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## REVIEW ARTICLE

### THE CANADIAN CRITIC'S BIBLE?\*

For a number of reasons the task of reviewing A.J.M. Smith's comprehensive collection of criticism, *Towards A View of Canadian Letters*, is a daunting one, particularly for a critic interested in the good name and development of Maritime poetry. The cause of this difficulty is produced by a conjunction of two considerations. The first of these will be obvious to most discriminating readers. It is that (a certain popular bestseller notwithstanding) this is the most important collection of the criticism of Canadian poetry yet to have been published, one that would unquestionably have met the approval of A.J.M. Smith's distinguished forerunners, Gordon Waldron, James Cappon, W.E. Collin, and E.K. Brown (if not that of the great Maritimers). The second consideration will be less obvious, particularly to Central Canadians and Westerners. It is that for both historical and aesthetic reasons, no Maritimer worthy of his inheritance can wholly approve of A.J.M. Smith's influence. What is difficult and daunting to the present reviewer is to express adequately the extent of his admiration for the author's critical achievement, and at the same time to hint without misunderstanding at the author's distinct limitations, his sharply defined obliviousness to certain horizons.

Whatever the limitations of the book, the sweep of the view of Canadian letters presented is remarkable. The supporting breadth and accuracy of the reading of the hundreds of individual collections which make up the corpus of Canadian poetry is no less awesome. The major intentions of the author, as they are introduced in the book's synoptic "First Part", are twofold. The first of these is his aim, as a pioneering anthologist and evaluative critic, to map out the general landscape of Canadian poetry, showing its heights and its depths, indicating the pinnacles of achievement that deserve to withstand the erosions of time. The second is to articulate a personal aesthetic, to defend a particular view of the nature and function of poetry (a view as pertinent to world as to Canadian poetry). These intentions provide the thread of continuity that link the twenty-three articles reprinted in the collection, articles that span a period of over thirty years and treat extremely diverse themes.

The twenty-three articles, the product of years of dedicated effort, are intended

\* *Towards a View of Canadian Letters*, by A.J.M. Smith, Vancouver: UBC Press, 1973.

to provide a matured distillation rather than evidence of work in progress. Smith predicts in a prefatory "Author's Note" that his reader will find in them "either a remarkable consistency, or a remarkable lack of development". It is easy enough to see that the author has selected his articles with the purpose of developing this classical point in mind, but it is less easy to believe that the reader will agree that he has done what he intended, particularly in the light of Smith's own title for the collection, "*Towards*" *A View of Canadian Letters*. The obvious area in which even the articles reprinted in this collection provide evidence of growth and development is Smith's treatment of the doctrine of pure poetry as it relates to the source and function of poetry. The author has chosen his most recent, mature, and fullest discussion of this, the article "Eclectic Detachment", as his opening statement on the subject. If the reader moves backwards in time and forwards through the book to such articles as "A Rejected Preface" he will find a much less mature and less satisfying treatment. The two articles directly, and many others indirectly, touch on questions of such importance that I will deal with them more fully later. The point about the cunning with which the author has selected "Eclectic Detachment" as his opening statement on aesthetic questions stands, and a similar point applies also to his choice of "The Introduction" to the *Oxford Book of Canadian Verse* as his initial exploration of the general landscape of Canadian poetry. The last-named piece is a product of Smith's maturity and is based on a number of previous studies such as the 1942 article "Canadian Anthologies: New and Old"<sup>1</sup> and "The Introduction" to *The Book of Canadian Poetry* (1943). If the earlier pieces (not included in this collection) are compared with the later one, it is sufficiently easy to find evidence of development. To mention only two points, one can find that Smith has only gradually come to the recognition that Duncan Campbell Scott (rather than Lampman) is the most important and the most accomplished of the Canadian romantic poets, and that it is only since the fifties that he has been inclined to stress the religious dimension in E.J. Pratt's work.

Although the scope of the collection is awesome, it does not encompass certain well known provinces and wildernesses that lie to the North of summer. It is generally known that A.J.M. Smith has never been particularly sympathetic to the efforts of Al Purdy and his friends to develop a Canadian Poetic vernacular in speech, tone, and rhythm. This, I think, has to be accepted as just one of those things. Smith furthermore has not paid any critical attention to the post-Plath generation, the milieu of poor fools in crow's feathers and lynx skins as they confront the post-absurd world. This omission could be interpreted as courteous deference on Smith's part to the critics of a younger generation so that they can map out for themselves the landmarks (or craters) of their world. It is interesting to speculate, however, that Smith may now believe in the necessity for the development of a strong new native tradition to challenge the helplessness of latter-day cosmopolitanism (disguised as cultural nationalism). But this may be to second-guess the sphinx. . . .

When one is thinking of the scope of Smith's critical efforts, the importance of the context of his work naturally comes to mind. A.J.M. Smith has been so

extensively involved in the development of Canadian writing that the results of his efforts are sometimes hard to separate from the accessible corpus of Canadian poetry itself. Certainly anyone wishing to make a just assessment of Smith's critical achievement (as revealed in this collection) must have a sure sense of the Canadian literary context, a context that includes both the general literary situation and Smith's own work as a poet. To take the literary situation first, it is difficult to realize now how badly Canadian poetry was represented in the six or more anthologies current during the twenties and thirties. That astute Dalhousian, Archibald MacMechan, reflecting on the title *Canadian Poets* which John Garvin gave to his comprehensive anthology (2nd Edition, 1926), wrote:

The ability to write even creditable verse does not entitle one to the name that was almost too good for Milton; but to be accurate would be clumsy. "Canadian Poets, including Verse-Writers of Average Ability, Versers, Worsers, Poetasters, Scribblers and Some People Who Do Not Know What Poetry Is" would possibly be too long a title, but it would fit any anthology which has yet appeared (*Montreal Standard*, 9 October 1926).

It is to A.J.M. Smith's great credit that by dint of immense efforts he succeeded in proving that this situation was the result of the shortcomings of the Canadian anthologists, not the limitations of Canadian poetry itself.

The anthologies which confronted A.J.M. Smith when he began his labours as an anthologist late in the thirties contained, to use his own words, "the worst poems of the best poets, and the best poems of the worst poets" in considerable abundance (176). Smith was virtually the first Canadian critic to use the standard of pressure and vitality (the force of the impulse that compels the poet to transform what he feels) to examine both the large body of older poetry and the substantial quantities of newer work, to separate the living poems from the mass of rhetorical, imitative, stock, solemn or precious verbiage, and to publish the residue of real worth in *The Book of Canadian Poetry* (1943). Smith explains and defends the critical principles that have governed his selections in many of the articles reprinted in this collection. These, it is no exaggeration to say, have strongly influenced in one way or another every anthologist who has followed him. The importance of his work was not merely that he recognized at a very early date the authenticity of such voices as those of Frank Scott, A.M. Klein, Dorothy Livesay, A.G. Bailey, Earle Birney and P.K. Page (though not those, at least at an early date, of Irving Layton and Douglas LePan), but that he insisted on the principle that the power of clear-headed discrimination was an obligatory requirement for the anthologist. No critic has played a greater role than A.J.M. Smith in making a corpus of living Canadian poetry accessible to the public.

He has also played an important part in helping us to recognize those major figures who because of their special gifts and sure sense of Canadian realities must appear to be somewhat larger than life in the Canadian literary landscape, in particular Isabella Crawford, Duncan Campbell Scott, and E.J. Pratt. Few critics (with the exception of James Reaney) have recognized with greater force the

originality of Crawford, and placed her work so uncompromisingly in the mainstream of the Canadian tradition. Smith speaks of her work as "impressionistic poetry that teems with energy and displays for the first time in Canadian writing an imaginative vitality commensurate with the land itself"(7), and then quotes the passage from "Malcolm's Katie" in which Crawford hints at the fire and ice of the Canadian arctic of desire:

In this shrill moon the scouts of winter ran  
From the ice-belted north, and whistling shafts  
Struck maple and struck sumach – and a blaze  
Ran swift from leaf to leaf, from bough to bough  
Til round the forest flash'd a belt of flame. . . .

Smith recognizes in the work of Duncan Campbell Scott (whom he describes as standing "first among the poets of his generation") a similar feeling for "the cruelty and magic power of the wild"(12). Stressing this quality, he has bolstered the claims of Scott's tragic Indian narratives, especially "The Forsaken" and "At Gull Lake, August 1810", to be of central importance, and ever since, despite the protests of Gary Geddes, they have taken their place near the centre of the native tradition. The poet whom Smith was virtually the first to place at the centre of the Canadian tradition has always been E.J. Pratt. Despite significant opposing pressures from certain modernist circles, and despite substantive disagreements of his own with Pratt on the nature and idiom of poetry, Smith allotted Pratt's work twice the space in *The Book of Canadian Poetry* that was allotted to any other poet. The articles reprinted here bear witness both to the consistency with which Smith has fostered Pratt's poetic reputation, and the insight with which he has helped his countrymen to recognize the convictions, the boldness, the power, and the epic proportions that make Pratt a major national figure. This essential work has necessarily involved Smith in a role similar to that of the hagiographer rather than that of the practical critic.

Smith's practical criticism is best seen in the context of his work as a poet. He shows the same care and respect in discussing the work of poets whom he admires as he does in shaping his own poetry. One finds in his practical criticism, as in his creative work, the same instinct for the central impulse of a poem, the same sense of the ways in which subject determines technique, the same awareness of the way in which the subconscious sometimes betrays the conscious mind. Smith as a practical critic is almost invariably prepared to accept a poem on its author's terms. Despite his insistence on the importance of poetic excellence and vitality, he virtually never imposes a set of critical or philosophical expectations on a poem. He is not one of those critics who insists on fitting the work of every poet whom he confronts into a predetermined archetypal pattern. Rather he tries to come to terms with the intention (or stance) and the ironies and the feeling which each individual poem reveals. Evidence of his excellence as a practical critic is contained on almost every page of this collection, but is perhaps best focussed in his detailed discussions of those poets – notably Anne Wilkinson and Margaret Avison – who

work in his own difficult tradition. The range of his taste, however, is better revealed in a trio of articles in which he discusses the work of three very different poets: Duncan Campbell Scott revealed as a cosmopolitan (!) and a powerful erotic poet, E.J. Pratt as a prophetic voice, and P.K. Page, revealed us much more than a demure conjuror and puppet mistress.

Smith's article "The Poetry of Duncan Campbell Scott" (pp. 79-96) contains an admirable treatment both of the delicacy and the force of Scott's work, of his sharpened sense of the way in which sound and colour affect states of mind, of his fascination with dusk, evening, and night, and the conflicting pressures which govern his emotional responses. Smith takes up a number of Scott's poems with which the reader is unlikely to be familiar — "The Voice in the Dusk", "The Fifteenth of April", "Night and the Pines" — and presents them with a faithfulness which should be a model for the practical critic. His account of Scott's complex metaphysic of sexual love is particularly valuable, especially where he considers in detail the poem entitled "The Water Lily", a dreamy symbolist poem where the rendering of physical ecstasy is disguised but honest and unmistakable. What Smith's specific discussions of poetic texture lucidly demonstrate is Scott's ability to fuse the cerebral with the emotional and sensational aspects of experience.

Smith's tolerant cosmopolitanism sometimes tends to bias his treatment of Canadian poems. Such a bias is clearly apparent in his detailed interpretation of Scott's poem "Spring on the Mattagami" (pp. 89-91), an interpretation with which I should like to take issue. Smith suggests that the poem is unmistakably concerned with the conflicting poles of sexual love, one that, though dramatized, is essentially individual with no overlay of wider cultural concern. He claims that the poem gives us "a dramatic presentation of division and the two impulses of attraction and repulsion" (89). It cannot be denied that the poem finds its impulse in the conflicting feelings aroused by a very strong personal fantasy, one that centres on the image of an ideal and seductive lover. The poem, however, is (as Smith himself admits) dramatic, and is concerned not (as Smith implies) with the dynamics of a real (though imagined) relationship, but with conflicting feelings about a fantasy. The implication of the poem gradually widens to encircle those two opposed poles of Scott's sensibility, his dreamy European idealism and his osprey-eyed Canadian primitivism. The *power* generated by these opposed forces seems to me to account for a significant part of Scott's poetic energy, and partially explains the force of such poems as "The Height of Land" and the Indian narrative poems. The beloved in "Spring on the Mattagami" emerges not so much from "Locksley Hall" (the analogy which springs to Smith's mind) as she does from the "Romaunt de la Rose". Her memory comes to the narrator in a European context in the days "when the tide came streaming in from the lido" and "Venice lay abroad builded like beauty's credo"; and he remembers how the lovely maiden pulled "a half-blown rose" from her bosom, a rose which might conceivably hold "a subtle meaning". The narrator day-dreams that his beloved may appear in the forest, and may recognize all its wonders: the water weaving its iridescent patterns, the partridge drumming his "mimic thunder", the loon echoing his "ululating laughter". Yet the lovely girl's presence in the forest is a fragile make-believe, one

where the Queen of Beauty must "keep her soul's imperial reservation" (a significant reversal), and where the thunder may not always be mimic, and the loon's cries not always laughter. It is a world where the promise of courtly love can dissolve in an instant, where European idealism does not necessarily arm one adequately for a fate that is "stern and hard". There is no resolution in the poem *pace* (A.J.M. Smith) because there is none and need be none in Scott's mind. The full culture of occupation had not at that time been even remotely achieved.

Let us turn now to a world where fate is truly stern and hard, the poetic world of E.J. Pratt. A.J.M. Smith has always been (with one or two conceivable exceptions) Pratt's most perceptive reviewer. One of the reasons for this is that he has not allowed himself to be diverted by archetypal preoccupations from the fact that, to use Smith's own words, "Pratt's images . . . lead directly to the cluster of closely related convictions about Man, Nature and God that are implicit in all but the most casual of his poems"(99). While Smith in his article "Some Poems of E.J. Pratt" (pp 99-114) devotes considerable attention to the gargantuan proportions, the gusto, and the wit of Pratt's imaginative world, he does not omit to suggest, by strong implication at least, that in such poems as "The Submarine", "The Stoics", and "Brebeuf", Pratt makes a philosophical (or quasireligious) comment on narrated experience, a comment which, though not without ironies, clearly stems from identifiable convictions. Yet the excellence of Smith's treatment of "The Roosevelt and the Antioe" (a poem which many critics agree is among Pratt's finest) consists in the fact that he allows the poem to speak for itself, only occasionally intervening to high-light a point, or to make a scene more vivid, or to allow the main theme to emerge with added force. The reader will presumably be familiar with the narrative thread of the poem, the story of the attempt by the liner *Roosevelt* to rescue the crew of the freighter *Antioe* battered, listing, and drifting completely out of control in a raging mid-Atlantic storm. He will remember that after all else has failed, the captain of the *Roosevelt* reluctantly agrees to send a lifeboat manned by volunteers to the sinking ship, and that on their return two of the volunteers fail to maintain their hold on the life-lines. Smith does not need to state the poem's central theme, because the story does it for him. Smith implicitly at least draws attention to this theme, one that sophisticated critics have recently been inclined to discount, the theme that the condition of communal survival may well be sacrifice, to the point of life itself if necessary, Smith allows the ironies of Pratt's treatment to emerge by simply quoting the following passage, reminiscent of Hardy's poetry, in which Pratt describes the burial service for the two volunteers:

"Now unto him who is able to do . . .  
Exceedingly abundantly," . . . a wild antiphonal  
Of shriek and whistle from the shrouds broke through  
Blending with thuds as though some throat had laughed  
In thunder down the ventilating shaft  
And the benediction ended with a crack  
Of a stanchion on the starboard beam.

It is the willingness of the volunteers, despite the improbability of survival, to return to their life-boats that enables the men to defeat the pagan sea, rescue the crew of the *Antinoe*, and carry on to the calm of the English Channel. As Smith's criticism clearly demonstrates, Pratt's world is one where safety and calm can only be achieved, and not always then, after one has come to terms with the exhilarating but terrifying experience of some kind of murderous storm, or catastrophe.

It may be considered loutish to juxtapose the rough and manly world of E.J. Pratt with the feminine and compassionate landscapes of P.K. Page, but I believe that there is more than a tenuous link between them, one provided by the heightened sixth sense that they share of the real terrors of isolation and of their shared feeling for the human possibilities ever present in the intractable world of "barbed wire and roses". Though I cannot believe that A.J.M. Smith would ever have encouraged the juxtaposition of the work of two such different poets, his treatment of their work suggests at least one clear parallel between them. Their imaginative worlds are both haunted by the sinister and the unexpected, by sudden danger and possible catastrophe, or by the overwhelming force of irrational impulses. Smith has well described P.K. Page's penchant for the unexpected in the passage where he writes "What is most strange and most revealing in this world is that the workings of the mind are almost unconscious, often as in dreams, and that even the wit is controlled from elsewhere" (p. 148). As he also rightly adds, her poetry "demands a quality of sympathy in the reader." The contemporary Canadian poet with whom P.K. Page's work has the most affinities is Gael Fox, a poet who, though she writes in the idiom of the global village, is similarly preoccupied (though not yet with P.K. Page's subtlety) with the inner compulsions which both connect and separate the body from the mind and from the privacy of dream. Though Smith admits the P.K. Page's poetry is of a kind particularly likely to show up the inadequacies of rational prose criticism, he exposes to its hazards Page's "Stories of Snow", a poem of notable importance in the evolving pattern of Canadian poetry.

"Stories of Snow" is a poem which, as Smith says, grows out of "memories, reveries, and dreams" of childhood and innocence — memories that are enclosed in the image of a toy globe which produces a mimic snowstorm when shaken. The innocent world "rounded with the dream of snow" is one for Page that is prior to that of the instinctive appetite of the "sprouting eyes". An "imaginary snow storm" from this dream world sometimes falls "In countries/ where leaves are large as hands/ where flowers protrude their fleshy chins", a sprouting tropical landscape which is described by A.J.M. Smith as standing for "the natural world of instinct and appearance, of uncontrollable organic growth that strangles and betrays" (149). The innocent dream of snow, however, "shifts from head to head" (perhaps to an older head), and is instantly transformed. The snowy landscape of dream suddenly becomes sinister and somehow less imaginary, one where hunters "go to the frozen lakes in search of swans/ the snow light falling white along their guns", and where these killers "skim the electric ice at such a speed/ they leap the jet strips of naked water". The acid from the silhouetted images etches the "terrible" atmosphere in

the mind. Then the tone of the poem modulates again to one of acceptance (not of sinister horror, as Smith suggests). Page presents the necessities of a winter world which is no longer merely pastoral, but which has been fully possessed and accepted:

And of the swan those dreamers tell  
of its last flight and how it falls, a plummet  
pierced by the freezing bullet  
and how three feathers loosened by the shot  
descend like snow upon it  
while hunters plunge their fingers in its down  
deep as a drift, and dive their hands  
up to the neck of the wrist  
in the warm metamorphosis of snow  
as gentle as the sort that woodsmen know  
who, lost in the white circle, fall at last  
and dream their way to death.

"Stories of Snow", the poet concludes, "are often told/ in countries where great flowers bar the road/ with reds and blues which seal the route to snow" (countries conceivably where the survival of the individual species is the law of the jungle). It is not day-dreaming or wishful thinking which enables the raconteur to go "through to the area behind the eyes/ where silent unrefractive whiteness lies". This is one poem which can herald the possibility of a full culture of occupation.

What is characteristic of almost all Smith's criticism, including that which has been discussed above, is his sure instinct for poetry that is vital and alive and formally realized. From the very beginning of his career he has usually praised those poets who mean what they say, and whose line is sure. His attitude to creative standards is crystallized in some good-mannered but slightly barbed remarks he made respecting Northrop Frye's "Conclusion" to the *Literary History of Canada*. In a passage which deserves to be quoted and italicized he takes diametrical issue with Frye's antagonism to evaluative criticism. "I have", writes Smith, "always believed that evaluation is the end, purpose and *raison d'être* of criticism and that criticism without evaluation, would be, if it could be called criticism, the least rewarding of the pastimes available to the dwellers in the ivory tower" (p. 203). Smith rejects, however, the view of evaluation which would limit it to the canonization of the genuine classics of world literature. He suggests that in the Canadian context the evaluator's task is sufficiently modest, that it is simply "the job of measuring good works of local and even national interest" and "the imperative need . . . to evaluate bad works, whether imitative, dull, pretentious, or incompetent — works which are below the level of literature, and throw them out" (204).

One can readily agree with most of this, although a cautionary note should be added. Smith is not entirely fair to Frye in that Frye's remarks were directed primarily towards the Leavisite evaluators, evaluators who do not give the time of day even to a staggeringly gifted writer unless he meets the criteria of aesthetic and moral excellence determined by the master. It is easy enough to recognize that, in



the Canadian literary setting, such procedures are not always appropriate. In Canada young writers must often coexist in the same academic environment with critics. In this milieu too much emphasis on analysis and evaluation can easily create a spirit which threatens the cocoon of faith and imaginative stimulation from which the mature and realistic writer can eventually emerge, proof against the deadening awareness that he is competing for the favour of unsympathetic judges.

The question of evaluation has not to date been the cause of more than a few hand-to-hand critical skirmishes: it has not yet sparked off any general Canadian critical engagements. The same could not be said of A.J.M. Smith's doctrine of pure poetry, and the closely related question of poetic intention. From Smith's very significant disagreements with Pratt to his major duels with John Sutherland (a Maritimer whom Smith does not accord the recognition that is his due) to his fairly recent brush with Professor John Bilsland, these two questions have been at the centre of some of the most instructive critical exchanges to have taken place in the history of Canadian Letters.

The strongly, even obstinately, held doctrine of Pure Poetry runs like Ariadne's thread through the maze of Smith's poetic career, though not without certain tangles and repairs. It was first fully outlined in Smith's (rightly) "Rejected Preface to *New Provinces*. 1936", a preface which Smith reprints in his collection, and which George Woodcock had the temerity to reprint in *Canadian Literature* (No 24) in 1965. This confused and contradictory polemic does at least contain a reasonably lucid account of the doctrine of Pure Poetry that Smith once held, one derived mostly, it seems, from Archibald MacLeish. Smith suggested then that a theory of pure poetry might be constructed on the assumption that a poem exists as a thing in itself, that "it is not a copy of anything or an expression of anything", but it is "an individuality as distinct as a flower, an elephant, or a man on a flying trapeze" (172). Pure and metaphysical poetry was then for Smith in 1936 "objective, impersonal, and in a sense, timeless and absolute"; "it stands by itself unconcerned with anything save its own existence". This is as clear a rejection as some critics might hope for of Yvor Winters' contention that a poem is written from a particular intellectual perspective and is "a statement in words about a human experience" (*Defence of Reason*, p. 11), and it also implies an Arnoldian dismissal of the notion that poetry is, or ought to be, the handmaiden of religion. Revolutionary critics like John Sutherland never could quite bring themselves to accept at face value what Smith asserted in the foregoing. They suspected Smith of Eliot's strategy, namely that he obscured his use of the term "metaphysical" in such a way that he could be using it "either in the literary or the religio-philosophic sense" or "in both ways at once".<sup>2</sup> Sutherland's suspicion of Smith's refusal to separate form from content even for the purposes of discussion has unfortunately been a distrust which has not been widely shared (particularly not in the academic community). It was not until the 1960s that certain critical squibs spurred Smith to reformulate his doctrine of pure poetry, a reformulation (if it can fairly be called that) which is contained in the article "Eclectic Detachment: Aspects of Identity in Canadian Poetry".<sup>3</sup>

To judge from the tone of injured innocence characteristic of this piece, Smith believed himself to have been grievously misunderstood. He argues in this piece (which is given a prominence in the book which its importance fully warrants) that he had always believed in the importance of poetic personality, a line of argument rather unexpected in a critic whom one always believed to have been a follower of Eliot. True, Smith's concern remains "the quality of Canadian poetry" *per se*, but his focus over three decades has shifted from the impermeable circle in which poetry must be enclosed to the sources of its creation. He uses the phrase "eclectic detachment" to describe the quality which he considers most desirable and most typical in the gifted Canadian poet, but he uses the phrase in a way which would intrigue the linguistic philosopher. The phrase "eclectic detachment", it seems, is to be used to describe not all those worldly, philosophic and non-poetic concerns from which the worthy neophyte must absolve himself, but rather to suggest only those worldly and non-poetic concerns from which he chooses to absolve himself so that he may attach himself to others. Smith's "eclectic detachment" thus involves an assertion of the importance of poetic personality and becomes the cornerstone of a poetic which one would have to strain the language to call pure and classical.

It is one of the pleasant little ironies of Canadian literary history that Smith, a self-avowed classicist who had used a formidable arsenal of rhetoric with such devastating effect against the romantic critics of an earlier generation, should turn in his maturity to the propagation of a species of romantic voluntarism. The irony is high-lighted by the fact that the romantic critics in question — Logan, Sandwell, Deacon, MacMechan, Pierce, *et al* — were agreed in holding to a superficially classical position, the position namely that literature is "the product of forces far wider and deeper than the mind of its individual authors, forces among which that of national (at first provincial) self-consciousness was all important".<sup>4</sup>

The point about Smith's voluntarism, however, should not be taken too far. While Smith acknowledges the diversity of the sources of Canadian poetry, for example the nourishment which Irving Layton has found in Nietzsche, Catullus, the Hebrew prophets, and William Carlos Williams, and which Margaret Avison has found in Tycho Brahe, George Herbert, and Marianne Moore, his main focus is invariably on the ways in which these influences are likely to benefit the poetic universe. He has had no interest in the way in which these influences affect what the poet as a man has to say to other men.

Let there be no ambiguity about the main point which emerges from our discussion of Smith's doctrine of Pure Poetry. He has consistently felt himself pulled towards a form of poetic absolutism as uncompromising as that of Northrop Frye (or that of Matthew Arnold, for that matter). His poetic position calls to mind some lines of Kent Thompson, reprinted in the important new Maritime anthology, *Ninety Seasons* (p. 148)

Now I am asking only for a fair day  
and a high wind so that I can enchant  
myself with the thought of this umbrella  
awkward and open and flying like a great  
roc bird, up and forever lurching

away over the land of myth and history  
 where all the birds fly endlessly  
 and never meet, and all arguments  
 become only flying  
 birds.

What is significant about the kind of criticism which has been pioneered by Northrop Frye, one that encloses itself in Smith's self-contained poetic universe, is that the birds are always being expected to fly in formation, or wing to wing.

Anyone familiar with the tangled history of Canadian poetry during the interwar years will readily enough acknowledge the historical circumstances in which Smith's doctrine of Pure Poetry arose. The version of Canadian poetry represented in the half dozen most influential anthologies then current displayed an immense quantity of second-rate, third-rate, and fourth-rate verse that only masqueraded as poetry. No wonder Canadian poetry was then seen by Smith to be the product of "a soft heart, and a soft soul; and a soft head" (p. 171). Smith's insistence on poetic standards and poetic intensity was an urgent historical necessity, one which then deserved acknowledgement and gratitude, and does so even now.

By the same token a new set of historical necessities demands that Smith's doctrine of Pure Poetry ("the best name of silence") be vigorously challenged. These necessities, it has to be said, are partly of Smith's own creating, and are partly derived from a European view of poetry (Valery's in particular) which Smith has helped to draw into the Canadian circle. They have been created by the widespread acceptance and dissemination of the view that the poetic universe is a self-enclosed circle, one that "bears a strong analogy to the universe of dream" and has no relationship whatever to the useful arts or practical reason.<sup>5</sup> Smith's poetic universe is one where the Poet Orpheus goes underground on his lonely journey to discover the source of the ornamental fountains.

This is the spiritual milieu in which Frye's critical approach, his cosmological approach to the self-contained poetic universe, has taken root and flourished. With his scientific passion for the dream universe of poetry, Frye has fostered through such immense books as his brilliant *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) the growth of a blinkered and authoritarian Aristotelianism of spirit as marked as any known in reactionary circles in late fifteenth-century Italy. Frye's formalist critical system may not derive but is certainly strongly reinforced by a particular set of assumptions about the nature of poetry which Smith has always done his best to propagate. The most central of these is that poetry worthy of the name is produced by an absolutely inseparable fusion of thought and feeling and is "not . . . concerned with the communication of ideas" (172). The natural derivative of this last assumption is that the poet's work will not (and should not) affect the reader's intellectual or spiritual stance in any way, a view which presumably A.J.M. Smith still holds, though recently there has been increasing ambiguity on this point.

What is germane to the present discussion is that Smith's insistence on the autonomy of the poetic universe has lent powerful support to Frye's synthetic system of criticism. The reader will probably be familiar with the basis of this. For

Frye the poetic imagination "swallows" experience, and embodies it in an archetypal literary form in which feeling and experience are inseparably fused.<sup>6</sup> For Frye poetic emotion modifies ideas, not the reverse. Within Frye's frame of reference the task of the critic is to recognize the archetypal form which each individual work embodies. Frye's own main concern as a critic has been to prepare the ground for a *Complete Cosmology of the Literary Universe*, one in which the total pattern of relationships among the limited number of literary forms are revealed.

Frye has encouraged the numerous Canadian critics who admire his work to examine poetry within a single archetypal framework, one which encompasses (and therefore eliminates) the personal intellectual and spiritual perspective of the poet. Douglas Jones, for example, in his *Butterfly on Rock* (1970) suggests that the history of significant Canadian poetry is the record of the evolution of a monolithic Canadian culture, one in which certain archetypal patterns (e.g. "The Sleeping Giant", "Eve in Dejection") focus the concerns of "our [communal] imaginative life".<sup>7</sup> Margaret Atwood has taken Frye's synthetic approach to its omega point in *Survival*. If one were in an unkind mood, one might be tempted to describe this book as a mammoth mechanical moose guaranteed to transform the work of most Canadian critics to the contours of Ms Atwood's own poetic vision. Though there may be something in this, it does less than full justice to a genuinely gifted poetess, and to the importance of the questions which she raises.

Nevertheless Frye's effective elimination of Aristotle's element of thought from poetry (an element which is typically given short enough shrift in the *Poetics*) has led Canadian critics into something of an impasse. I believe that A.J.M. Smith's veiled hints as to the importance of eclectic attachment may help us to rediscover the individuality of each poet's stance, and therefore his importance, and that thus we may be able to find our way out of the thicket. The virtue of A.J.M. Smith's practical criticism has always been that he has been prepared to accept realized poetry on the creator's own terms. It seems to me that this approach could be taken a step further. The critic could recognize that poetry worthy of the name (for instance, Pratt's) arises often from the poet's profoundest convictions as a man (or woman), and that the poet by indirection and usually without full conscious intention, communicates those convictions (or at least some sense of perceptive orientation) to his reader. The poet is, in other words, a man or woman speaking to men and women, not a poet passing the time with a poetess. This brings us back to the justice of Yvor Winters' admirable assertion that a poem "is a statement in words about a human experience". A further proposition might advantageously be added to this, the one namely that the force of realized poetic statement will be directed by the writer's general perspective (one of many possible perspectives). It is the act of exchange (a matter both of feeling and of intellect) involved in poetry, not the emotional release of personal identification which creates a healthy tradition, and draws poets and readers from their individual worlds to seek the possibility of finding common ground. An acceptance of a view of poetry similar to this would enable both poets and critics to nerve themselves for the encounter with the know-nothing squid called Positivist Empiricism as it flexes its tentacles.

Though Smith has generally been prepared to accept the work of poets on their own terms, he has sometimes allowed his personal stance to stand between himself and the appreciation of certain works. He has found it particularly difficult to come to terms with the work of Acadian poets, those poets, that is, who have been nurtured in the more pastoral parts of the Maritimes and who are shielded from the openness of the Atlantic by Newfoundland. Smith's aesthetic has been significantly (too significantly?) influenced by the imagist's insistence on the sharply defined foreground, where rhythm tends to follow the visual pattern. This aesthetic is not appropriate to those Maritime poets who are nurtured by the sea, whose land is frequently shrouded in mist or fog, whose sense of rhythm is conditioned by the independent pulse of the waves, and whose eyes scan a constantly disappearing horizon. Smith has always had the landsman's suspicion of the sorcery of the waves, and consequently his reading of the older Maritime poetry smacks of perversity. By perversity I mean his refusal to realize that Charles Roberts' restless spirit is at its most authentic in "Ave", and his patronizing willingness to damn with faint praise the superb mood poems of Bliss Carman.

Despite this radical misreading, Maritime poetry has not been damaged, although it has been much altered, by the influence of Smith's ideas. There are even — fortunately — still Maritime poets (for instance, Brian Bartlett) whose wings have not been clipped by the crabbed intellect. Indeed despite a loss of poetic fluency, there is ample evidence in the new anthology *Ninety Seasons* that Maritime poets have benefited (for the most part indirectly) from Smith's insistence on the importance of conscientious craftsmanship, although generally they have wisely eschewed the influence of Pound and Eliot, Spender and Auden. I find little or no evidence of the influence of these cultural gurus in the astonishing earthy delicacy of Milton Acorn's lyrics, or in the droll laconics of William Bauer, or in the moving sonnets of Kenneth Leslie. The work of these — and many other Maritime poets — bears witness by its artistic assurance, compression and sustained achievement to the wholesome sense of artistic conscience which has been cultivated by A.J.M. Smith. Perhaps the most important way in which Smith has set an example to his fellow craftsmen is in his mastery over the artistic self-swindle, and in his sense of the difficulty of his art.

The best way to encapsulate Smith's critical influence (as it is represented in *Towards A View of Canadian Letters*) would be in poetic form, but, failing that, I must rely on images. Two come to mind which capture different aspects of Smith's contribution to Canadian letters. The first is that of a quizzical Noah greeting (and screening) the poetic creatures as they make their way on board the ark. The second is that of a tall Moses figure inspired not by the burning bush, but by a flaming arrow. Whether deriving from the first or the second roles, Smith's critical work is of the first importance, especially, perhaps, to those who have least apparent sympathy with his biases.

#### Footnotes

1. *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Vol XI: No. 4 (July 1942), pp. 457-474.
2. John Sutherland "Introduction" to *Other Canadians* (1947), reprinted in L. Dudek & M.

- Gnarowski, eds., *The Making of Canadian Poetry*, p. 52.
3. originally published in *Canadian Literature* No 9 (Spring 1961), pp 22.
4. B.K. Sandwell's words, used to describe Archibald MacMechan's basic position. *The Kingston Whig* (24 October 1924).
5. Smith quotes Paul Valery's remarks to this effect in his article "Poetic Process", *Towards A View of Canadian Letters*, p. 221.
6. A view implicit in almost all Frye's published criticism, but expressed particularly clearly in elementary form in *The Educated Imagination*, p. 31.
7. A direct quotation from *Butterfly on Rock*, p. 3. I have added the word "communal" since it is consistent with the drift of Jones' argument.