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The Poetry of Sydney Goodsir Smith

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The Poetry of Sydney Goodsir Smith

Ever since Hugh MacDiarmid's seventieth birthday in 1962 the world has been told that it possesses a great modern poet whose best work has been written in Scots. Yet there has been little recognition, even in Scotland, that poems of real merit have been produced by the second generation of Scottish Renaissance writers—by Tom Scott, Alexander Scott, Robert Garioch, Douglas Young and Sydney Goodsir Smith, to say nothing of those who write in what looks like "Standard English" on the printed page. The responsibility lies with Scots critics, both inside and outside the universities. In Commonwealth countries, or within well defined regions of the United States like the South or the Middle West, poets whose intrinsic quality is similar to the five I have mentioned would almost certainly be the subject of learned and semi-popular articles, of adult education and extension courses, and even of book-length critical studies from the university presses. But in Scotland silence prevails, apart from a few faint cheeps from time to time; and these feeble peeps proceed all too often from those who are relatively innocent of modern critical method. The present article is intended as a preliminary contribution to a general revaluation of modern Scottish poetry.

The salient biographical fact about Sydney Smith is that he is a Scotsman by free and deliberate choice. Born in Wellington, New Zealand in 1915, his earliest memories are of an adventurous two-year old voyage to Blighty when his ship suffered from the depredations of the famous raider, the German cruiser Emden. He has memories, too, of sunny Singapore; of more sunshine—and riots—in Egypt, where his father, later perhaps the most distinguished Forensic Medico of his age, had an appointment. His first experiences, that is to say, were those of a cosmopolite, of an internationalist; and his education at prep. and public schools in England was hardly calculated to encourage any sort of nationalism, unless by violent reaction. His university years were spent at Edinburgh and Oxford, and he has resided more or less continuously in Edinburgh since the end of World War II. He has some eighteen publications to his credit, thirteen of them volumes or pamphlets of verse and drama; and the highest points of his career to date were the receipt of an Atlantic Award for poetry in 1946, and the pro-
duction of *The Wallace* as the main play at the Edinburgh Festival in 1960.

Now the point that needs to be stressed—the biographical point—is that Smith, as the son of self-made New Zealander, albeit with a Scottish mother, was perfectly free to become an Englishman, as hundreds and even thousands of Australians and New Zealanders have done, with his base in London; or a cosmopolitan living in Majorca or Italy or the south of France; or even an American, like W. H. Auden or Aldous Huxley. But he did none of these things. Instead, he preferred Scottishness, for reasons that seem to have been as much literary as personal, in that the Scottish styles of poetry, aureate and colloquial, which have been bequeathed to us by the past five hundred years were those most suited to his imaginative and creative potentialities. Smith chose the Scottish tradition as Conrad chose the English tradition.

What was involved in this almost existential choice of country and of language can be demonstrated from *Skail Wind* (Edinburgh, 1941). The book contains poems written in English as long ago as 1938 which are so bad that they read like parodies of the southern radicals of that day; and yet, because the text contains no evident comic intention, the reader has the uneasy feeling that they might just conceivably have been meant in all seriousness. His doubts are increased by the presence in the volume of an utterly undistinguished and sentimental love poem, "June afternoon." The beloved is absent (temporarily, one gathers), and he is left, in June 1939, contemplating an empty room:

> But darling it's empty as a lonely cave without your beating heart,  
> I see only your slippers and an empty room;  
> My sweet, come soon and breathe this air, rustle this torpid gulf,  
> Sit near me and fill this waiting emptiness with your life, your cooling love.

Whether the English verses in this first volume are parodies or not, they are like the work of a wraith, of someone who does not exist. The poems in Scots, however, even when they are bad poems, read like the work of a distinct though embryonic poetic personality. The archaeologist Gordon Childe once wrote a popular book entitled *Man Makes Himself* (London, 1936). What is so intensely interesting about Sydney Smith is that, in reading through his poetry, we can see him, "making himself" deliberately and as it were of set purpose; and that purpose, that process of poetic self-creation, is manifest in the choice of national language. The reason for this choice, as it presented itself to Smith, is the subject of the best known poem in the first volume—"Epistle to John Guthrie who had blamed the Poet for Writing in Scots which No One Speaks":

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We've come intil a gey queer time
When scrievin Scots is near a crime,
'There's no one speaks like that,' they fleer,
—But wha the deil spoke like King Lear? . . .

Nane cud talk lik Gawen Douglas writes,
He hanna the vocablerie,
Nor cud he flye as Dunbar flytes—
Yir argy-bargy's napsalteerie!

Did Johnnie Keats when he was drouth
Ask 'A beaker full o the warm South?'
Fega no, he leaned across the bar
An called for 'A point o bitter, Mal' . . .

But mind, nae poet e'er writes 'common speech',
Ye'll fin eneuch o yon in prose;
His realm is heich abune its reach—
Jeez! wha'd use ale for Athol Brose?

The theory behind this poem, the intellectual position, is straight Scott-

tish Renaissance doctrine, which MacDiarmid held before Smith; and

it is a response to a belief quite common in the nineteen twenties and

thirties, that the English tongue is played out. If this is so, it follows

that the writer must first create his own language, then bully his fit
though few readers into learning and sharing it. It is therefore in the
context of what was felt to be a general paralysis of the English lan-
guage in both Britain and America that we should judge MacDiarmid

and Smith. We should see them as descendants of Hopkins and Dau-

ghty, blood brothers to the experimenters and syntax-wrestlers of the

twenties and thirties. And we should regard them also as exemplars of

the world phenomenon of cosmopolitan regionalism—of a tendency

for significant advances in sensibility and technique to be made on the

periphery, in places other than the cultural capitals of the major na-
tions. One need only think of D. H. Lawrence, Italo Svevo, William

Faulkner, Malcolm Lowry, Patrick White and Gunter Grass to be

aware of the international significance of such regionalism.

The Scots poems in Smith's first volume, though often halting and
sometimes positively arthritic, announce themes and symbols that occur
again and again in the later work. One collocation is that of snow and
sexual love, a characteristically northern type of association that runs
through Irving Layton's fine anthology of Canadian lyrics, Love Where
the Nights are Long (Toronto, 1962). Here is how the contradictory
image-cluster appears in Smith's 'My gowden Childe o the Snaw'

Yir roond briesis stan lik the Jura paps in snaw,
O saft an bein is yir whiteness . . .
Other common themes are sea-shore, strand, and above all cockles (reappearing in 1953 as the title of a slim volume); the bar-room as symbol for the city; and frequent references to the sister arts of music and painting. In a poem entitled "Hornie wi the Green Ee," written at Rockcliffe, Dalbeattie, in May 1941, the connection with surrealist painting is made by the shortening of the place name Dalbeattie into "Dali":

Lourd is my hert by Dali Sound . . .
Whaur the drabbed dinghies lig on black Reid-rusted keels
Masts leeaning owre lik weary fingers wae for a warld o' skaithe . . .

We are surely meant to think of Salvador Dali’s clearly focussed sand and fishing boats, with inanimate objects sprouting human organs, and masts becoming fingers.

One of the more ambitious poems in this early volume is an "Ode to Hector Berlioz, 1803-1869," written in August 1940, in which Smith attempts to render his emotional response to Berlioz’ music at the same time as he laments the sufferings of wartime France. Music inspires him too in the rather good "Sonnet written in Dejection, August 1940," beginning:

"Night On The Bare Mountain" screams through my head
And me on my mountain, cauld i the hays nicht,

while one of the most popular of all his poems, the lyric "Sahara," has as its sub-title "Efter Hearn Sibelius Fift Symphonie." In the piece entitled "October 1941," written when the Germans were some twenty miles from Moscow, he sets Tchaikowsky’s Valse des Fleurs against the agony of the Russian people and transposes it into the "Deevil’s Waltz," later the title of the volume in which the poem was collected. And in that fine nationalist poem, "Ye Mongers Aye Need Masks for Cheatrie," the two arts come together to provide images for Scotland’s predicament and needs. The bourgeoisie make a myth of a cheated land as so many namby-pamby painters and illustrators have made Chopin into a "lillic man." But just as

Delacroix pentit Chopin’s heid
No like ither a jessie hauf deid
But true, wi a neib lik a eagle’s heak

so

. . . truth will scrich an Scotland rid
Ye mongers as the Irish did.

\footnote{In The Deevil’s Waltz, Glasgow 1946, p. 33. The subtitle appears in Modern Scottish Poetry: An Anthology of the Scottish Renaissance 1920-45, ed. M. Lindsay, London, 1946, p. 106.}
The last poem in *Skail Wind*, entitled "The Refugees : a Com- 
playnt," announces one of Smith's great subjects—World War II. Its 
most striking effect occurs in an image identifying the refugees firstly 
with autumn leaves in the Meadows (an Edinburgh park close to the 
University quarter), and secondly with embers in the grate of an Edin-
burgh fire, while his loved one sleeps on in the next room.

O I hae seen them, staiverin cross the wa's o my room, 
Puir creepin beastsies makin patterns on my eyes, 
I see them in the tumbled leaves that swirl there neth my winda 
Driftin fae the raggit trees plaintive like spent promises, an spun 
Alang the gutters, sweepit bi great gusts across the empty 
Meadows, 
Mushed in rain bi oblivious feet, cast intil windy vennels; a' their 
glory 
Of gowd an tiger reid an the broun lowes o deecin bracken 'll not 
lift them—
They are the lost stumblers, the human autumn fleecin tae wintry 
daith their onlie harberie. 
I hae seen them in my fire, I see them now as the last coals settle 
Black and black i my deecin grate, the charred remnants, 
Broken ors o men and women and weans—the pity! O my loo 
Sleeping a child sleep i the room next door, how're your dreams? 
Do you see them stalkin? The bony een o daith and hunger? 
Do they strummel cross your sleep, the sweet oblivion a’ these 
weeks denied me? 
And, Christ, it micht be you I’ll see, beside me in the road 
amang the leaves.

Smith's war poems fall into two main groups—poems about the war 
at home, and poems about the war in the East, in Poland and Russia. 
Both groups are united by the idea that this war is pointless unless 
it brings Scotland (the Scotland which I claim that Smith deliberately 
chose for his country, for primarily literary reasons) nearer to inde-
pendence. The intellectual position is not as extreme as that of Douglas 
Young, who went to prison because he would not fight in England's 
war; but emotionally it is close to what was felt by many Scots at the 
time. In the first poem of a sequence entitled *Armageddon in Albyn*, 
the burden is that we must “mak sikkar” our losses were for Scotland. 
In the second, the mother doubts, ironically, whether her son really has 
died for Scotland:

*The Mither's Lament*

Whit care I for the leagues o sand, 
The prisoners an the gear theyve won? 
Ma darlin liggs amang the duncs 
Wi mony a mither's son.
The sequence ends with "The War in Fife," a poem of 36 lines about three wars: the world war beyond Fife, the war of the miners in the Fife coalfields struggling underground against brute matter—those miners whose solidarity is "the banded future"—and, finally, the war in the future, for Scotland's freedom. I quote the two final stanzas:

The foreign war ruins mony a bed
But yet seems faur awa—
Twa hunner year o union's bled
The veins mair white nor ony war.

A third war cracks; lyart an loon
Thegither curse the lang stoutriffl, 
Mirk ower Scotland hings its rule
Lik the snell haar hings ower Fife.

The best poems in the sequence, however, are not the political-rhetorical ones, but two firmly etched realizations of the concrete: a precisely observed, taut and firmly controlled rendering of a convoy—a "mirk thrang o ships drawan hame" through the Forth, and this superbly savage sketch of a soldier and his doxy, "Mars and Venus at Hogmanay":

The nicht is deep,
The snaw liggs crisp wi rime,
Black an cauld the leafless trees:
Midnicht, but nae bells chime.

Through the tuim white sleepan street
Mars and Venus shauchle past,
A drucken jock wi a drucken hure
Rairan "The Ball o Kirriemuir"!

One can see, at this distance, that the attempts to recreate the war experiences of Russians and Poles, or to imagine a political dialogue between a Red Army man and a Scot in North Africa, as in the sequence "On the Don, August 1942," were almost bound to fail. Faced with such subjects, Smith's vision generally succumbs to the rhetoric of propaganda. It is only when events in the east are linked with the author's lyrical contemplation that genuine poetry occurs. In "October 1941," a poem in the Deevil's Waltz volume, the concrete particulars of the wind-driven leaves of an Edinburgh October and the ragged branches moaning outside the poet's window make it possible for us to be aware of Russian suffering and the tears of the world's October.

Peter Morrison, or the Wanderer, a poem in Twelve Cantos, pub-
lished in 1943, is perhaps the most interesting of all Smith's early poetry. Although the cantos are short lyrics merely, they are interrelated; the subject is epical; and the work demonstrates a quality he is often said to lack—a sense of form. In actual fact, Smith has again and again shown that he can create serial forms with the shape of a chain rather than of a building, so that the metaphor of structure is peculiarly inappropriate to his work. So it is with Peter Morrison. The protagonist was a real character—a youth cast up on the island of Lewis, as sole survivor of his ship, who rejected conventional behaviour, became a notable "tink" and Hebridean dropout, a gangrel gallus minstrel like the "bard of no regard" of Burns's Jolly Beggars, only to die after a night's drinking in a lone shebeen:

But Peter tripped in the drunken night,
And there they fund i the cauld rife morn
The song on his lips blown out lik a licht
An the outlaw deid wi his heid in a burn.

The second poem in the sequence, whose last stanza has just been quoted, is a ballad setting forth this tale—and a very fine ballad it is, so fine that one wants to invent one's own tune for it. At the beginning and end of the twelve mini-cantos, Peter Morrison cries "Warison!" (Onward!) to the whole of Scotland and presumably to the entire world from the gravemounds of gull-rife Lewis. Peter is Smith's personal variation on one of the most significant figures of modern literature and life—the Man Alone. In colonial and pioneering societies he may be the missionary who goes native or the lone embittered prospector, in late nineteenth and early twentieth century America, the migrant hobo hopping from freight-train to freight-train; in early twentieth century Dublin, a rootless, impotent advertisement canvasser of Jewish race, unhappy in his home and in search of a son; later still, Molloy, Malone, and the other figures in the world of Samuel Beckett. Now the significant thing about Peter Morrison is that he is not a proper Man Alone at all; though alienated on one plane, he is very much in touch on another. Most of the preoccupations of Smith's early poetry except, curiously enough, Love, are present in Peter Morrison, and interwoven into a connected lyrical texture. The seagull is here; the gangrel and waif; the Thistle; the Mongers (Smith's name for the Bourgeoisie); the Soviet Union; Russian cultural figures; the Makar; the Lion of Scotland and the Red Star; the Doppelgänger, as important in Scottish literature and life as in German; Auld Clootie—in this case, White Clootie, not Black Clootie (surely, a little dig at D. H. Lawrence's "White Christ")—and the Whore, the Leith Street trull who "hauds her aith mair nor the Mongers wull." For the first time, I think, in Smith, the Wallace appears: the fifth lyric is called "The Een o
Wallace Glower Yet frae the Spear on London Brig." Even the political rhetoric, which is certainly not Smith's main strength, is integrated into what may be regarded as very much a work of synthesis—

Gangrels, makars, subjugated lains,
My Scotland—aa yir weirds are ane.

All four may be in bad shape, but since their fates are aspects of a single fate, they cannot be alone. In Canto X, which bears the title "Pushkin and the Rebel Bards Rampage at Kenmore," the gangrel outlaw Peter Morrison is with them all on storm-wings at the winds' black mouth; he is there along with Byron, Burns, Lermontov, Lorca, Rimbaud, Villon and Holderlin. In this Canto the "Man Alone" paradox is resolved. Is not man doomed to alienation by his very nature as a human being? How can he be himself—how can he be solitary, and at the same time a member of society?

The answer comes, as tersely as in an aphorism of William Blake's:

In this fecht, ilk's alone, but none is lone.

The poem creates an antithesis between "alone" and "lone." "Aloneness" is a necessary condition of man's being; aloneness is apartness. "Loneliness" is isolation, exile, alienation—the product of a particular society in its decadence; it is not a necessary condition of man's being. What the Peter Morrisons and the William Wallaces and the Sydney Smiths are really fighting for is to substitute the "alone" for the "lone," to replace alienation by true, creative individuality.

Smith's reputation does not, of course, depend on these Promethean exercises, and it would be low indeed if it did. It rests on his love poetry and on his poetry of the City. Already in the early war years he had written one or two love lyrics, such as "Ma Moujik Lass," or "Whan the Hert is Laiuch," which passed straight into the canon of those Scots who care about poetry. But one has to go to the 1952 volume, So Late into the Night, for his most remarkable achievement in the lyric—exactly fifty "quintessential" poems. The book was printed with a preface by Edith Sitwell claiming, amongst other things, that four or five of them are "amongst the few poems by a poet now under forty to which the word 'great' can be applied." 2 The lyrics, written between 1944 and 1948, display an imaginative unity of the "chaining" sort which is consolidated in the two final poems, so full of references to what has gone before—the sonnet "Mansel," and "Hame with," a muted death wish in statement form. This unity is also manifest in the interweaving of favourite themes, notions and symbols throughout the volume.

2 So late into the night (London, 1951), p. 7.
Traditionally, the most notable form of psychological abnormality evident in Scotland is that of the split personality: witness Deacon Brodie, that respectable eighteenth century burgess of Edinburgh who was a pillar of the establishment by day and the leader of a gang of burglars by night, or Major Weir, dreaded in the seventeenth century "for his sorceries and admired for his gift of prayer." As the Marxists would say, "it can hardly be accidental" that the author of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde was a Scotsman, or that James Hogg's Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner is one of the finest studies of split personality in any language. If Sydney Smith is really operating in a Scottish tradition, at the deeper level of content and theme rather than on the superficial planes of language and versification, we would expect him to touch on divided hearts, demonic possession and schizophrenic splits. He does so in "Say ye Sae?" first published in Selected Poems (Edinburgh, 1947—Saltire Modern Poets).

There is a demon in my breist.
—Say ye Sae?
I pray the Lord to gie me rest.
—Maybe it's yoursel.

It is a worm in my hert.
—Say ye Sae?
It has twa fangs are unco shairp
As the lowes o hell.

It chacks my hert when I'm my lane.
—Say ye Sae?
And frae its chafs drip dule and bane,
Is the wine o hell.

I ken it breeds frae my ain mynd.
—Say ye Sae?
Its lugs are deif and its een blind
But its tongue a knell.

Frea it there's ane can gie me bield
—Say ye Sae?
But she kens nocht the pouer it yields
Yon fient frae hell.

She thinks me wud; maybe she's richt
—Say ye Sae?
Lord, dumb this demon o my night!
—Maybe it's yoursel.

In another lyric, "Blind," the sun, moon, stars and the dumb brain, even the heart and soul, are all blind, and it is the Deil, not God whom he asks to "unblind" him—

There's nane in this blind airt
To guide but you.
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Even a seemingly "pure" lyric is built out of the Manichaean opposition between spirit and lust:

Odessa
Circassian leman, lie
Abandoned in the lowe
O' the Embro mune, while I
Hark til the Black Sea far ablow.

Odessa's in the room the-night
And in the gray mune's lily-loo
The Caucasus untamed is bricht
As ice and ivorie in your brou.

Circassian leman, wi your een
Liquid as wine, see there
Rise aa the mountains o the mune
—And the base Levant is steaman here.

The classic Manichaean division between light and dark, the remote shining moon mountains and the base Levant of lust and the pub that yet possesses its own validity, is present again in "The Wraith o Johnnie Calvin," a poem that glances at the ideological cause of the contradictions within so many Scottish minds:

Heathen, pagan, heretic,
Mair auld nor the gods are we!
The lave may gang their richt and wrang . . .
We sing sweet Lemantie!
O, the wraith o Johnnie Calvin
I's chappen at the door.

In the lyric "The Nineteen Days" the poet or his persona is a storm-bound Ishmael who, after struggling for ninety days "hiferie-hetterie ower the sea," prays to an ambivalent figure, a supernatural Jekyll and Hyde whom he calls "demon angel." In a technically brilliant sonnet where the lines are trimeters and tetrameters not pentameters, he addresses the "God or Deil that in man is" who works man's destiny; and in "Mansel," already mentioned, the Man Alone theme and the Calvinist Lord-and-Deil come together in a somewhat overwrought synthesis—

Yon Janus godhead, Lord-and-Deil,
That I made in the likeness o mysel.

In pieces like these Smith shows that he can make poetry out of the very kernel of the famous Caledonian antisyzygy.

As well as being love-poems, the lyrics in So Late into the Night form a kind of "poet's progress"—chips and spails from a lyrical Bildungsroman. Perhaps there is a clue within the volume itself, in that
the title of one poem—one of the few humorous ones—is "Selbst-Bildnis" (Self-portrait; but Bildnis is close to Bildung—formation), below which is the gloss in English—"Selfish Business."

Since so much of Smith's poetry is inaccessible, it would be unfair to leave this volume without quoting in full two of the poems that Dame Edith has singled out as possessing the quality of "greatness":

**The Mandrake Hert**
Ye sawt flowertan in my breist
—My mandrake hert—
And, wi a wild wae look,
(O my dear luvel)
Ye reift it scrichan oor . . .
And the bluid rins aye frae the torn ruit.

**Defeat o the Hert**
Borne-hed demoniac
In sleep ye're lain,
At length the raven takes
Her follie's sin.

O black-maned Artemis
The strauchle's dune,
And wi oblivion's kiss
Ye win.

The judgment is sometimes made by those unfamiliar with the Scots language that such poems are impressive only by reason of their slightly unusual vocabulary and phonetic values, and that when translated into English they appear in their true colours as basically sentimental. This opinion, however, rests on a theory of poetry that cannot be sustained—the view that intellectual paraphrasable content is primary and separable from the total organism of the poem, while "texture," added later, is adventitious. On the contrary, any poem is an indissoluble unity of texture and structure, and in these two lyrics the texture largely depends on the phonetic value of the Scots words and the slow, heavy rhythms that exist to render dynamic emblems.

Norman MacCaig is one of the few commentators to have written well on Smith's lyrics. Speaking of the earlier love poems published during the war, MacCaig reports: "I know that some of the simplest of these, by their emotional intensity and sincerity and by their unfused directness of expression, have for many people the piercing quality that simple 'heart-cries' aim at and so often fail to achieve."" The implication is that they do not have this quality for MacCaig. But the fifty lyrics in So Late into the Night are a different matter altogether.

*Saltaire Review,* I (Apr. 1954), 16-17.
and MacCaig recognises that there is intellect as well as emotion behind them. "Often," he says, "they achieve a most impressive solidarity in which there is no time for exclamations, hysterics and pretty ornament. Each syllable is weighty and pulls its weight, and the result is a concentrated intensity not only of feeling but of thought. Lyrics like these are each a sort of controlled explosion such as we have not seen since MacDiarmid's early work in Scots and for which I see no parallel in contemporary English writing." Lyrics like "Defeat o the Herr," however unfashionable, are genuine poems; whether they merit the term "great," must be left to posterity.

*Under the Eildon Tree*, first published 1948, second edition 1954 (revised) is in my view still the best thing Smith has done to date. It is a single long poem of twenty-four elegies together forming a complex unity. I do not think that regard for *Eildon* is inconsistent with a belief that Smith is at his best when dealing with the city, because the two finest elegies are surely the one where Sidney Sluagabed Godless Smith lies stinking in his pit, comically imagining the moral condemnation of John Knox and Joseph Stalin (*Elegy V*); and the one where he visits a prostitute in the Cowgate (*Elegy XV*)—both realistic "urban" sections or movements of a larger whole. By this time, Smith's mastery of the various styles of Scots he had chosen was complete, and his rhythmic control, within verse paragraphs and between paragraphs, could hardly be bettered. We have it on MacCaig's authority that the book "purports" to arise out of a real love affair, but its subject is really more generalised than that—it is man's search for woman, woman's rejection of man, and man's desertion of woman. Real woman is metamorphosed into Muse, and Muse transformed into Goddess and back again, against the background of Embro town and the poet's Bohemian existence. The real woman seems to be the "tyger" woman of earlier poems, dark haired and with brown eyes, who changes with bewildering ease now into Artemis, now into Aphrodite; and the central experience of the twenty-four elegies is, I think, also the subject of a lyric in *So Late into the Night*—"Semper Vincis, amor." The last stanza runs:

Memorie, why will ye tell  
O' the een are tint til me?  
Real and ideal mell  
—And in the hert is ye.

In *Under the Eildon Tree*, "real and ideal mell" constantly, and in the herr is "ye"—the lost one, who is both woman and goddess. At this point the question inevitably arises—is the idea-structure of *Eildon* a development and amplification of Robert Graves's *The White God*—

* p. 19.
dess? The answer is surely no. The first edition of *The White Goddess* was in 1948; Smith’s poem was written at the end of 1946 and 1947. The sub-title of Graves’s book is *A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, and he is concerned with what he calls “the antique story of birth, life, death, and resurrection of the God of the waning year” and his rivalry with his blood brother, the God of the Waxing Year, for the possession of the Great Goddess-Mother and Bride, “begetter of both and of all living persons; she who, like the Queen Bee, brings life and death to her offspring and mate.” In Graves’s book, this Goddess is the Earth Mother, who appears in many strange shapes, and in many animal forms; but in particular she is the White Goddess or White Lady, the Divine Moon Queen, from the British Isles to the Caucasus. She is chaste virgin, mistress and mother at one and the same time—Artemis, Aphrodite and Gea Tellus; she is a Triple Goddess. Graves asserts that all poets sing of her, but that a “clear vision” is vouchsafed only to Celtic Bards.

It seems clear that even although Smith could not have borrowed the mythic framework of *Under the Eildon Tree* from Graves’s book, yet it must have been derived from the whole early twentieth century current of anthropological and mystical speculation to which Graves contributed, like Yeats before him. In *The Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye abstracts still further from the White Goddess type of myth; he finds in the period from the Romantics to the present day “a good many visions of a cycle of experience, often presided over by a female figure with lunar and *femme fatale* affiliations.” Frye’s more generalized statement enables us to see that this is exactly what *Under the Eildon Tree* is: an imaginative treatment of a love affair whose overall rhythm is connected with, though it does not slavishly follow, the four seasons, the twenty-four hours of the day and the passage from sunrise to sunset, the phases of the moon, and the rise and fall of civilisations—the whole related at various points to the presiding Goddess. It is also profoundly metamorphic. His loved one is seen as Eurydice, Calypso or Isidol; his *persona* vary from Robert Burns to Tisram to Aeneas to Orpheus; he is also True Thomas and his White Goddess is the Queen of Fair Eifland who has had him in thrall below the Eildon Hills.

The third major preoccupation of Smith’s poetry is the City. Surveying English poetry from 1945-1950, Alan Ross noted the comparative lack of city poems in England during these years: when English poets brought “environment” into their poems, he found, it was still

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THE POETRY OF SYDNEY GOODSR SMITH

a rural one that they preferred. But this was not at all the case in Scotland, where Goodsr Smith and Robert Garioch rendered Edinburgh with both realistic and symbolic force, and Smith became our best poet of urban scenes and townscapes since Ferguson. This was noticed some time ago by Alexander Scott, in terms that are rather to Smith’s disadvantage: “Where Ferguson, in identifying himself with his community, adopts that community’s moral code, Goodsr Smith—unable to find a place for the poet in the mercantilism of contemporary Edinburgh—stands Mrs. Grundy on her head and displays with evident gusto the revelations which result from this procedure.” Smith’s Edinburgh “is little more than a stage on which the individual dances like a dying swan,” and the poet is “in the city but not of it”—an alienated outcast. Or, in my terms, Smith’s Edinburgh is the Edinburgh of “Man Alone.”

Is this, we may ask, really true? Does that sort of critical generalisation really help even in a poem about an isolated outcast, such as “The Grace of God and the Meth-Drinker”? from Figs and Thistles (Edinburgh, 1958):

There ye gang, ye daft
And doitit dotterel, ye saft
Crazed outland skolrag saul
In your bits and ends of winnockie duds
Your fyled and fozie-fouosome clouts
As fou’s a fish, cr act and craftie-drunk
W’ bibleit Reid-rimmed
Ee and slaveran crozie mou
Dwaiblan owre the causie like a ship
Storm-toss’t i the Bay of Biscay O
At-sea indeed and hauf-seas-owre
Up-til-the-thrapple’s-pap
Or up-til-the-crossstreets-sunk-
Wha kens? Wha racks?
Hidderie-hetterie stouteran in a dozie dwaum
O’ramh Reid-biddie—Christ
The stink
O’ jake shint him, a mephitic
Rouk o miserie, like some unco exotic
Perfume o the Orient no just sae easlie tholit
By the bleak barbarians o the Wast
But subtle, acrid, jaggan the nebrous
Wi’ o’ owre hailin ussome guff, maist delicat,
Like in scent til the street of a randie gib...
O-bone-a-rool!
His toothless gums, his lips, bricht cramatie
A schere-bricht slash o bluid
A scheme like the leaman gleid o rubics

Throu the gray-white scribble
O' his blakc unrázit chafts, a hangman's
Heid, droolie wi gob, the bricht een
Sichless, cannie, blythe, and slee—
Unkennan

Ay,
Puir gangrel!

—But for the undeemous glorie and grace
O' a mercifu omnipotent majestic God
Superne eterne and sceptred in the firmament
Wharril the praises o the leal rise
Like incense aye about Your throne
Ayebydan, thochtless, and eternallie hauf-drunk
Wi nectar, Athole-brose, ambrosia—nae jake for
You—

God there!—
But for the 'bunesaid unsocht grace unprayèd-for,
Undeserved—
Gangs,

Unregenerate, Me.

There are three centres here—a visual one, where the meth-drinker is precisely observed as in a realistic painting; an ironic one—God the Bourgeois Father in his heaven, incomprehensively preserving the poet from a derelict's fate; and an anti-climax—Schir Skidderie Smitherccens himself, the "unregenerate." What is said in the poem is far more difficult to paraphrase than anything that could be covered by Alexander Scott's generalisation. Apart altogether from its subtly modulating ironies, its symphonic rhythm based on the vigorous cadences of spoken Scots, and its diction synthesizing both colloquial and literary terms, the poem renders the meth's appearance so faithfully that our disgust becomes a kind of love, an intuition of suffering that is also an imputation of holiness. Despite the aureate vocabulary used to express it, we feel that the unsought-for and unprayed-for grace of Smith's deity is not really worth much when set beside the meth's urban crucifixion.

Smith's more recent rendering of Edinburgh, the television poem *Kynd Kittock's Lad* (first performed in 1964) gives us the chance to test Alexander Scott's judgment of a few years ago against the author's mature vision. As Smith reminds us in a note prefaced to the book, "Kynd Kittock is the subject of a Ballad attributed to William Dunbar. She was a great boozèr who died of thirst one night when the taverns were shut. When she got to heaven she found the ale was sour and decided to leave the place, and she now looks after the alehouse situated outside the gates of Paradise for the refreshment of
weary travellers." And the Kynd Kittock of the telepoem is a symbol not just of the Edinburgh of the modern alienated age, but of Edinburgh as she has been for the last five hundred years and as she may be for the next five hundred. This Edinburgh is the same as the City of Carval Cornucopias (Edinburgh, 1964), Smith’s extravaganza in Joycean prose—a city divided in two, half of it snug, complacent, lost to all pride of race and spirit, and

The tither wild and rouch as ever
In its secret haurt.  

It is this wild, randy, violent, anarchistic Edinburgh of the lumpen-proletariat that is the real city. Alexander Scott claims that in saying this sort of thing Smith is standing Mrs. Grundy on her head. I do not think the matter is quite as simple as that. Edinburgh, capital city of a land that has sold and still sells itself for greed, living on memories like Tchekhov’s Russia, must necessarily be divided; but it does not follow that the Edinburgh for which Kittock stands is non-social, or that its buildings are mere back-drops. Scott points out rather disapprovingly that Smith’s is the Edinburgh of the night. Now in Kynd Kittock’s Land we discover what happens at dawn—

Tycoons tak ower frae the bards and lauchin lassies,
Ha’irt liggs doun at feet of Gowden Cauf,
Enslaved by the muckler god of day,
King Sol the Affluent, Giver of Riches, credits, yachts,  

The Bards and lauchin lassies are declasseed individuals, it is true—but they can form a group, and they are more permanent than they look. They are members, as Kittock herself says, “O’ an auld companie in an auld rortie city.”

Times aye cheynge and this auld runt
Will flouer again (Heh! Heh! Yon’s me!)
And hae nae cheynge ava—we’re aye the same,
The desperae and the deild, the living raucle yins,
D’ye ken? Ay, though, and sae it is,
Auld Reekie through the keenkin glass
Looks fine, and sae it does.
And the mornin and the evenin
Were anither age gane by . . .
I’m gettin gey an’ auld, and weartie . . .
Sleepie . . . my grey heid hings . . .
And shall she get thericht o’ it,

Kynd Kittock’s Land (Edinburgh, 1965), p. [6].
  * p. 7.
  ** pp. 21-2.
  *** p. 24.
A diadem for the brou?
Shall Scotland crown her ain again,
This ancient capital—?
Or sell the thing for scrap?
Or some Yankee museum maybe?
I'll be here bidin the answer . . .
Here I be and here I drink,
This is mine, Kynd Kittock’s land
For ever and aye while stane shall stand—
For ever and aye till the World’s End.18

The final terms of full and complete meaning are "be," "drink," "mine," "ever," "aye," and above all the firmness and solidity of "stane," "stand," and "till the World’s End." It would seem then that for Smith there is not one city but two—the false city of the Mongers from which he is alienated, and the perennial city of Kynd Kittock, composed of men and women who are "alone" but not "lone," of urban Peter Morrisey whose values are those of the Jolly Beggars—the Beggars of the City. For Smith the physical city of close and causay is no mere backdrop; its spirit is the spirit of his everlasting city; it is "ayebidan," to use one of his favourite words. "Ayebidan" is, however, relative, for the World’s End may be nearer than we think in the nuclear age—a connotation further enriched by the fact that the World’s End is the name of a well-known Edinburgh close. In a sense, then, the whole paradox of national and universal, regional and eternal, is summed up in the World’s End; a metaphysical concept and a contemporary anxiety are linked to the image of a construction of solid stone in the poet's own locality.

Smith's career, then, falls into three distinct stages which do not exactly coincide with the three main types of poem in which he has excelled. In the first stage he ransacked the whole of life—war, politics, nationalism, as well as love—to find proper material for poetry. In the second stage, after 1946, he seemed to retreat into the narrower field of private experience, apart from occasional political excursions like his Burnsian song "Scroggam" of the reiving of the Stone of Destiny from Westminster in 1950;18 yet the retreat was only apparent, since the most significant work from this time, Under the Eildon Tree, succeeds in rooting the facts of life in history and pre-history through embodying the personal in terms of archetypes and myths. In the third stage, Smith returns to social and political themes on, as it were, a higher plane—most recently in Kynd Kittock's Land, somewhat earlier in The Wallace and The Vision of the Troilgal Sun.

17 PP. 24-5.
18 Figs and Thistles, p. 39.
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The Wallace (Edinburgh, 1960) merits the author's subtitle, A Triumph in Five Acts, for reasons other than the final transformation scene in the Great Hall at Westminster where the shackled Wallace refuses the proffered Dukedom of Scotland, preferring the martyrdom of a traitor's death. The Wallace is also the triumph of an unmodish dramatic form, the Chronicle Play, which has been given a tightness of organisation and thematic unity seldom seen in the genre; and it is a triumph, too, of poetic rhetoric. Ever since the revival of verse-drama earlier in the century, poets have struggled to create a dramatic line which will be flexible, contemporary and poetical. Judged from the technical standpoint, Smith is better than most. Even the English speech of royal Edward, closer in style to blank verse than T. S. Eliot's, less gimmicky by far than Christopher Fry's, is extraordinarily impressive, while the prose assigned to the semi-choric English Chronicler, designed to counterpoint the Scots chronicler's vernacular, is a tour de force. But it is in the Scots assigned to Wallace and his countrymen that the real triumph lies—a sinewy, colloquial, dramatic speech based on twentieth-century demotic which is nevertheless easily understood by non-Scots during an actual performance.

Nothing is more significant than the way in which earlier themes and notions reappear, to be integrated into the total movement of the play. In the key scene between Wallace and his leman, Ailish, just before his capture, she sings a song about a White Goddess figure beneath the Eildon Tree. Wallace, remembering his wife, slain by the English long ago, says that after her death "Scotland became my luve and she Scotland." 14 Scotland, woman and Goddess are all connected; each passes into the other in a manner reminiscent of the poems of the second period, where the public voice and national content are not so evident. In close juxtaposition to these other themes is placed the idea of the universality of all national democratic movements, common elsewhere in Smith:

As men in chains the day
Are Scots and Scotland the world o slaves
And prisoners.15

The play hints that the false Menteith, who played Judas to Wallace, is the type of those traitor knaves who later made the Union, or those Anglo-Scots who today worship the Golden Calf. Far from being an isolated "sport," then, The Wallace employs Smith's characteristic

14 p. 122.
15 p. 123.
themes, with the exception of those that are clearly out of place, such as the City. All these preoccupations, including the City, are to be found in the concentrated *Vision of the Prodigal Son* (Edinburgh, 1960), written for radio in 1959 to celebrate the bicentenary of Robert Burns. In this poem of nine sections (could it be that in this birthday piece they stand for the nine months of gestation?) Smith moves from the apparition of his Muse-Woman to the doun-dingan of false Scots who sell themselves for potrage and "you never had it so good." He makes explicit the message of *The Wallace*:

Wallace wicht, be wi us nou  
Scotland has need o' ye  
Of thy strang hairt we hae great need  
In dour extremitie.\footnote{\footnotemark{16}}

and specifically identifies the Goddess with Scotland (in *The Wallace* they were merely seen as connected):

*Archaic Aphrodite*  
*The nicht come,*  
*Is Aphrodite Scotia*  
*The Dark Ano*  
*Regent of the luvers' nicht*  
*Ark o their freedom—*  
*In her mirk aspect Scotia*  
*The auld truths conjine*  
*And love and liberie are ane.\footnote{\footnotemark{17}}*

In *The Vision of the Prodigal Son* Smith's great technical skill is manifest in multiple ironies, and in a texture that integrates quotations from earlier Scottish poetry with references to Greek myth and Italian painting. The ultimate vision of reborn Scotland perhaps encompasses a sexual as well as a patriotic and social revolution:

*Aphrodite Scotia*  
*In persona propria*  
Let me sleep nocht or the morn  
Sees the aunftent truth reborn;  
Hiech is Nevis abune the hills  
Hiecher yet she that rules—  
*Aphrodite Scotia*  
*In persona propria.\footnote{\footnotemark{18}}*

Two centuries after, *Burns's Coila* has become Smith's Scotia. The

\footnotemark{16} p. 24.  
\footnotemark{17} p. 26.  
\footnotemark{18} p. [27].
Goddess, we are told by Graves, has many forms, from hag to beautiful woman. Smith uses his considerable powers to celebrate her in all of them. Aphrodite Scotia, Kynd Ketock, the Kimmers o Cougate—they are all one; and Burns, Wallace, Thomas the Rhymer and John Maclean are her prophets. So, too, is the Auk himself.

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