

## Introduction

The reader who loves the work of Thomas Hardy or Robert Graves and turns to the best biography of each to find out more about the writer's life may not even register, at first, the name of that book's author. Likewise, the student who dips into the *Guide to Modern World Literature* may – after recovering from seeing some lauded writer cut down to size or neglected writer praised at last – fail initially to appreciate that this massive book is the work of a single man. But very soon the reader and the student will find themselves increasingly interested in, and then fascinated by, the mind and voice of that same man – the poet and critic Martin Seymour-Smith. The criticism and the biographical writing have made his name, but it is the poetry that reveals the man himself.

In the case of this extraordinary poet, the boy was father to the man. 'He Came to Visit Me' is a doppelgänger poem by a precocious fourteen-year-old boy. It introduces a unique voice to the canon of English poetry: a voice that, despite the poet's increasing sophistication and technical proficiency over the succeeding decades, remained remarkably consistent:

This sorrow on my face is but a hood;

Behind there is a blank white wall of skin –

An eyeless, mouthless, noseless face: neutrality.

It is dark death that lives behind the thin

Pale flesh. You have my eyes, I cannot see.

This 'other' of the poem – 'my mortal messenger' – reappears in a much later poem in a similar guise: that of 'the internal saboteur', a phrase used for the title of an unpublished collection that gathered together many of those poems that Seymour-Smith thought 'worth keeping', several of which appear here for the first time.

'He Came to Visit Me' was included in 'Poems' (1952), one of twenty poems by Seymour-Smith in a book that also featured the poems of Terence Hards and Rex Taylor. Two booklets in his own name appeared shortly after, one published as part of the 'Fantasy Poets' series and the other, *All Devils Fading*, by Robert Creeley's Divers Press in Mallorca. As well as unflinching self-scrutiny – facing up to oneself, warts and all – these early poems explore states of (inner and outer) exile, the loss of innocence as experience transforms us into 'dark birds ... with fatal knowledge', and – most of all – the psychological complexity of love, from rapt appreciation of the loved one's dazzlingness to the damage that lovers ultimately do to each other.

Yet many of these early poems of complex love are too sparing in detail: in comparison, the few doppelgänger poems are dramatic, swift and biting in their (self-)attack. Perhaps 'sparing' is indeed the word, as the poet may well have wanted to spare the loved one from such withering scrutiny. At times it is as if we are being given a post-mortem of love rather than witnessing the drama of its destruction.

By the time of *Tea with Miss Stockport* (1963), Seymour-Smith had learned (possibly, in part, from the example of Robert Browning) how to convey complex states of mind and feeling dramatically – and to do so at greater length, without sacrificing the lyricism of his original poetic impulse. The title poem shows a more sharply satirical but also humorous dimension to his work. And yet behind the story of three men who, 'trapped by charity', feel compelled to make their weekly visits to a religious old lady and end up being poisoned (two of them fatally) by her delicate sandwiches

is the concept of the Goddess-Muse in the form of a crone. The precocious 14-year-old had come to visit the poet Robert Graves in Devon during the war, and, while still in his teens, had ‘helped him in various ways with his “historical grammar of poetic myth”, *The White Goddess*’.

Of all the poets Seymour-Smith encountered in his life, Graves was undoubtedly the one who made the deepest impression on him. Their relationship was not a simple one of master and disciple: intellectually, Seymour-Smith was always his own man. The biography of Graves that he came to write – especially the expanded version published after Graves’s death – is so honest that it is painful to read at times. He had known Graves well, and had tutored his eldest son, William, in Graves’s Mallorcan home. He was accompanied in that three-year stay on the island by Janet de Glanville, marrying her in the British Consulate there. She assisted Graves with his book *The Greek Myths*.

The association with Graves has perhaps hampered his reputation as a poet. This is true of others who might be said to have lived in the master’s shadow – even so independently-minded and distinctive a poet as Norman Cameron. Seeing the work in full, observing its responsiveness to the contemporary foreign-language poetry that Graves (with a few notable exceptions) took little interest in, will surely dispel any notion that Seymour-Smith is a mere ‘Gravesian’. In his youth he may have been too much in awe of Graves to tell him plainly that he ought not to publish *The White Goddess*. His misgivings about the impact of the Goddess ‘scheme’ on Graves’s behaviour and writing are apparent in the poem ‘The Punishment’ (‘Of all men living, who could be most wise / Insists that women may put out men’s eyes ...’). In comparison with such a schematic approach, Seymour-Smith’s outlook seems more modern: based on the psychology of the actual, and (to use a word he used himself) phenomenological in approach. In the mid-twentieth



century, with the Existentialism of Camus and Sartre in vogue, the times were on the younger poet's side, even as the fame of the elder was rising.

Indeed the title sequence of the 1971 collection, *Reminiscences of Norma*, makes much contemporary poetry seem out-of-date. This 13-poem description – no, *enactment* – of a relationship gone wrong starts lightly, almost whimsically (as many romantic relationships do) and ends with a bleak ‘journey, not of miles, / To find in nothingness the love I can.’ Always the character of ‘Norma’ is vividly present: pasty, with brazen curls, with glasses and bad clothes, committing welfare in teenage coffee-bars, not caring for poetry. Readers picking up the present book uncertainly, wondering if Seymour-Smith’s poetry will be to their taste, would do well to turn to this sequence first of all: they will know soon enough, either way.

It was another 23 years before another book of Seymour-Smith’s poetry appeared, and it was a slender volume at that. Unlike its predecessor, *Wilderness* has no stunning centrepiece, but it does

reveal a further development, towards an almost Rilkean clarity of vision. The vision was perfected in the last few poems he included in correspondence to friends before his sudden death, in 1998, from a heart attack at the age of 70. These poems appear towards the end of *The Liquid Rhinoceros and other uncollected poems*, edited by his friend Robert Nye. The title sequence and stunning centrepiece of that posthumous booklet reveals Seymour-Smith's idiosyncratic style *in extremis*. Here is a poet who had learned from the likes of César Vallejo, the Peruvian poet whose work often tests the communicable boundaries of language itself. Seymour-Smith is difficult at times not because he has decided wilfully to be so, but because life is difficult. The 'absolute discord' of his wife's periodic instability had 'ghosted [him] indeed' ('The Hope'). And then there was also the strain of the always-difficult relations with (and then break in relations from) the woman who had so enthralled Graves, Laura Riding – whom Seymour-Smith regarded as the greatest woman poet of all time, and whose exacting nature had made both men, at different times, 'squirm justly in the eternal pure' ('The Internal Saboteur').

If Seymour-Smith the critic seems grudging in his appraisal of the poetic experimenters in English-language poetry, then it is not because he is against experiment *per se*, but rather that he finds the poets in question cold-hearted (Eliot), intrinsically minor (Williams), or empty (Olson). Many of the translations which make up roughly a quarter of this book demonstrate the kind of inwardly resonant, phenomenological poetry he favoured. As he said in relation to the work of the Polish poet Bolesław Leśmian: 'there is perhaps no clearer mirror of the external world than a faithfully rendered inner one.'

David Cameron