

"After the ebb-flow": A.J.M. Smith's Nature Poetry

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*Earth, isn't this what you want: invisibly
To arise in us?*

—Rilke, "Elegy 9," *Duino Elegies*

For all his preoccupation with death, or perhaps because of it, A.J.M. Smith was fascinated with energy, force, and dynamic action. Smith studied and wrote about the seventeenth-century Metaphysical poets,¹ and he wrote Metaphysical poems of his own on faith and death; but his nature poems, collected in section two of *Poems, New and Collected*²—which critics usually speak of as Imagist—in fact go beyond Imagist theory and practice to reveal, equally as much as his Metaphysical poems do, Smith's order-seeking habit of mind.

As Abraham Klein once noted, Smith "has taken for his themes the grand verities and not the miniscule ephemera"³ The Imagist poems, though limited in focus to minute objects and brief moments, are indeed part of Smith's "grand verities." The approach in the Imagist poems is different from that in the Metaphysical poems, but in both modes the impetus is towards "philosophic unity."⁴ In the Imagist poems, Smith begins with a natural object and traces it inward to its constituents, explores its relation with other objects, and examines its existence in time; in the Metaphysical poems, on the other hand, he ranges outward through comparison and conceit.

¹ See A.J.M. Smith, "Studies in the Metaphysical Poets of the Anglican Church in the Seventeenth Century," diss., Edinburgh U., 1931; "Some Relations Between Henry Vaughan and Thomas Vaughan," *Papers of the Michigan Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters* 18 (1933): 851-81; "Donne and Spenser: Two Poetics," address, Language and Literature Section, Michigan Academy of Science, Arts and Letters, 23 Mar. 1959; and "Donne Lecture" (rev. and corrected), n.p., n.d., 1-20, A.J.M. Smith Papers, Bata Library, Trent U, B-78-007/5 (18). As well, there is the appreciative criticism of Henry Vaughan in the parody "To Henry Vaughan." Among the Smith Papers are notebooks on Traherne, Vaughan, Herbert, and Donne.

² (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1967) 42-52. Hereafter abbreviated as *PNC*. For information about the publication history of each poem, I am indebted to the following bibliographies: Anne Burke, *A.J.M. Smith: An Annotated Bibliography* (Toronto: ECW P, 1983); Michael Darling, "A Variorum Edition of the Poems of A.J.M. Smith with a Descriptive Bibliography and Reference Guide," diss., York U, 1979.

³ A.M. Klein, "The Poetry of A.J.M. Smith," *Canadian Forum* 23.277 (1944): 257.

⁴ A.J.M. Smith, "A Note on Metaphysical Poetry," *Canadian Mercury* 1.3 (1929): 61.

Both kinds of poems are intellectual probes. In Smith's nature poems, the attention to fact which is typical of Imagist poetry combines with an idealism which seeks patterns of intelligibility within all fields of experience.

D.M.R. Bentley sees in Smith's nature poems the adaptation of Imagist ideas and practices to the Canadian environment. The poem which Smith places first in this group, "To Hold in a Poem," Bentley sees as a prelude to and announcement of what follows: "The implied function of the poet is to discover and distill the genius of Canada"⁵ "To Hold in a Poem" does propose an austere language appropriate to "the spirit of prairie and river" of the Canadian landscape, but the natural objects which are the subjects of the succeeding poems are not particularly Canadian. The poems do not draw attention to locality, as Roy Daniells points out: "The structure of Smith's landscape references is . . . puzzling; they seem for the most part unlocated"⁶ And that is so because Smith's motive (what Bentley calls "implied function") is not description of place, much less "the spirit of place." His motive is the discovery of order; his subject is the operations, movements, and relations in nature.

Writing from "within the object" is the cornerstone of Imagist theory. T.E. Hulme, its prominent theorist, articulated the metaphysics of the Imagist movement as derived from the philosopher Henri Bergson, whose work he translated. Hulme, following Bergson, believed that by intuition alone one grasps a thing, as itself, or, as Bergson explains: "By intuition is meant the kind of *intellectual sympathy* by which one places oneself within an object in order to coincide with what is unique in it."⁷ The Imagists condemned analytical perception as confining itself to the external, relational point of view.⁸ For the Imagists, the intuitive faculty grasps objects in and of themselves; the image communicates the thing discovered. However, Smith's are poems "Not of Things only, but of Thought" (Bentley's title). They are poems of images and analysis. Smith has the "intellectual sympathy" which the Imagists value (he does seem to write from "inside the object"), but he also practises the analysis

⁵ "Not of Things Only, but of Thought: Notes on A.J.M. Smith's Imagistic Poems," *Canadian Poetry* 11 (1982): 29.

⁶ "Fringe Benefit," rev. of *The Classic Shade*, by A.J.M. Smith, *Canadian Literature* 79 (1978): 75.

⁷ *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, 1903, trans. T.E. Hulme, ed. Thomas A. Goudge (Indianapolis: Library of Liberal Arts, 1955) 23-24.

⁸ Bergson 24; John T. Gage, *In the Arresting Eye: The Rhetoric of Imagism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1981) 10.

which they condemn. For him, intellectual understanding has to succeed the "intellectual sympathy" of intuition. Like Thomas Traherne, the seventeenth-century Metaphysical poet, Smith seems to believe that the thought of an object is better than the object itself because it brings the object closer than mere representation can. "Apprehensions within are better than their Objects."⁹ The faculty of understanding works beyond the Imagists' "intellectual sympathy" to grasp, not the fact, but the meaning of the fact. Smith's Imagist poems create, not merely a visual world, but an intelligible one.

There are ten Imagist nature poems in section two of Smith's *Poems, New and Collected*; except for "To Hold in a Poem," these are single image or single scene poems—about a creek, a cliff, a current, a stony strand, a flower, and so forth. The objects are small and ordinary; the poet's presentation of them, concentrated and brief. "The great aim," says Hulme, "is accurate, precise and definite description."¹⁰ Moreover, Smith's focus is always a scene or an object in a scene where things edge into one another—a scene of interactive elements. Relation is thus built into the poems. He writes about a stream's edge in "The Creek," the rock at the edge of the sea in "Sea Cliff," the ragged edges of a meadow in "Walking in a Field," trees on the edge of a lake in "Birches at Drummond Point," the narrows in "Swift Current," the frayed edges of leaves in "Wild Raspberry," and the coastline of a bay in "The Lonely Land." The natural world is constituted of relations among things. Not things, but the relations among things, make the universe dynamic.

Secondly, these poems have a structural similarity. In each poem there is a turn; that is, there is a seeing and a further seeing. This turn—this further seeing—is signalled by a pivotal word. The two-stage seeing captures the moment-by-moment relation among things, and the relation between object and viewer. This is contrary to the practice of other Imagists, who wish to fix the image in time. The temporal flux, according to Bergson, "always operates to *distort* [my italics] perception by showing every thing to us in relation to something else, in constant action" (Gage 13). The Imagists seek an instantaneous, rather than a cumulative, effect. Smith aims, as the Imagists do, for an intuitive grasp of the thing and for its accurate presen-

⁹ Thomas Traherne, *Poems, Centuries and Three Thanksgivings*, ed. Anne Ridler (London: Oxford U P, 1966) 323.

¹⁰ "Romanticism and Classicism," *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Herbert Read (1924; London: Routledge, 1968) 132. Hulme is discussing beauty when he makes this remark.

tation; but, in his poems, after that presentation, there is narrative movement.

In Smith's Imagist poems, no object exists in itself alone, nor does it exist in the same way a moment later. Images are not isolable because there is a constant flux in time and because the mind, which is part of that flux, is not still, but moves with the object in time. The fundamental difference between Smith's Imagist poetry and that of the Anglo-Americans is that Smith presents objects in relation and in time; the Imagists fix the image in time. Smith's practice of Imagism is, in fact, closer to the theories of Ernest Fenollosa ("Thought is successive . . . because the operations of nature are successive")¹¹ than it is to the theory and practice of the Anglo-Americans. Although the Imagists used Fenollosa's essay to give their theories "scholarly authority," his poetic, like Smith's, emphasizes things in action. A close examination of the ten Imagist nature poems reveals Smith's focus on action; it also reveals the pattern in his arrangement of these poems.

In both of his collected volumes and in his *Selected Poems*, Smith prefaces his Imagist nature poems with "The Two Birds,"¹² a poem which, when originally published in December 1926, was called "Something Apart." Its placement in each collection is significant: "The Two Birds" describes a relationship with nature which is the opposite of that achieved by the poet in the Imagist nature poems. In "The Two Birds," the speaker is in a landscape, but he is alienated from it by his own foulness.

The "So" which begins the poem is a sequence marker. "So I went into the cool / Pinewoods" The woods to which the speaker has resorted, as a result of some unspecified event, is a radiant world of "cool sweet air." Like Henry Vaughan's world ("To Henry Vaughan"), this world is connected with heaven by "the gold sun's winding stair." This cool, still world is a place of refreshment for all but two creatures, "the cat-bird" and the speaker.

So I went into the cool
Pinewoods where the yellow sun falls
Into a steel-gray pool
And heard at irregular intervals

¹¹ *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, trans. Ezra Pound (Washington: Square Dollar Series, 1935) 57.

¹² *McGill Fortnightly Review* 2.3 (1926):23; rev. *Collected Poems* (Toronto: Oxford UP, 1962); rpt. *PNC* and *The Classic Shade: Selected Poems* (Toronto: McClelland, 1978); hereafter abbreviated as *CS*.

The angular creaking note
That is forced rather than falls
From the cat-bird's ragged throat. (40)

The identification of the bird and the speaker is made explicit in stanza two: "I heard what that solitary cried / In a voice as twisted as mine." The speaker cannot fit his voice to the world which he has entered because of "that other foul bird, my black heart."

Commenting on the poem, Smith has said it expresses "bitterness, remorse, and self-disgust"; more important, Smith connects the heart's condition in "The Two Birds" with the bitter king who fled the "fat royal life" ("Like an Old Proud King in a Parable").¹³ In "The Two Birds," the speaker has carried his "black heart," his bitterness, into the place apart. "The Two Birds" is about a necessary second stage. Recognition of the foulness of the "black heart," recognition of how it keeps one "alien from all these" and makes song "twisted," is a prerequisite to the "communion" with summer and "the morning's glory" expressed in the final Imagist poem, "Convolvulus." "The Two Birds" is a cleansing poem which enables the poet's intense identification with the objects of the natural world in the Imagist poems. It is the entrance to them.

Imagist theory and practice corresponded with (or contributed to) Smith's notion that pure poetry requires clear and lively perceptions,¹⁴ but for him, as for Thomas Traherne, pure seeing is not an end in itself but a "Preparative"—"felicite / Appears to none but them that purely see" (Traherne 14). Smith's arrangement of his Imagist nature poems—prefacing the section with "The Two Birds," ending it with "Convolvulus"—suggests that the end of the process of seeing and understanding is "felicite," the joyful note in "Convolvulus" when things are seen to be connected.

"Sea Cliff"¹⁵ gives the impression of having been written from "inside the object." The lineation of the poem creates the slap and rest of the waves. Two lines of paired nouns, yoked by the same preposition, are followed by a rest line.

¹³ *Towards a View of Canadian Letters: Selected Critical Essays, 1928-1971* (Victoria: U of British Columbia P, 1973) 213.

¹⁴ "Observations," rev. of *Selected Poems*, by Marianne Moore, *The Rocking-Horse* 2.4 (1935): 26.

¹⁵ *Canadian Forum* 10.117 (1930):332; rev. *News of the Phoenix* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1943); rpt. *CP*, rev. *ellipse* 22 (1978): 80; rpt. *PNC, CS*.

Wave on wave
and green on rock
and white between

This pattern is repeated; but whereas the first three lines present movement and colour, the next three create movement and sound.

the splash and black
the crash and hiss
of the feathery fall

The syntax is manipulated to create the waves' force and rhythm. The monosyllabic nouns, most of which begin with *w*, *s*, and *f*, create a fracture effect, but the verse is without a verb, demonstrating that action is inherent in objects and the relations among objects.

The pivotal turn occurs at "after"; the word is repeated.

after—
after the ebb-flow,
wet rock
high—
high over the slapping green,
water sliding away
and the rock abiding,
new rock riding
out of the spray. (43)

The first "after" marks a passage of time; the tide has ebbed. The second "after" belongs to the narrative. The sum total of things remains the same, yet the rock is new. The continuity of the scene is carried by the feminine rhymed participles—"sliding," "abiding," "riding"—but that continuity contains the dynamically new—the "new rock riding." The second seeing of the elements (in the second stanza) contains the first, the memory of the first; the rock is what it was and also new. Mind moves with the thing in time, incorporating what is new within what abides, the continuity of "wave on wave."

Desmond Pacey quotes "Sea Cliff" as an example of Smith's affirmation of "the triumph of beauty or love or strength or of spiritual values generally over all those forces, natural and social, which seek to overwhelm them."¹⁶ Similarly, Bentley

¹⁶ *Ten Canadian Poets* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1958) 215.

describes "Sea Cliff" as the discovery of "human resonances" in a terrain apparently devoid of them; the second stanza suggests, says Bentley, "both a sexual rhythm and an enduring strength which have clear, human referents" (31). It is just such humanization of nature that Smith objects to in his "Rejected Preface."¹⁷ For Smith, nature does not mirror the human. The only connection between the two is that which occurs when the senses are open and the intellect comprehends. This brings nature closer than any imparting to it of human values, spiritual or sexual. The identification of the human and the natural occurs when nature is prized for what it is in itself. This prizing becomes, in "Wild Raspberry," a "feast"; in "Convolvulus," a celebration.

Like "Sea Cliff," "The Creek"¹⁸ depicts the interaction between water and shore focusing on a variety of objects at stream's edge. The overall effect is one of things matted together.

Stones
 still wet with cold black earth,
 roots, whips of roots
 and wisps of straw,
 green soaked crushed leaves
 mudsoiled where hoof has touched them,
 twisted grass
 and hairs of herbs
 that lip the ledge of the stream's edge:

these

Alliteration and consonance effectively draw attention to the quality of each object. These consonant sounds suggest that this is a rough heaving together of things and textures. The first stanza is followed at a distance by the summary "these," not "it" note, but "these" for the objects remain discrete while temporarily connected.

In the second seeing (of stanza two), the speaker presents what is later ("then") and different; that is, his eye has moved to the water itself.

¹⁷ Smith's preface was written for the 1936 anthology *New Provinces*; almost thirty years later, it was published as "A Rejected Preface," *Canadian Literature* 24 (1965): 6-8.

¹⁸ *The Dial* (Nov. 1928) 414; rev. NP; rev. *A Sort of Ecstasy. Poems: New and Selected* (East Lansing: Michigan State UP; Toronto: Ryerson, 1954). Hereafter SE; rev. CP; *ellipse* 22 (1978): 82, trans. 83; rpt. PNC, CS.

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

these (44)

"Foamfroth," line one, suggests a churning action, but the churning action is broken into discrete movements, the listing of which parallels the listing of objects in stanza one. This is a stanza of movement—of verbs, not nouns. Movement and the effects are understood by breaking movement into parts. "Break the world all into parts," said Traherne, "examine them asunder" (176), and that is what Smith appears to be doing here. Smith scrutinizes, not the "arrested" object, but the object in motion and in time.

Motion renders things "a little changed." "And stranger," too, notes the speaker as the things move further in the direction of change, "nearer / nothing." Visually, the "nothing" is the dark space of water cleared of the tattered bits of things, which are swept, or nearly swept, away. But conceptually the "nothing" is part of the totality which is summed up by the second "these." The sum total of things is constant, but the parts within that total are in constant flux. No two moments of seeing will be the same. What the poet sees is the continuous interaction of creek and shore; what the poet understands is constancy and flux as they exist within the scene.

The "outward appearance" of the poem, says Edel, is "so innocent": "the sparkling creek widening into a pool."¹⁹ The poem contains, as well as perception, the process of understanding what has been perceived. Edel, however, finds something quite different in "The Creek":

The very shape of this poem as we hold it up to
 the light is human; . . . there are two bodies in
 the two stanzas, and the bodies are male and fe-
 male. The first stanza is all female and the second
 is male. (207)

Edel sees female in "the rigidities expressed in the first stanza" and male in "the pounding movement in the second." The things

¹⁹ Leon Edel, "The Worldly Muse of A.J.M. Smith, *U of Toronto Quarterly* 47 (1978): 207.

of the first stanza are, however, tentative, not rigid, and the movement of the second is hardly "pounding." If it were, things would be more than "a little changed." Edel regrets that "verbal contrivances . . . make the poem intellectual, almost diagrammatic" (208). Edel's interpretation works against what "The Creek," by his own admission, really is, "intellectual, almost diagrammatic." In an objective response which is both sensual and intellectual, Smith discovers form in nature. The nature poems, like most of Smith's poetry, reveal a conceptualizing tendency linked to sensuous language.

"Swift Current"²⁰ is Smith's third water study. In all three, Smith's subject is the interactive edge of water and shore. Here, Smith was able to observe something of the close and fluid connection among things—what Traherne describes as "the Beauty and Servicableness of its [creation's] Parts" (172).

"Swift Current" proceeds by description, negation, and similitude.

This is a visible
and crystal wind:
no ragged edge,
no splash of foam,
no whirlpool's scar;
only
—in the narrows,
sharpness cutting sharpness,
arrows of direction,
spears of speed. (45)

The turn, which signals a further seeing, falls between the negation and the similitude. In this poem, the further seeing is conveyed in metaphor.

After the wind is described, the stillness of the water is presented as a negation: "no ragged edge, / no splash of foam, / no whirlpool's scar," but this is, in fact, a "swiftness," which is perceptible "only / —in the narrows." Where the current is concentrated by the limits of space, its real nature is discernible. Similarly, under the poet's narrowing of attention, his concentration, the swiftness of the current appears, in its diverse movements, as a sequence of metaphors. The poet breaks his image of the current into fragments and reconstitutes the visual image in metaphors of movement; he juxtaposes the natural

²⁰ *Canadian Forum* 10.117 (1930): 332; rev. NP; rpt. SE, CP, PNC, CS.

image with martial images of blades, arrows, and spears, achieving what Hulme believes is requisite in a metaphor, "the charm of direct impression" (Gage 19). The swift current is a clash of blades, "sharpness cutting sharpness"; it is an "arrow" and a "spear," which are active, bearing direction and speed.

"Swift Current" does not emphasize the visual content which is so important to the Imagists. Only in the further seeing—"in the narrows"—is the current really presented, when the visual is "translated" into metaphors which are tactile and vectorial. Bentley, discussing the "vectorial signs" in this poem, compares "Swift Current" to a "futurist" (or cubist) painting." The Imagists sought the "instantaneous, processless image" outside the "flux of time." Smith's poems incorporate time, for only in time can the close connection of everything exist. There are no things in isolation in Smith's nature poems. "A true noun," writes Fenollosa, "an isolated thing, does not exist in nature" (60). In each of these three water studies, then, the sum total of things remains permanent; change is, in effect, a reconstitution of the parts.

In "Walking in a Field, Looking Down and Seeing a White Violet,"²¹ the poet discovers as he walks in a field at springtime a different kind of reconstitution within nature, one which is organic rather than algebraic, making this poem more intimate and less abstract than the others.

The two-stage seeing is made explicit in "Walking in a Field." "The eye," surveying the meadow, notes this and that. Four "and's" amass the things seen; "the eye" is, at this stage, a collector.

Threading
 the ragged edges
 of meadowgrass
 and avid arches
 of tendrils
 and torn leaves
 and straws
 of last year's grass
 and strings
 of crass cornwisps
 windwafted
 from last year's
 sheaves

²¹ *Canadian Literature* 15 (1963): 19; rpt. *PNC, CS*.

the eye (46)

But as the pun "Threading" indicates, something is to be made of these stray bits. The eye is an active maker, a player.

In the arrangement of the poem, "the eye" is centrally located; it is "inside the object," in this case, the scene. The eye "plays" with the scene. The passive and the active eye are suggested in the poem's title, "Looking . . . and Seeing." In the second stanza, "the eye" becomes active, playing "Jackstraws / to disentangle . . ." "the welter" of things. "Jackstraws" is an effective pun, referring, as it does, both to the "straws / of last year's grass" and to the game. In the game of "Jackstraws," the player tries to remove a straw or thin stick from a jumbled heap. In "Walking in a Field," "the eye" sorts out this from that in a meadow scene which is a combination of last year's straws and this year's grass. The "straw" which the eye plays for is "the skywhite skyblue / first white shoot / of a white violet." The fineness of the player, "the eye," is suggested by the fine colour distinctions. The alliteration and repetition convey the pressure and the pleasure of the effort. The pleasure of the game results in what Greg Gatenby describes (derisively) as a "syllabic orgy."²²

"The eye" picks out "graygreen" from "grayblack" in a manner of seeing which parallels the violet's own volition:

lifting a graygreen stalk
out of the welter
of leafgreen grassgreen
folded over the old
grayblack earth's
mothermilky
breast (46)

The eye unfolding the green sees the debris beneath it, not as a welter of things, but as source. There is an essential difference between "Looking . . . and Seeing." One is visual; the other is visual-intellectual. The active eye brings nature into the mind and enables affect. That affect is the speaker's pleasure which is expressed as "play" and which results in the "syllabic orgy."

²² Rev. of *The Classic Shade: Selected Poems*, by A.J.M. Smith, *Tamarack Review* 71-78 (1979): 86.

Both "Walking in a Field" and the next poem, "Wild Raspberry,"²³ show perception as issuing in pleasure. In *Poems, New and Collected*, Smith has arranged his Imagist poems to reflect the speaker's increasing response to nature: the first poems are objective and abstract; the last, "Convolvulus," is ecstatic. "Walking in a Field" and "Wild Raspberry" fall halfway in that development.

Addressed to the raspberry, "Wild Raspberry" presents the plant before and after rain, just as the "Sea Cliff" is described at tide and ebb-tide; but this speaking is more personal—a fact signalled by the direct address.

Your ragged leaves
are speckled with dust

They are frayed at the edges
and sticky with sunshine.

The raspberry leaves, "frayed" and "ragged" in sunshine and dust, are refreshed by the rain. "The eye" is similarly "refreshed" in its interaction with the plant. Whereas the first two couplets state the condition of the plant, in the next four couplets "the eye" relishes colour and design ("gashes" and "curves") as it slides over the curve of branches.

but after the rain
gashes of red

glisten
among slipp'ry green leaves

Yellow whips
and prickly little branches

are pulled into curves
by the big berries (47)

The "glisten" of colour and the "slipp'ry" and "prickly" textures are sensual apprehensions which culminate in the eye's "feast" on "the big berries": "The eye feasts on them / and feels refreshed."

In "Refining Fire," Smith speaks of the poet's delight which is "first and foremost a passion of the eye, a sort of visual thirst

²³ *Pan* 2 (1958) n.p.; rev. CP; rpt. PNC, CS. In all versions except in *Pan*, the poem carries the subtitle "For W.W.E. Ross."

that drinks eagerly whatever it lights upon."²⁴ "Wild Raspberry" recalls Smith's homage "To Jay MacPherson"; the two poems were published within a year of each other. In "To Jay MacPherson," the fisher-poet provides the life-giving feast, the "sacramental fish." In "Wild Raspberry," Smith records an apprehension of nature which is, for the speaker, refreshment and feast. Implicit in both poems is the comparison of poetry to communion. Receiving the communion is "a physical expression of the receiving of spiritual grace";²⁵ similarly here, nature, sensually apprehended, becomes "really and effectually" present in the speaker. The raspberries' refreshment becomes his own.

W.W.E. Ross, to whom this poem was dedicated, writes to Smith:

Towards the end of the last ("Wild Raspberry") I felt a slight falling off. Now, this may be deliberate, to emphasize the repose of the 'refreshment.' But I thought you might put it 'The eye feasts on these' rather than 'The eye feasts on them', in which case 'feels' would not be so necessary as now (after 'them') and could be replaced, simply, by 'is'. Merely a suggestion.²⁶

It was a suggestion Smith did not follow, perhaps because "feels" is appropriately sensuous, following the sensory detail, and because "them," rather than "these," suggests the intimacy between "a world to be contemplated and a mind to contemplate it."²⁷

In none of the foregoing Imagist nature poems does Smith suppose nature has intent, voice, or message. If it had, our human, analytical efforts would be suspended in a mere listening to message or voice. However, in "Birches at Drummond Point,"²⁸ he considers the possibility that nature is alive with messages. "Birches" has a nostalgic cast; it is the one poem in the section which refers to a specific place.

²⁴ "Refining Fire: The Meaning and Use of Poetry," *On Poetry and Poets: Selected Essays* (Toronto: McClelland, 1977) 64.

²⁵ Smith, "Studies in the Metaphysical Poets of the Anglican Church" 46.

²⁶ Michael E. Darling, "On Poetry and Poets: The Letters of W.W.E. Ross to A.J.M. Smith," *Essays in Canadian Writing* 16 (1979-80): 120.

²⁷ Smith, "Studies in the Metaphysical Poets of the Anglican Church" 322.

²⁸ This poem first appeared as "Silver Birches" in 1926; as "Birches at Drummond Point: Lake Memphremagog," *Quarry* 16.4 (1967): [back cover]; rev. *Canadian Literature* 36 (1968): 97; rev. *PNC* 48. "Birches at Drummond Point" and "Tree" are structurally unlike the other poems in this section; they contain no "turn." Smith dropped them from the section of Imagist poems in *Classic Shade*.

Sharpness cutting sharpness
 arrows of direction
 spears of speed.

However this "Tree" does not belong to the world of experience.

As words denote the speed and direction of thought in the mind, so they denote things in the mind. The mind is capable, not of concepts only, but of things. The mind can create everything a tree is, everything involved with a tree, including time.

I say tree
 and the rain falls
 and the sun gets to work
 and the seed breaks
 and the sprout appears

and the years pass
 and here it is spring again. (49)

"And here it is spring again" is the "here" of the mental reality. This is the capacity of the mind to envision fully a world; a tree grows in the mind. This "mental" tree is not some ideal tree any more than it is a phenomenal tree. It is, none the less, an individual tree of particular characteristics: "gray, black, knotted, gnarled." Mind has a creative power whereby the things of the mind have (as things have in objective reality) speed, direction, and an existence in time. The other Imagist poems show how nature can be made "really and effectually" present to the human mind; "Tree" demonstrates the power that enables that achievement.

"The Lonely Land"³¹ illustrates, as Pacey points out, Smith's "care in revision." He notes that these changes ("with one possible exception") make the poem tighter, "more concrete and exact" (214). In spite of these revisions, and in spite of the fact that it is a poem which Marianne Moore of *The Dial* "greatly admired"³² and critics have since acclaimed as a Canadian classic, Smith himself faults it: "Well, what I have against it is it's too much in the patriotic-nature-Canadian poetry style."³³

³¹ *McGill Fortnightly Review* 1.4 (1926): 30; rev. *Canadian Forum* 7.82 (1927): 309; rev. *New Outlook* 5 (1927): 8; rev. *The Dial* (June 1929): 495-96; rev. *NP*; rpt. *SE, CP, ellipse* 22 (1978): 84, 86; trans. 85, 87; rpt. *PNC, CS*.

³² Letter to A.J.M. Smith, 28 Nov. 1928. A.J.M. Smith Papers, Bata Library, Trent U. B-78-007/1(2).

³³ Gordon Johnston and Michael Peterman, "The Voice to Go With the Room," an interview with A.J.M. Smith, *Friends of the Bata Library* 2 (1979-80): n.p. This comment seems to contradict

Smith's presentation of nature in these Imagist poems is a study of force, motion, and dynamic action. To trace out the "stagger and fall" and recovery, the "stagger and fall" and loss of the wild duck's call in the lonely land, as Smith does, is, in some degree, to participate in them. When intuition and understanding become participation, the speaker becomes, or partakes of, the thing he observes: the "refreshment" in "Wild Raspberry," "the beauty" in "The Lonely Land."

"The Lonely Land" can be compared with "The Two Birds," a poem which it parallels in several ways. The two poems appeared in the same year, 1926, in *The McGill Fortnightly*. Smith tells us a "brief bit" was taken over from "Something Apart," the first version of "The Two Birds," "and worked into 'The Lonely Land'."³⁴ In other words, the original poems were alike enough to allow a transposition of phrases. In the 1926 versions of these poems, the speaker in each seeks ease in the landscape: in "Something Apart," from "the sorrow in my heart" and in "The Lonely Land," to "Find for a tired heart relief." Although Smith edits this attention to self out of both poems, the poems remain studies in the speaker's relationship with nature. In "The Lonely Land," the speaker finds something satisfying in nature; in "The Two Birds," the speaker, like the "cat-bird," is "something apart," "alien" from everything in the "Pinewoods."

In the fourth version of "The Lonely Land" (*Dial*, June 1929), Smith adds the final stanza:

This is the beauty
of strength
broken by strength
and still strong. (51)

Although he gets rid of the attitudinizing statement of relief in the first version—

It is good to come to this land
Of desolate splendour and grey grief,
And on a lone, stony strand
Find for a tired heart relief
In a wild duck's bitter cry—

in effect, he reinstates it in the added *Dial* stanza, but with an important difference. In the first version, the speaker simply

Bentley's theory that "the implied function of the poet is to discover and distill the genius of Canada . . ."

³⁴ Towards a View 212.

identifies with the "monstrous plaint" of the wild duck's cry. In the later version, the speaker tracing the ragged and passionate tones which

stagger and fall
and recover,
and stagger and fall
on these stones— (50)

finds that the "passionate tones" are gathered up with the "blown spume and windrift / and thin, bitter spray" into "this resonance / of stony strand." The speaker discovers nature's self-contained subordination of dissonant elements; things "jagged," "sharp," "bitter," and "ragged" are part of nature's "resonance."

At first glimpse, the natural world seems to be a disorderly "ragged" "welter" of things. Smith uses the adjective "ragged" in four of these poems—"ragged edge," "ragged edges of meadowgrass," "ragged leaves," and "ragged and passionate tones"—but in each poem the raggedness is, on further examination, seen to be a function of a dynamism which is itself a steady "communion" among things ("The Convolvulus"). "The Convolvulus"³⁵ is the poem which closes the Imagist nature section. The triple-named flower of its title convolves, or encloses, all "ragged edges." By luck or by wit, Smith struck on just this flower, a flower whose name and whose structure enrich the meaning of the poem. Cultivated, the flower is called morning glory; wild, it is called bindweed and grows rampant in hedge and ditch, over other plants, enfolding them. Both wild and cultivated, the flower closes at night and opens in the morning, raying out from its "narrow throat." Though it looks delicate, it is tough and vigorous.

Smith sees "The Convolvulus" as the trumpet voice of nature, ringing "like a great shout." The speaker is the conductor of a choir of one.

Open your narrow throat,
convolvulus, and cry

Let your paean of being
ring like a great shout

³⁵ *Pan* 2 (1988) n.p.; rev. CP; rpt. PNC, CS.

distinguished
in the diapason

of the yellow sun
and a million green shoots

—in the communion of summer
and the morning's glory (52)

From this "narrow throat" will come a ringing shout "of being," "distinguished" and distinguishing the entire range of other voices, "the diapason" of "a million green shoots." The unfolding flower is a voice in accordance, unlike the "cat-bird's"; moreover, because of its "communion" with "shoots," "sun," and "summer," the convolvulus "articulates" their glory and "the morning's glory," much as Hopkins' "Windhover" is a whole "king-dom of daylight."³⁶

"Convolvulus" is scarcely an Imagist poem at all. Although its subject is tiny and common enough to fit Hulme's criteria, "all dry and hard" (126), in "Convolvulus" the visual presentation is not primary; what the convolvulus *means* is. If we think of the first and the further seeing which structure Smith's Imagist poems as the perceptive and the contemplative seeing, then "Convolvulus" is largely of the second kind. Smith's observation on F.R. Scott's Imagist poetry comments appropriately on "Convolvulus" and on all Smith's own Imagist poems.

The purpose of an Imagist poem is to perceive and to present perceptions, but here we go further in an effort to grasp the idea of the thing and of its place in history.³⁷

Such understanding works beyond the Imagists' representation to grasp, not the fact, but the meaning of the fact.

Few Canadian poets write of nature as objectively as Smith does. He carefully avoids imposing or "implanting" human "shapes" and "characteristics" on nature. Smith embraces the Imagist practice of "seeing the thing in itself," which he refers to as "nakedness of vision," but he subjects what he sees to analysis. Where he differs from the Imagists, he resembles Thomas Traherne, whose notion of "pure seeing" includes analysis and

³⁶ John Fern examines Hopkins' influence on Smith in "Bent Worlds: The Influence of Gerard Manley Hopkins on A.J.M. Smith," *Hopkins Among the Poets: Studies in Modern Responses to Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Richard F. Giles (n.p. International Hopkins Association Series, n.d.) 61-65.

³⁷ "F.R. Scott and Some of His Poems," *Canadian Literature* 31 (1967): 35.

leads to "Felicitee." "Survey the Skin, cut-up the flesh, the Veins / Unfold: The Glory there remains" (40). If nature is infused with "glory," analysis discovers, not destroys, it.

"Metaphysical poetry and pure poetry are what I stood and stand for,"³⁸ Smith wrote to Pacey in 1957—but are they compatible? The pure poet has no aim other than accurate presentation. The Metaphysical poet, inspired by a philosophic conception of the universe,³⁹ is concerned with establishing relations among things and connecting experiences. What we see in section two of *Poems, New and Collected* is a Metaphysical poet adapting the Imagist poetic to his subject, nature, which, for Smith, "possesses a philosophic unity."

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³⁸ Pacey, *Ten Canadian Poets* 203.

³⁹ Herbert Grierson, ed. *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1921) xiii.