of "illuminating" / "wanting" indicates, Smith does not find the palpable reality of "My Death" easy to face. Like the metaphysicals, he often relies on the chime of true rhyme to reinforce sense, and he has spoken publicly of his practice of allowing the rhyme to help structure the logic of a poem. Yet in the final line of the last stanza, the expected pattern of "My Death" is broken. The pattern of the poem is that of a true rhyme between the last and the third last lines of each stanza: "or"- "metaphor," "Sin" - "within," "phlegm"- "stem." Given this pattern, the expected rhyme is "illuminating"- "waiting," an acknowledgement of the fear of death. But what the poem gives us is "illuminating"- "wanting," the assertion that the controlling intelligence desires death. But this last affirmation is not supported by the emotional attitude of the poem. This death is quite unpleasant; it "lives on its own phlegm," in effect from its own excretions. The characterization of death as phlegmatic ("it lies dormant at first, / Lazy, a little romantic"), which draws upon the Elizabethan theory of the humours, also encourages us to give to "wanting" a secondary, common Elizabethan meaning: to "want" is to lack, to be in need of. But to require death for completion is not necessarily to desire it. Thus the false rhyme and the secondary meaning of "wanting" both suggest an interpretation opposite to the poem's ostensible statement. But for Smith to have given the expected "waiting" would be to acknowledge the difference between the old metaphysics and the new, between the ideal and the real. It might not be unfair to conclude that it is Vaughan who is "wanting" and that it is modern man who is "waiting."

Although death "wants" to grow, the body that houses this growth will sometimes recoil in fear (as in the poem "On Knowing 'Nothing' ") and the intelligence will refuse to accept this knowledge; it is this latter recognition that is explored in the late and difficult poem, "What the Emanation of Casey Jones Said to the Medium." Alternatively, death can be faced through the recognition that it is a part of the cycle of continuing life or through the humanist affirmation of poems such as "The Wisdom of Old Jelly Roll." Certainly death is the most recurrent subject in Smith's canon. He has been writing of it constantly since the 1920's and his poems of death — "Metamorphosis," "Prothalamium," "On Knowing 'Nothing,'" and "The Wisdom of Old Jelly Roll" — are his most compelling. In general, Smith, like Eliot's Webster in "Whispers of Immortality," is "much possessed by death / And . . . [sees] the skull beneath the skin." He too, in the early fertility myth poems, sees "breastless creatures under ground" where "Daffodil bulbs . . . / Stared from the sockets of the eyes!" Ultimately, however, like Eliot, Smith finds that for the moderns "our lot crawls between dry ribs / To keep our metaphysics warm." However, Smith's "dry ribs" — the solace of sexual love offered as a defense against the abyss — have as much of the spirit as of the

flesh; in this sense they are related to the "dry bones" of Ezekiel. Again it is the question of a resurrection but re-defined by Smith in modern terms as the immanence of the spirit in man.

Smith's love poetry is often witty in the metaphysical sense, in that he regularly interchanges the terms of religious and physical love. As Dryden complained of Donne, many of the love poems consist of "nice speculations of philosophy" rather than "the softness of love." Despite this, the poem "Song: Made in lieu of many ornaments" is a frank description of the joys of the flesh.

Your body and my blood,
 Consanguine, make the feast:
 Pious, and oh so good
 The Apostle-blest twined man-beast.

Beneath the gaiety of this seemingly frivolous scholasticism ("the envious angels stare / At us, exalted and co-starred") are the doctrines of trans-substantiation and incarnation. Smith maintains that the profane and the sacred are equal and inseparably connected. His exasperation with Eliot reflected in "Arp's Randy Rant in the Comfy Confession Box" (1935), a poem which was later absorbed into "A Portrait and a Prophecy" (1940), appears to have been a response to Eliot's religious conversion and the latter's determination to subordinate the secular to the religious, as expressed in his 1935 lecture "Religion and Literature."⁷ In Smith's vigorously colloquial 1940 poem, Eliot becomes "A smiling falsifier of the intricate debt / Of love to the tiger."

And now, by God! he has fallen in love with Penitence!
 He'll bring that slut to bed of the most fulsome of his sins,
 The precious blue-eyed bastard, Innocence!

Smith's attitude to the relation between body and spirit is set out most clearly in "To the Christian Doctors" (1936, 1943), a sonnet which argues against the Christian or Platonic insistence on the primacy of the spirit over the flesh. The title refers primarily to the early Church fathers, but the term is sufficiently broad to include Eliot, another Christian doctor of sorts. The argument is set out in the octave where it is suggested that civil war is introduced into the body when the "innocent heart" (spirit) is set against the demands of the blood (body or flesh). This assumption of superiority by the heart, accompanied as it is by a false "Christian" humility, would "filch [heart's] character away and bind / Him spiritless, whom Holiness designed / To swell the vein with a secular flood." "Spirit," in this context, is a carefully contrived pun; primarily, it is the vital, courageous spirit of the heart (a quality

⁷"The whole of modern literature is corrupted by what I call Secularism . . . it is simply unaware of, simply cannot understand the meaning of, the primacy of the supernatural over the natural life." T. S. Eliot, "Religion and Literature," in *T. S. Eliot: Selected Prose*, ed. John Hayward (Harmondsworth, Midd.: Penguin Books, 1953), p. 40.

destroyed by false humility), but it is also, in seventeenth-century terms, an allusion to the Natural, Vital, and Animal Spirits carried by the blood. Finally, "spirit" refers to the Holy Spirit. In Neo-Platonic philosophy, just as the heavenly bodies affect the soul of man through the medium of the air, so soul touches soul through the medium of the body. Consequently, John Donne in "The Extasie" can write "our blood labours to beget / Spirits, as like soules as it can." In Smith's metaphor, the sexual impulse is a "flood / In pure ferocious joy, efficient and good, / Like a tiger's spring or the leap of the wind." Here the doctrines of the Christian doctors are turned back on their makers. Following Donne, Smith shows that the spiritual is not separate from the physical but animates it; similarly, he is to demonstrate that Christ the tiger has a secular aspect. The carry over from octave to sestet in this sonnet is "the leap of the wind," which on the physical level is natural phenomena and on the spiritual level is the embodiment of the Holy Spirit. The startling image of "the beast of the wood, / Whose savage fire is self-consuming, blind" reminds us that man shares with animal the same vital spirit or animating "fire." The difference is that in man "sense" impressions are converted through "spirit" into that heightened "Perception" which is the function of the soul: "Whose end it is to burn sensation's lode, / With animal intensity, to Mind." The measured beat of the penultimate line and the force of the last line are the verbal equivalents of the ecstasy that the sonnet describes. The force of the metaphor is our recognition that just as the heart cannot exist without the blood or the blood without the heart, so the spirit must animate the flesh. The sonnet, in fact, is a progression up the Neo-Platonic ladder from "sense" through "blood" to "Mind" — an ecstasy⁸ which is both sacred and secular.

That Smith regularly associates ecstasy and poetry is shown by the fact that the term appears not only in the epigraph of his first book, *News of the Phoenix*, which was prepared by 1937, and in the title of the second, *A Sort of Ecstasy*, (1954), but also in two of his early poems: Punch's song treats "of ecstasy" and the wooden hyacinth invokes "the bird of ecstasy." As early as 1926 in "A Note on Contemporary Poetry," he shows that he knew Donne's "The Extasie" and a contemporary interpretation, Rupert Brooke's "Dining Room Tea." By 1930, he was familiar with Sir Herbert Grierson's notes to "The Extasie" which quote Donne as saying: "Sir I make account that this writing of letters . . . is a kind of extasie."⁹ Consequently, by 1932 when Smith came across George Santayana's tongue-in-cheek description of the poet who sometimes sings like a peacock or a rooster — "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" — and adopted it, half-ironically, as the signature for his own poetry, we might

⁸"Ecstasy in Neo-Platonic philosophy was the state of mind in which the soul, escaping from the body, attained to the vision of God, the One, the Absolute." Sir Herbert Grierson, "Commentary," in *The Poems of John Donne*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), II, 42. Smith cites these comments in his 1931 doctoral dissertation.

⁹Grierson, II, 42.

suspect that it took its place together with the concept of metaphysical ecstasy.

"A Sort of Ecstasy" is an apt title for Smith's later poetry because it combines the seriousness of metaphysical ecstasy with the wry self-deprecation of a thirties poet who recognizes that "a sort" of ecstasy is all that can be expected. In the early fifties Smith stated directly that he considered himself a metaphysical poet: "Metaphysical poetry and pure poetry are what I stood and stand for."¹⁰ (Presumably "pure" poetry is here opposed to propaganda art, although it also carries overtones of Verlaine's "pure poetry.") In opposition to this statement is Milton Wilson's objection that Smith cannot be considered a metaphysical poet in the true sense of the word because his poetry lacks the "sheer argumentativeness" that characterizes a Donne. Wilson's objections deserve careful consideration because they point to an important difference between the structure of a Smith poem and a typical early seventeenth-century poem. With the exception of a group of poems — including "Metamorphosis" and "The Wisdom of Old Jelly Roll" — characterized by the rapid telescoping of theme and image and others such as "A Portrait and a Prophecy" where the rhetoric of the poem moves relentlessly from point to point, the typical organization of a Smith poem is post-romantic, combining metaphysical substance and image with a late romantic or symbolist organization as does "Noctambule." A Herbert or a Vaughan or a Donne could not have ended "Prothalamium" as Smith does; there we find the late romantic or decadent sensibility viewing the subject matter of the Jacobean.

Despite the difference in poetic organization, common after all to most poets after the romantic age, Smith is justified in calling himself a metaphysical on the basis of a group of poems, his best, which do combine metaphysical texture and subject. But if we are to apply the term "metaphysical" to Smith's poetry, it might be as well to consider its different implications as it is variously applied to seventeenth- and twentieth-century poets. Smith is first of all a modern metaphysical — that is, one shaped by Eliot's discovery and commendation of certain qualities of technique and sensibility in the poetry of the early seventeenth century: the characteristic use of the conceit, poetic development by rapid association of thought, and, especially, that fidelity to the thought and feeling of human experience which results in a necessarily complex poetry. These discoveries, elucidated by the Anglo-American New Critics and especially by Cleanth Brooks in *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939), identified paradox, irony, ambiguity, tension, and wit as the distinguishing qualities of the new poetry. Smith's characteristic poetic techniques — the use of paradox, the love of word play, especially as shown in the serious use of the pun, the interweaving of the learned and the colloquial in diction, and an insistence on the tough logic of the poem beneath

¹⁰In a letter to Desmond Pacey (April 3, 1957), discussing the preparation of *New Provinces* (1936). See Desmond Pacey, *Ten Canadian Poets* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill-Ryerson, 1958), p. 203.

a lyric grace — these are all qualities of the contemporary metaphysicals as defined by Eliot and praised by the New Critics. The colloquial vigour and immediacy of Smith's "The Sorcerer" are as striking in its own whimsical context — "Come along, good sir, change us into goldfish. / I would put away intellect and lust" — as Donne's "For God's sake, hold your tongue, and let me love." But Smith also has a claim on the term "metaphysical" in its original seventeenth-century sense in that he "affects the metaphysics," as Dryden said of Donne, in his characteristic poetic subjects: much of Smith's poetry is concerned with that great metaphysical question of the relation between the spirit and the senses. Brooks, in his consideration of the new poetry and its relation to the tradition, refuses to consider the matter of poetic content, arguing that "form is content," but with Smith's poetry the question cannot be so arbitrarily dismissed. Not only does his "sort of ecstasy," his longing for eternity, and his preoccupation with the paradoxical conceit identify him as a metaphysical in the generalized sense (as, indeed, do they many of his eighteenth- and nineteenth-century predecessors), but the forms of Smith's characteristic poetic expressions are often drawn from the content of specific metaphysical poems. One could argue, for example, that one of Smith's central paradoxes, the "Glad to be Nothing, to be All" conclusion of "To Henry Vaughan," draws verbally on a phrase from Donne's "A Valediction of Weeping."

On a round ball
A workman that hath copies by, can lay
An Europe, Afrique, and an Asia,
And quickly make that, which was nothing, All.

Smith's poetic sensibility seems to have absorbed and retained images drawn from the metaphysical poets which, re-appearing in a modern context, invariably make an ironic commentary on the discrepancy between the old metaphysics and the new. This characteristic can be demonstrated with reference to a poem from the late fifties, "What the Emanation of Casey Jones Said to the Medium," in which Smith interprets contemporary events through a basically metaphysical vision. Time is personified as the express train that killed the American folk hero, Casey Jones, and the mind is imaged as a "Field that attracts, absorbs / Cats, hairpins, spring greens, clocks." But as the references to "hairpins" and "clocks" imply, it is a magnetic field which distorts all that comes within it. Through a series of associated metaphors, the brain is metamorphosed into the train smoke which destroys human vision; this implies that man manufactures his own blindness: the fog "seeps / From tunnel's murky bung / Hole." Brought up short on the carry-over from line to line between "bung" and "hole," we recognize that the tunnel is both the passage of life and the tunnel of the skull. This collocation of skull and bung-hole subtly introduces a Shakespearian allusion: Hamlet, confronted with the skull of Yorick, remarks: "To what base uses we may return, Horatio!

Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till he find it stopping a bung-hole." This line (to which Smith refers in an early essay on Eliot, "The Hamlet de Nos Jours") emphasizes transience, the metamorphosis of mind and man; the mythic resonance is that of the imminence of death, subliminally present but rarely recognized.

The poem asserts that the make-up of the mind works to prevent metaphysical speculations such as Hamlet's — "the make-up of the mind / Embellishes and protects." Yet the poem proves by its very existence that such is not the case because it is an attempt to come to terms with some of the factors that prevent insight into the human condition. By the references to the "dirt of stars," "the spangled banner of smut" (allusions which link and ironically comment on "The Star Spangled Banner" and its antithesis, Robinson Jeffers's "Shine Perishing Republic"), it is suggested that an emotional, unthinking patriotism to country and to constituted self is one of these factors: Smith's injunction, "Then shine, O curdled orb," is a reference which incorporates brain, skull, and world. This poem, published in the American periodical *The Nation* in the late fifties, may very well have been interpreted as a criticism of the McCarthy era.

Turn inward to the brain:
The signal stars are green,
Unheard the ghost train
Time, and Death can not be seen.

As the ellipsis between "can" and "not" in the last line indicates, perception is a chancy business; in Smith's view, mind intervenes: like man or maid, it is most often "accomplished and undone." To Marvell, the mind was still uncorrupted, "that ocean where each kind / Does straight its own resemblance find"; to Vaughan, the stars were "Emanation / Quick Vibrations";¹¹ to Donne, the air, in Neo-Platonic terms, was still the "medium" through which the spirit was conveyed to the mind, man's God-like faculty. But Smith, through his related images of train exhaust and fog, has developed a modern conceit: the air becomes a medium which betrays the reason and refuses to serve the spirit.

Smith's early formulation of the poetic process also seems to have been derived largely from his understanding of the practices of John Donne. In 1929, while still a doctoral student working under Grierson, Smith published "A Note on Metaphysical Poetry." Following Eliot, he defends the metaphysicals against Dr. Johnson's charge that they were merely atomists, arguing that such dissection was invariably followed by the poet's attempt to recreate a poetic universe: "Has he not now the problem of re-arranging his shattered world, building it again, nearer not to the heart's but to the mind's desire?" Smith, who had earlier written a master's thesis on the poetry of W. B.

¹¹Henry Vaughan, "Midnight II."

Yeats, had come to believe that the heart was subordinate to the intellect in the hierarchy of the poetic process. Distinguishing between romantic and metaphysical poetry, he favours the metaphysicals and Eliot's "intensity." For the metaphysicals, "emotion does not come directly through the senses. It is kindled only after an intellectual process, and if it differs in kind, it at least differs nothing in intensity from the feeling expressed in the most romantic poetry."¹² The similarity between this last sentence and the conclusion of Smith's poem "To the Christian Doctors" is unmistakable, and, in fact, it is a theory of poetry which stresses the intellectual at the expense of the sensual that characterizes Smith's poetry of the thirties and forties. However, in the later bawdy *vers de société*, in the translations and especially in the late, fine poems of death, he begins to allow the senses and, particularly, emotion a more equal part with intelligence in his poetry. The repellent sense of a death that grows on its own phlegm — the concrete imagery of a "met-/aphysics" who "laughs," "touches," "tastes," and "smells" and thus "knows" — gives much of his later poems their honesty and strength. If we are to judge from "What the Emanation of Casey Jones Said to the Medium," Smith has come to recognize the fallibility of the mind, and because of this, he no longer gives it pride of place in his poetic.

In Smith's early poetry, the will to believe ("Good Friday") or at least the will to understand ("To Henry Vaughan") co-exists with ribald satire ("The Resurrection of Arp"); his sensibility thus evidences the same division that we find in metaphysicals such as Donne. His irony, a response to the modern situation, arises from circumstances similar to those that produced metaphysical poetry, the conflict of new philosophy with old faith. As Smith writes in his study of the metaphysicals, the early seventeenth century was a time when "the concepts of science, philosophy and religion were capable of arousing men's passions in a way that was new to England, and in a way that was afterwards forgotten until Galileo and Copernicus were matched by Darwin and Einstein."¹³ A product of the transitional twenties, Smith was the last of a generation raised on the liturgy of the Anglican church and then confronted with that break-down in society and religion which followed the Great War. His "Calvalcade" (printed in *The Canadian Forum* in 1928 and not collected) in its wistfulness for lost values and in its new found irony is a record of that generation.

If only we had a song
We could get through this shadowy valley
.....

My father had such a song. He sang it lustily.
It sounds hollow enough nowadays.
It sounds hollow enough to me;

¹²A.J.M. Smith, "A Note on Metaphysical Poetry," *Canadian Mercury*, No. 1 (February 1929), pp. 61-62.

¹³Smith, "A Note," p. 62.

And my mother's voice singing on Sunday
 Trails away in the dust.
 There was a young cavalier
 Who rode with us to the wars:
 He knew a good song, he knew a brave song.
 But they stopped his mouth with the mud in Flanders.
 Ah well! The locusts are singing.
 The vultures are wheeling overhead
 And they too are singing a kind of song,
 A kind of grace before meat.
 And the wind sings too.
 We had better get on.

This youthful romantic disillusionment, the collocation of war and death, the preoccupation with the metamorphosis attendant on death (from soldier to vulture, in ironic parody of Christian communion), and the conclusion with its determined irony of "making do" with reality — all anticipate the subjects and development of Smith's poetry. Above all, it is this sense of a breakdown in the established world that exemplifies Smith as a modern or neo-metaphysical. What does a poet do when the old standards have dissolved and there is no acceptable new metaphysic to replace the old? Eliot's initial recourse was to the world of literary tradition; Stevens' was to the world of poetic belief: "After one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption."¹⁴ As "Calvalcade" shows, Smith was aware of both possibilities. A romantic at heart, he responded to the general post-war disillusionment and to the particular circumstances of his own career with a cultivated irony; especially, he learned to project his poetic concerns through the masks of a variety of personae. The impact of the whole — accomplished, urbane, witty — is not unlike that of Wilson's "cavalier."

Like many poets of the age, including Bridges, Yeats, Eliot and Sitwell — all of whom Smith studied and commented upon critically — he reacted to the disintegration of the contemporary world by attempting to construct a poetic world of his own. To do so, he turned back to the metaphysics of the seventeenth century. His sensibility was nurtured on Frazer, Webster, Herbert, Vaughan, and Donne, especially the latter's great sermons on death which treat of the corruption of the body. And just as Donne adapted the terms of medieval scholasticism to the love poetry of the seventeenth century, so Smith was to apply Neo-Platonic philosophy to the twentieth. In the process, he began to re-define some of the older religious concepts and to give them a contemporary and more general meaning. In the poetry of this modern metaphysical, the old religious concepts are re-defined in new human terms: the "spirit" is perceived as the generating life spirit, as human love and as human intelligence. Furthermore, the contemporary drought of the spirit is faced with reference to, but without benefit of, seventeenth-century doctrine.

¹⁴Wallace Stevens, *Adagia*, cited in *Prose Keys to Modern Poetry*, ed. Karl Shapiro (Evanston, Ill.: Row, Peterson, 1962), p. 155.

In the fine, later poems on death, there is a clear-eyed recognition of the horror of "nothing," of death as the holes in the net, of the transience of life, and of the fallibility of the mind. To look on death as long and steadily and with such absorption as Smith has done is to come to terms with mortality.

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