

Two Letters from A.J.M. Smith to W.E. Collin

Edited, with an Introduction, by Brian
Trehearne

We have little documentary knowledge of A.J.M. Smith's early development as a poet and critic, little more in fact than we have of his zealously guarded personal life. Such arguments as we can make about his artistic growth are almost certain to be conjectural and based on the published poems and essays. It was almost entirely on such grounds, for example, that I made claims in *Aestheticism and the Canadian Modernists* about Smith's early responses to British and European aestheticism. To judge by the holdings of the Smith collections at Trent University and the University of Toronto, he did not keep copies of his outgoing correspondence, which survives widely scattered in the archives of other Canadian writers, and a great deal of what we do have is of a professional, even business-like nature. His comments on his own poetry were therefore very few until the publication of his "Collected Poems" encouraged him to write "A Self-Review" in 1963. Any documents providing a similar glimpse of his own self-estimate prior to the period of his wider acclaim—following the publications of 1943: the Governor General's Literary Award-winning *News of the Phoenix* and the well-received *Book of Canadian Poetry*—will have an inherent interest for the light they cast on Canadian modernism's emergence and consolidation.

Smith's first critic was W.E. Collin (1893-1984), whose collection of essays *The White Savannahs* considers Canadian poetry from the nineteenth century to the 1930s. Collin's insistence on the significance of young poets such as Smith—whose work he largely knew through the student verse in the *McGill Fortnightly Review*—can be seen in retrospect as a breakthrough for Canadian literary criticism as dramatic as the conceptual revolution effected when Smith himself produced a *Book of Canadian Poetry* ranging from eighteenth-century Loyalist lyrics to the newest experiments of the 1940s. Collin's late Romantic literary theory makes for strange modernist criticism, to say the least,¹ but for the young poet, best known at the time in the literary circles of

England, such sustained critical [Page 76] attention was very welcome. That Collin's book appeared in the same year as *New Provinces: Poems of Several Authors*, the small anthology with which Smith and F.R. Scott announced their generation's arrival on the Canadian literary scene, has given 1936 the inescapable appearance of a watershed year in the story of Canadian modernism—a pleasant reverie that is easily dispersed by the paltry sales of *New Provinces*: eighty-two copies in the first year, according to Michael Gnarowski (xxi).

Two of Smith's letters to Collin, written as the assistant professor had his essay on Smith in preparation, have recently surfaced among the uncatalogued archives Collin deposited in 1988 with the University of Western Ontario, where he spent his academic career. It is sheer good fortune that Collin himself chose to mark one of the dozens of unmarked boxes "White Savannahs"; within it are three "A.J.M. Smith" files, one of which contains the two typed letters from Smith.² They were written following an initial letter (or perhaps letters) of inquiry from Collin that has apparently been lost. The first Smith letter is dated "November 17, 1933." The other letter is clearly the later of the two,³ but it is undated by Smith. An adjacent envelope in the file, however, addressed to Collin and identified as containing "MANUSCRIPT" material, is postmarked 16 February 1934. As Collin answers and specifically responds to the remarks of this second letter on 25 February,⁴ it is safe to conclude that Smith's second letter was the one mailed on 16 February 1934, and I will refer to it as such hereafter.⁵ The two letters to Collin contain a wealth of self-reflection that makes them essential documents of Smith's career and of his stewardship of Canadian modernist poetics in the 1930s.

In 1933-1934 Smith's academic career was languishing. Two years' temporary employment at the then Michigan State College in East Lansing from 1931-1933 had not led to a permanent position. For unknown reasons, he and his wife Jeannie remained in East Lansing during the subsequent year of Smith's unemployment (Ferns 11); that the first of the letters to Collin is on MSC letterhead may suggest that he retained some privileges or minor teaching duties at the time. However typical Smith's position was in those early years of the Depression, the year's experience of unemployment, and of continuing exile from Canada, must have been acutely frustrating. It was about this time that he wrote the uncharacteristically bitter "Son-And-Heir,"⁶ with its images of "the doom / We discern": "the empty years, the hand to mouth, / The moving cog, the unattended loom..."⁷ In such a

context Collin's inquiries must have afforded a welcome sense of the increasing attention his poems were receiving in Canada. [Page 77]

Whatever Smith's mood during his year of unemployment, he took full advantage of his enforced leisure to try to advance his career as a poet. It was in 1933-1934 that he prepared two typescript collections of his poetry⁸ and began to circulate the larger of them among publishers, an effort he mentions to Collin (see the second letter and note 10, below). This typescript would take ten years of circulation and revision to appear as *News of the Phoenix*. At the same time, he began the vigorous correspondence with Scott that would lead to the eventual publication of *New Provinces* in 1936 (see note 6 to the letters). Their exchanges are quoted at length by Michael Gnarowski in his introduction to the 1976 reprint of that anthology. The letters to Collin are an intriguing side-light on the simultaneous discussion with Scott. In the letter of 16 February 1934, for example, Smith calls for a politically engaged modern poetry, much as he would do in the preface he was soon to write, and see rejected, for *New Provinces* (see note 22 to the letters). Meanwhile he was finding it increasingly easy to place his poems in the leading literary periodicals of the day.⁹ He had found a sympathetic editor in Geoffrey Grigson of *New Verse* in London, England, and was among the remarkable group of respected American and English poets whose responses to a questionnaire made up the bulk of the periodical's October 1934 issue (the others included Wyndham Lewis, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, and William Carlos Williams). That new sense of an international audience and recognition must have played a role in the dramatic complication and enrichment of his modernism at this time.¹⁰

The convergence of professional frustration and creative expansion in Smith's life in 1934 establishes the intellectual and emotional timbre of his letters to Collin. Some of Smith's readers may be shocked to hear his satisfied announcement of an imminent "Revolution" in the West, but it is easy to understand why the unemployed junior academic and the intensely experimental young poet should call at the time for such a seismic shift of economy, politics, and culture. Smith has received little credit for his political and social poetry. New documents affirming his political convictions should help to focus new critical attention on that fundamental context of his art.

There are many such points of value in the Collin letters. They are now the earliest statements we have from Smith of his own poetics (as opposed to those of modernism more generally), and they show with

particular acuteness the care with which he was developing his own idea of "impersonality" and distinguishing this with nicety from the prevailing interpretation of T.S. Eliot's 1919 coinage. In this sense the letters both evince and nuance some enduring assumptions about the theory and practice of modernist [Page 78] poetry in Canada. More immediately, the letters should help us understand some of the rapid advances in Smith's technique at this time, while increasing our sense of his own estimate of their motives and value. The first letter includes fascinatingly variant versions of two poems later reprinted in *PNC* and thus well-established in the Smith canon. Perhaps most valuable of all, the letters include extended commentaries on two of Smith's most difficult poems, "A Soldier's Ghost" and "The Offices of the First and the Second Hour," poems that have resisted explication since their first appearances. With such rare instances of self-exposition, framed by early discussion of the plans for *New Provinces*, Smith's letters to Collin seem self-evidently worthy of attention.

Editorial Practices

The letters have been replicated exactly, including typographical errors that Smith did not correct (followed by *sic*), with three minimal exceptions: when he corrected a punctuation error by hand the text has been silently emended; in one instance a needed comma has been inserted in a sentence that would otherwise have been unclear [noted as by *ed.*]; and a few extra spaces between words have been removed without remark. Punctuation has been left outside of quotation marks, as Smith has it. Autograph and typed insertions are indicated in square brackets, with a caret locating their insertion point. Insertions by hand and by typewriter are not distinguished. Collin has added a few marginal notes for his own scholarly work to the letters; these are not represented. Smith's references to his poems are annotated only when these are variant from titles used in *PNC* or when the said poems do not appear in *PNC*.

Notes to the Introduction

1. Tracy Ware reverses my summary of Collin's critical method when he castigates Collin for his harsh treatment of Archibald Lampman in *The White Savannahs* (Ware 64). In Ware's view, Collin's treatment of Lampman's social vision as "specious"

- enacts a shallow anti-romanticism typical of modernist critics. Perhaps Collin is best understood as a critic of the transition, one who writes about Canadian romantics from a modern standpoint and about Canadian modernists from a romantic standpoint; though I would continue to argue that Collin's *rhetorical* method, impressionistic as it is, bears little resemblance to the emerging modernist criticism of his day. [\[back\]](#)
2. The other files contain a typescript prepared by Collin himself of several of Smith's *Fortnightly* poems, and a typescript collection prepared by Smith in 1932 entitled *Nineteen Poems*. **[Page 79]** While the latter typescript does not contain any entirely unknown Smith poems, its contents provide a number of significant variants from the canonical versions of his poetry. It will be collated fully among the textual notes appended to my forthcoming *A.J.M. Smith: the Complete Poems*. [\[back\]](#)
 3. The letter of 17 November opens "Dear Mr. Collin," whereas the undated letter opens with the much more familiar "Dear Collin." The undated letter refers to and corrects the title of a poem enclosed with the dated letter. The letter of 17 November suggests that Smith will try to drop in on Collin over the Christmas holiday; in the undated letter he regrets that the visit had not proved possible. [\[back\]](#)
 4. Collin's letter is held among the Smith Papers at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto. It is mistakenly dated "25 February 1933." This date is clearly an error for "1934," because in the letter Collin responds to detailed remarks by Smith in *his* second letter, which we know at the very least to be later than a letter of 17 November 1933. [\[back\]](#)
 5. The date appears to be confirmed by Smith's reference in the second letter to the recent appearance of two of his poems in the London periodical *Adelphi*; they appeared in January 1934. He has his author's copy of the periodical in hand, so a February date for his second letter makes sense. [\[back\]](#)
 6. It first appeared in *New Verse* in London in June 1935. [\[back\]](#)
 7. Quoted from *Poems New and Collected*; hereafter *PNC*. [\[back\]](#)
 8. The dates of preparation of these undated typescripts are subject to complex interpretation. My reasons for assigning them to this academic year—apart, for the moment, from the obvious coincidence with Smith's freedom from academic duties and the fact that Smith mentions one of them to Collin—will be laid out at length in my forthcoming edition of Smith's complete poems. [\[back\]](#)
 9. From December 1933 through December 1936 he published eighteen new poems in mostly British and American journals. See Anne Burke's bibliography in the *Annotated Bibliography of*

10. In a paper presented to the *Reappraisals: the Canadian Modernists Meet* conference at the University of Ottawa in May 2003, I suggested that Smith's dramatic repudiation of the style of Eliot in the mid-1930s was assisted by his growing interest in the French and English Surrealist movements. Whatever their inspiration, the new styles of 1933-1936 mark a significant departure from the earlier landscapes of despair and the Canadian imagism that had dominated his practice to this time. [\[back\]](#)
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The Letters

Letter One

November 17, 1933.

Dear Mr. Collin:

Thank you very much for your kind letter. I had been meaning for some time to send you a note, but have been quite unusually busy and have at the same time been seized with the urge to write some new poems. I have written four or five in the past fortnight that I think are good, as well as a number that I know are not. I am striving to get a deeper intellectual content into my verses, and to give them (though in a very abstract sense) a religious or a political significance. Technically, the qualities required are precision, hardness, and clarity. The clarity, though, may only be apparent to the reader who has a certain amount of erudition and poetic experience. I think there is much to be gained by trying out the uses of ambiguity—to squeeze every ounce of meaning out of the various (and often conflicting) denotations and connotations of words. Irony, scorn, disgust, pity, terror—these emotions might be expressed by writing as it were in two keys, setting two contrasting suggestions, meanings, [[^]or] moods playing against one another.

What do you make of this poem? Is the theme clear to you? Does it express a political attitude? Don't think these questions impertinent; it is only to the intelligent critic that the modern poet can apply in testing the success of an experiment.

CHORUS¹

How shall I speak
To the regiment of young
Whose throats break
Saluting the god

Descending onto the drumhead?
—Each stalled
In his proper stance,
Upholding the service.

We, distilled
Of the polished bone and
The shiftless heart spilled
In the frontier sand, [**Page 81**]

Pluck at the natty sleeve.
—To what known use?
These young live
Fourth-dimensional to us.

In vain the smoking beeves,
The bloodstained grass!
How, memberless, to touch?
Or, tongueless, tell?

Other poems of the same kind that I would like you to dig your critical teeth into:—

NEWS OF THE PHOENIX

They say the Phoenix is dying, some say
dead—
Dead without issue is what one message
said,
But that was soon suppressed, officially
denied.

I think myself the man who sent it lied,
But the authorities were right to have him
shot,
As a precautionary measure, whether he
did or not.

TO A YOUNG POET²

Tread the metallic ice
Of this windless day with
A step prepared, precise—
Iphigenia in her myth

Creating for stony eyes
An elegant, fatal dance
Was signed with no device
More fatal to romance

Than I would have you find
In the stern, autumnal face
Of Artemis, whose kind
Cruelty makes duty grace,

Whose votary alone
Seals the affrighted air [**Page 82**]
With the worth of a hard thing done
Perfectly, as though without care.

HEAR MY MOST GRIEVOUS FAULT³

Indeed, I have sinned, and integral and
chief
That mortal sin, my Self. A delicate-
fingered thief
Of values, this, a dealer in stolen belief
And a falsifier of the intricate debt
Of love to the tiger. Why! this is the one
who set
A premium on the sins of age and let
The faults of youth go hang, that watered
its blood
And schooled its heart to whisper I will
be good
Like a young Victoria of wax and wood,
And now has fallen in love with
Penitence.
Let him work hard and father on my sins
The precocious bastard, Innocence!

Well, enough of this for now. When does your term end? I should very much like to visit you, but whether we drive or go by train will depend

to some extent on the weather. If we drive, as I hope, I shall certainly make a point of seeing you. Perhaps in January when I return would be a better time to arrange some kind of a meeting or talk.⁴

How is Leo's book⁵ coming along? I had a letter from him about two weeks ago, and subscriptions were still needed. Macmillans, I think, ought to be damn glad to get hold of such work, in any case.

About an anthology of newer Canadian poets:⁶

The book I would like to see would in its general arrangement be something like the Georgian Poetry books,⁷ with perhaps a general critical introduction; arrange the contributors [*sic*] alphabetically; a blank sheet with the poets [*sic*] name, followed by approximately twenty-four pages of self-selected poetry; the contributors [*sic*] would be Klein, Kennedy, Scott, myself, Robert Finch, W.W.E. Ross (of Kingston, who published some very remarkable poems in *The Dial* and who brought out a small book of them)⁸ There are possibly some others writers [*sic*] unknown to us.

I will let you know when (and if) I am coming through London.

Mrs. Smith joins me in best wishes to you and Mrs. Collin.

[*by hand* Sincerely

AJM Smith

P.O. Box 846
East Lansing] [Page 83]

Letter Two

Box 846,
East

Lansing,

Michigan.

Dear Collin:

I am really quite overwhelmed and, I need hardly say, immensely pleased with the testimony of your interest, kindness, and industry embodied in the essay you sent along. The only real fault I have to find

in it is that it assumes my verses are much more important than I can feel they really are. It doesn't seem right to speak of them in the same essay with references to Vaughan, Shelley, Yeats, and Eliot. All I am trying to do is to express in elegant and, if possible, moving verse attitudes and emotions with which I can sympathize and which are not wholly foreign to my time. In the United States and in England (though not in Canada) there are a large number of young men who are doing the same thing.

Your notes on the recent poems I sent you are very perspicacious indeed. I hope you will be able to deal with them. There is hardly one single poem in the Fortnightly⁹ that I am not now ashamed of. They are nearly all immature and unbalanced, both technically and as far as content is concerned. "Hear My Most Grievous Fault" also is not up to standard. I have gathered together 35 poems and have shipped them off to a London publisher under the title "News of the Phoenix".¹⁰ I don't suppose, however, that the first publisher will take them. Of the poems you make mention of the following will not appear in the book, and will have to be drastically revised before I can (OVER)

[*verso of first page*]

consider them as having any existence:

Noctambule—too obscure

The Moment and the Lamp¹¹ — this is perhaps the best of those I am discarding, but I can't feel that the idea is given its necessary form. The rhetoric is too loose and the complete meaning escapes one.

For Ever and Ever, Amen¹² — a commonplace idea; verse for the most part flat; some stanzas worse than others.

Beside One Dead—the spirit of the poem is Catholic, but the idea, I think, is an heretical one.

To describe a corpse as "Calvary toward dawn" seems to me sheer blasphemy, which would, of course be all right in a satire or in an angry poem that set out on purpose to be blasphemous, but his is a devotional poem. Your comment on the attitude I

am expressing here might be of interest.

Final Inconstance¹³ — this seems to me a rather flat and ordinary poem.

Testament¹⁴ — I am not sure about. I like the first part, but it seems to weaken at the end, and anyway it is too Eliotish to reprint. I think this

criticism could be maintained against some of Kennedy's ¹⁵ verse.

I will go on now to make some notes on various points in the essay.

Page 1: "Smith's theories that art is distinct from life, that the ego or idea of a poem is distinct from the poet—"

If these are mentioned, a more detailed exposition should be given, otherwise they appear to be rather crude reflections of the Art for Art's sake of the nineties. ¹⁶ Let me give some explanations. ¹⁷

In a perfectly healthy organism the bodily functions (e.g. digestion) go on without interference and without troubling the consciousness. So in the well organized human life, most of the necessary business of everyday— work, play, the ordinary social intercourse—ought to go on smoothly and pleasantly without being concerned in the intensely real life of the intellect and spirit. It is of this life, and of this life alone, that poetry is the interpreter and critic. ¹⁸ [*between paragraphs* "Shadows there Are" is a good example of this kind of poetry. "Prothalamium" also]

The truth of fact, the law of reason—these are the guiding principles of the everyday practical surface life, the life that Axel said could be left to our servants. ¹⁹ Poetic truth, the laws of the imagination—these are the guiding principles of the life that art—not only interprets and criticizes but unites itself with.

Now as to the distinction between the ego or idea of a poem and the poet himself. ²⁰ I do not think that this can be maintained. The confusion arises because an attempt is made to identify a poem with the ordinary surface life of the poet instead of with the other. To take a personal example: it would be possible for me to write a poem imaginatively expressing the spirit of Communism or of Catholicism without intellectually being identified with either. I could not however hard I tried write a poem (other than a satire) about the Baptist Church or the Conservative Party in Canada. [**Page 85**] And so my poems, however inconsistent among themselves and whatsoever various attitudes and moods they reflect[, *ed.*] are really conditioned by my training, temper, environment, experience, personality, or whatever name you can give to the conglomeration of all these.

It seems unlikely that pure art in the sense I was referring to it as identifying itself solely with the inner life of the imagination ²¹ can flourish under the present social system. Economic security cannot be

taken for granted. For a time—a long time, until after the Revolution—pure art will have to give way to propagandist art.²² "News of the Phoenix" is a result of these ideas. Is not "Ash Wednesday",²³ after all, a propagandist poem?

The verses you have under the title "Chorus" I have revised a little and added the explanatory title "A Soldier's Ghost" [*sic*] They are going to appear with "To a Young Poet" in Poetry.²⁴ The theme of the poem can be briefly stated, and you will ~~say~~[^] [see] how far away it is from pure poetry (although, if this is possible, the technique is that of pure poetry). It is this: A member of the older generation to whom the sufferings of the war are still a vivid memory finds himself out of touch with the young generations to whom the war means nothing and who are being misled into the same patriotic ardour that makes war possible again. It ends with a vision of these young conformers as so many brother bones scattered on the battlefield of the next war.

I hope you will discuss these later poems because I think they are an advance in originality, technique and significance over the earlier poems. Your article is so long that—although their discussion is sensitive and generous—I think you could ~~omit~~[^] [shorten] the references to "The ~~Flame~~[^] [Moment] and the Lamp" and "For Ever and Ever, Amen". [*vertically in left-hand margin*: I am really ashamed to see the lines from "For Ever and Ever" quoted—omit the quotations at least]²⁵ I ask this because these are very early, sketchy, and technically weak things. I shall never reprint them, unless I rewrite them. The same remarks apply to "Testament". You quote an early version; a later one was published in the Canadian Forum; and I am enclosing a final one. I think the poem suffers, however, by showing too obviously the influence of *The Waste Land*, and for that reason I cannot reprint it. Would you not use instead "Like an Old Proud King"²⁶ to illustrate the point you are making? To quote that in full would help to make your title clearer.²⁷ It expresses, too, more vividly and more originally the [**Page 86**] same point of view as "Testament"; it is, I think, the best poem I have written.

The fact that most readers of your essay will be quite unfamiliar with the work you are criticising may considerably limit its appeal. That justifies you in quoting quite freely, and I think it would help if you named the periodicals in which the poems you refer to have appeared. "The Two Sides of a Drum", "The Shrouding", "The Lonely Land", "Prothalamium" all appeared in The Dial; the Punchinello poems²⁸ were in the C.F.²⁹ and the London Aphrodite; "In the

Wilderness", and "Like an Old Proud King" in the Hound and Horn; "A Hyacinth for Edith" was in the C.F. and is going to appear in England in The Adelphi. By the way, you might be interested in seeing two poems of mine in the January number of the Adelphi—I suppose you can see it at the library, I have only one copy.³⁰ "The Offices of the First and the Second Hour" and "News of the Phoenix" were in the December number of New Verse (London).

Now for a few scattered references to minor points which, though it may seem carping, believe me, is not.

Page 2: Would you name the English and American journals rather than the Canadian ones? I don't want to run the risk of becoming a "Canadian poet".³¹

At the bottom of page 2, change to: "Although an ~~enthusiastic~~ admirer of Yeats' earlier poetry—"

It is the quotations on pp. 7 and 8 from "For Ever and Ever" that seem to me such bad verse. Could you not, instead of this poem, discuss "Universe into Stone" (Adelphi, Jan 1934) a copy of which I will enclose, as an example of mysticism. The poem is too romantic however to please me much. The poems I like best are "This is a theme for muted coronets"³² (Hound and Horn) "Shadows there Are [*missing quotation mark sic*] (Nation) "News of the Phoenix", "A Soldier's Ghost" and all the less obvious and colorful ones.

Page 9. I am kept from setting much store by "Beside One Dead" by the suspicion that it expresses a very un-Catholic and heretical idea. I am not sure of this, though. But I don't think the soul can be so completely and generally identified with the godhead. [**Page 87**]

Page 15—The quotation from "The Lonely Land" should have no initial caps except at the beginning of sentences.

Page 16—The sonnet "We have come a long way riding"³³ is to be published in The Queen's Quarterly, and I think it would be best not to quote from it until it has appeared.

I will try to write a simple explanation of "The Offices"³⁴ that you can compare with your interpretation.

The poem gives an account of the first exercises in that athleticism of the soul that Eliot, quoting I think from some mystic, refers to—I think in the essay on Dante.³⁵

"To abjure the kindness of darkness"—to give up the easy, pleasant careless ways of those who walk in darkness, who are immersed in the here and now, in the flesh. The flesh (the spite of the spirit) is to be regarded humbly as being irrelevant to the real spiritual life. So also is the [^romantic] cultivation of the sensibility and the emotions—"the romantic unnecessary cape of the naked heart".

"Is the rude root and manlike shape of articulate mandrake still godlike in this light? [*missing quotation mark sic*] From this point of view is the main tenet of humanism tenable? Can the fleshly part of man any longer claim to be godlike or divine?

That vanity (as a result of the spiritual discipline of the first hour) has been drained away, and now in the second hour (stage) empty of darkness (error, sin) but not yet filled with light (truth, grace) we wait, as inhuman and faithful as a weed or a flower.

Page 19 last paragraph: the phrase "would smile upon" might be interpreted ambiguously.

Page 5 line 4: Is "affects" quite the right word?

Well so much for this. I don't know if this was the kind of aid you wanted, but believe me, in any case, to be extremely grateful for your interest and acumen. What are you going to do with the essay? send it to the C.F.?³⁶ They will probably reject it as being on an unworthy subject, and, [**Page 88**] I'm afraid, with some reason. If the anthology³⁷ seems to be definitely going to come out in the near future it might be a good idea to work in some reference to it in the introductory paragraphs.

I thought of looking in on you when we drove back in the middle of January, but we were rather late, and not having heard from you I was afraid that the last poems I sent you had disgusted you completely. I shall certainly make a point of seeing you next time I go through—in the early summer I suppose.

With all best wishes,

[*signed* Arthur Smith]

[*enclosed typescripts follow*]

UNIVERSE INTO STONE

Let us invert this monstrous world
And stare with downcast eyes
Below the world to where the stars
Are littered on the skies.

Then reaching up with ~~knotted~~^{knotted} [^{bony}]
hands
Into the roadway, see
I pluck a stone as you would pluck
A cherry from a tree.

I cannot hold it! Look! It flies
Into the web of air:
It puts the stars out one by one,
And spreads a darkness there.

It gathers size as it recedes—
It is the Moon!—the Sun!—
The myriad Milky ways have grown
With my small pebble one.

(Page two to follow)

The cornucopia of the sky
Is shrivelled into stone, **[Page 89]**
And I who pulled that pebble down
Stand in its mouth alone.

I am the tongue of that vast bell
Inverted over me—
The voice, the victim, and the god,
Lost in infinity.

Bring me my hammer! Bring my blade!
I'll shape this world of stone
Into the likeness of a heart
Of flesh and blood and bone.

I'll take it for my love, and I
Will joy in it, and sing
How peace and lovingkindness are
In many a stony thing,

But not in hearts of flesh and blood,
And not in living bone,

That pride and chastity and scorn
Have shrivelled into stone.

[^by hand Adelphi. Jan 1934]

66³⁹

Testament [^by hand final copy]

[^by hand This should

have initial caps]

It is along the seamed and gnarled
and long-dead riverbeds I take my way,
I, molten, moulded, hardened into stone,
rifted with ripples, seamed with sand,
myself more sun-baked, sallow-seamed
with sand and little fine gray dust
in eyes and mouth and matted hair
than any Sphynx or desert god
half sand with so much crumbling age
as broods unwinking out of stony eyes
on cactus and the prickly pear. **[Page 90]**

Was it an old poet spoke of wells
and green and grass and juicy trees?
babbled o[^f]⁴⁰ green fields on a sable
bed
and went dry into the salty soil?

~~April~~[^] [^Summer] has the sound of silver
bells
or a certain misremembered voice
calling to me out of a child's heaven
to walk with it in waving shade
far from the clotted dust, ^
^the bleeding stones.⁴¹

But I have answered with retreating soles
—diminuendos of good-bye,
and leaning upward from a broken shoe
have come at length, still living, on a land
where hollow bones dream out their

tragedy,
stand up in sequence and soliloquize.

[[^]by hand omit and ensuing four lines
circled]

...this is no place of indolent surrender,
there is life in this death;
this scepticism has its faith,
this martyrdom its ecstasy.
I am not I, but a generation—
these are the bones of my comrades
that have found with me, in stony sand,
the blood and body of our unknown god.
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Notes to the Letters

These letters are reprinted by kind permission of A.J.M. Smith's literary executor, Mr. William Toye, and of the James Alexander and Ellen Rea Benson Special Collections, University of Western Ontario Archives.

1. As "A Soldier's Ghost" in *PNC*. Smith adopted this final title for his poem, and secured its publication, in the weeks between the two letters to Collin. A comparison of "Chorus" and the first published version of "A Soldier's Ghost" in *Poetry* (July 1934) shows how rapidly and intensively Smith must have worked with the poem after first mailing it to Collin. [\[back\]](#)
2. As with "Chorus," Smith revised this variant version of "To a Young Poet" rapidly; the **[Page 91]** poem appears substantially in the *PNC* version in *Poetry* in July 1934. [\[back\]](#)
3. This early version of "A Portrait, and a Prophecy" was never published. Significantly revised, it appeared with its *PNC* title in the *Canadian Forum* in December 1940. As Sandra Djwa has noted (27), both early and late versions of the poem bear a strong textual relation to "Arp's Randy Rant in the Comfy Confession Box," a piece that appeared only in *New Verse* in December 1935 and was never reprinted. [\[back\]](#)
4. The proposed trip would probably take Arthur and Jeannie Smith from East Lansing, via London, Ontario, where Collin taught at

- the University of Western Ontario, to Montreal for the Christmas holidays. The second letter makes it clear that he did not in fact visit Collin in the course of the journey. [\[back\]](#)
5. Leo Kennedy's *The Shrouding* was published by Macmillan of Canada in 1933. The publisher's policy of securing advance subscriptions to proposed volumes of poetry would be applied again to *New Provinces: Poems of Several Authors* (see next note), but the authors in that volume chose instead to invest their own money in lieu of subscriptions (Gnarowski xvii, xx). [\[back\]](#)
 6. At the time, Smith was in regular correspondence with F.R. Scott concerning the publication of a small anthology of the younger Canadian poets. It would eventually appear, with great effort and no small degree of frustration, as *New Provinces: Poems of Several Authors* with Macmillan in 1936. The project's development is fully narrated by Michael Gnarowski in his Introduction to the 1976 reprint of *New Provinces*. According to Gnarowski, Scott first proposed the idea to Smith and E.J. Pratt early in 1934 (x), and a flurry of letters followed, including one from Smith to Scott that was mailed the day after his second letter to Collin (xi-xii). In his subsequent remarks to Collin, Smith proposes a selection of poets and editorial policy very like those of *New Provinces*. Interestingly, however, Gnarowski says Pratt had "become an important part of the scheme" by 2 January 1934 (xi), but Smith appears not to have known of his involvement: in the list of proposed contributors that follows, he gives Pratt's place in the anthology to W.W.E. Ross. [\[back\]](#)
 7. The *Georgian Poetry* anthologies were edited by Edward Marsh and appeared between 1912 and 1922. They reprinted such well-received poets as Rupert Brooke and Edward Thomas; many other poets included over the years were receiving publication for the first time (Perkins 204-206). David Perkins notes that "The [1912] anthology was the first important example of its kind in the modern period...a book of contemporary poets who, finding it difficult to make an impression individually, group themselves in an anthology and describe themselves as a phase in literary history" (205). The various Imagist anthologies pioneered by Ezra Pound, for example, responded in part to the success of the Georgian Poetry series (331). Smith's comment makes plain the value to later poets of the Georgians' experimental use of the "little anthology" as a means of presenting work that was specifically *not* yet canonical. [\[back\]](#)
 8. Ross had in fact published two volumes of poetry at the time of Smith's writing: *Laconics* (1930) and *Sonnets* (1932). *Laconics* contained Ross's imagist experiments, and it is probably to that volume that Smith refers, rather than to the more conservative

- verse of *Sonnets*. [\[back\]](#)
9. The *McGill Fortnightly Review* (1925-1927), edited by Smith with F.R. Scott. [\[back\]](#)
 10. This is Smith's first reference to the typescript that would eventually—after years of circulation among unwilling or uncourageous publishers—appear as *News of the Phoenix* with Ryerson in 1943. See note 2 to the Introduction concerning an earlier typescript collection, *Nineteen Poems*, that was clearly superseded in Smith's mind by this expanded collection. Three typescripts entitled "News of the Phoenix" survive today: two among the Smith Papers in the Bata Library of Trent University, Peterborough, Ontario, and one in the uncatalogued Leon Edel Papers in the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections at McGill University. Neither of the Trent typescripts contains thirty-five poems, although the larger of the two, dateable to 1934, contains thirty. As the **[Page 92]** two typescripts are in some disarray (the table of contents for one is to be found in the other, for example), this larger typescript may well be the residue of the typescript Smith mentions to Collin, five poems having perhaps been removed for other use in the interim. The typescript sent to Edel appears to have been prepared later in the decade and was probably the basis of the eventual Ryerson volume. [\[back\]](#)
 11. It appeared in the *Fortnightly* on 17 November 1926. [\[back\]](#)
 12. It appeared in the *Fortnightly* on 1 December 1926. [\[back\]](#)
 13. As "Final Inconstancy," an early title for Smith's "Metamorphosis," which would not be published until 1957. It is not clear whether "Inconstancy" is a typographical error or an affected archaism. [\[back\]](#)
 14. "Testament" appeared in the *Fortnightly* on 10 Mar 1927. A revised version appeared in the *Canadian Forum* in August 1930. It never appeared in a Smith volume. [\[back\]](#)
 15. See note 5. [\[back\]](#)
 16. In *Aestheticism and the Canadian Modernists* I argue that Smith's early poetry was strongly but not subtly influenced by European aestheticism, and that his later poetry and especially his criticism show that influence strongly *and* subtly. "Art for Art's Sake" properly understood is only one of the often conflicting doctrines of European aestheticism; it is noteworthy that Smith does not repudiate the doctrine itself but eschews "crude reflections" of it that some might associate with his poetry. [\[back\]](#)
 17. In what follows, Smith borrows from but also takes issue with T.S. Eliot's powerful pronouncements concerning the poetic sensibility—specifically, its needed "impersonality" and "unification"—in such essays as "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) and "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921). Smith's

- opening reference to "digestion," for example, may echo Eliot's demand that, like Racine and Donne, who "looked into a good deal more than the heart," the modern poet "must look into the cerebral cortex, the nervous system, and the digestive tracts" ("The Metaphysical Poets," *Selected Prose* 66). [\[back\]](#)
18. Eliot would disagree. In "The Metaphysical Poets" he writes that "The [ordinary man] falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking; in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes" (*Selected Prose* 64). [\[back\]](#)
 19. In Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *Axel*, the eponymous hero famously remarks from his symbolic tower, "As for living, our servants will do that for us" (249). In his *Axel's Castle: a Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930* (1931), Edmund Wilson made the remark central to his interpretation of the "Symbolist" movement, a term embracing, in his interpretation, much of aestheticism *and* modernism. [\[back\]](#)
 20. Smith might be quarreling here with the popular version of Eliot's ideas of "impersonality" rather than with their careful expression in "Tradition and the Individual Talent." Eliot nowhere insists that "impersonal" poetry will have absolutely no reference to the private experience of the poet: impersonality is a condition of the creative process, not of artistic content. The "surrender of personality" that he believes necessary is "continual," incidentally, not continuous, and "only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things" (*Selected Prose* 40, 43). [\[back\]](#)
 21. Smith appears to refer to his earlier remarks in the present letter rather than to any publication. In the so-called "Rejected Preface" he would soon write to *New Provinces*, however, he would still be fighting clear of the notion of a "pure poetry" that "stands by itself, unconcerned with anything save its own existence" (Gnarowski xxx). It is just such an ahistorical art, Smith implies in the "Preface," that the young poet of the Depression must spurn (see note 22, below). George Moore, author of *Confessions of a Young Man* (1886), which was for Smith's generation the archetypal *bildungsroman* prior to James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), had published an anthology of *Pure Poetry* in London in 1924. As the McGill University library owned a copy, it is very likely that Smith read Moore's provocative introductory remarks as an undergraduate, and that the terms of this debate were partly set for him by Moore. [\[back\]](#) **[Page 93]**
 22. In these remarks Smith clearly anticipates another major argument

of the "Rejected Preface" (see notes 6 and 21). In that document he remarks, "Detachment, indeed, or self-absorption is (for a time only, I hope) becoming impossible.... Capitalism can hardly be expected to survive the cataclysm its most interested adherents are blindly steering towards, and the artist who is concerned with the most intense of experiences must be concerned with the world situation in which, whether he likes it or not, he finds himself. For the moment at least he has something more important to do than to record his private emotions" (rpt. in Gnarowski xxxi). [\[back\]](#)

23. T.S. Eliot's poem of post-conversion religious struggle appeared in 1930. Smith's wry treatment of it as "propagandist" is fanciful—unless he means (he does not appear to) that it is propaganda for the Christian faith. [\[back\]](#)
24. They appeared in *Poetry* in July 1934 with "The Crows" under the general rubric "Emblems of Air." [\[back\]](#)
25. In *The White Savannahs* Collin quotes two lines from "For Ever and Ever, Amen" and a substantial portion of "Testament." He mentions but does not quote from "The Moment and the Lamp." [\[back\]](#)
26. The full title, of course, is "Like an Old Proud King in a Parable" (*PNC*). [\[back\]](#)
27. The title of Collin's chapter on Smith is "Difficult, Lonely Music," a quotation from the penultimate line of "Like an Old Proud King in a Parable." Collin followed Smith's advice and published the whole of the poem in *The White Savannahs*. [\[back\]](#)
28. As "Three Phases of Punch" in *PNC*. [\[back\]](#)
29. Here and below, the *Canadian Forum*. [\[back\]](#)
30. The poems were "The Fountain" and "Universe into Stone." [\[back\]](#)
31. Smith's striking remark is an instance of the counter-nationalism that governs his early criticism and that would eventually manifest itself in his opposition of a valued "cosmopolitan" to an implicitly less valued "native" tradition in Canadian literature. His attitude is at least in part determined by a reaction against the cultural nationalism that (he believed) was vitiating Canadian literary taste in the years after the First World War by "boosting" writers whose Canadian subject matter was obvious, whatever the literary merit of their work. The same counter-nationalism motivates, of course, F.R. Scott's "The Canadian Authors Meet." I call the sentiment "*counter*"-nationalist because it is always subtended by an implicit and sometimes explicit desire for Canada's literature to equal the best written in the contemporary world. Such a desire cannot be called, properly speaking, "anti-nationalist." [\[back\]](#)

32. As "The Plot Against Proteus" in *PNC*. [\[back\]](#)
33. As "The Cry" in *PNC*. [\[back\]](#)
34. Full title: "The Offices of the First and the Second Hours." Smith is referring to this title in brief rather than establishing a variant title. [\[back\]](#)
35. In *The White Savannahs* Collin follows up Smith's comment by quoting Eliot's 1926 review of Ramon Fernandez's *Messages*. Eliot claims that a new "generation...is beginning to turn its attention to an athleticism, a *training*, of the soul as severe and ascetic as the training of the body of a runner" (253). His remark bears plainly on the conversion to Anglo-Catholicism that he was considering as he wrote. There is no comparable reference in Eliot's "Dante" essay. [\[back\]](#)
36. In his answer to Smith of 25 February 1934, Collin says that he "meant [the essay] to be a chapter in a book of essays—wherein I follow Canadian poetry out of one world-view into another." The phrase nicely describes the important project of *The White Savannahs*, in which the essay on Smith made its first appearance. [\[back\]](#)
37. That is, *New Provinces*. [\[back\]](#)
38. Smith appears to have sent Collin a copy of "Universe into Stone" drawn from a typescript collection he was preparing. "95" would, however, be a high page or poem number for any Smith collection at this time. [\[back\]](#)
39. See note 36. Again, Smith did not think that he had more than about forty pages of poetry [**Page 94**] for a collection at this time. [\[back\]](#)
40. The "f" of "of" has been added by hand and obscures a typed apostrophe. Smith alludes to the Hostess's narration of the death of Sir John Falstaff in Shakespeare's *Henry the Fifth*: she says of Falstaff that "a' [he] babbled of green fields" not long before passing away (Act 2 Sc. 3 16-17). In the *Canadian Forum* version of the poem Smith confused pronoun for preposition in the Shakespeare phrase and wrote "babbled a' green fields." Presumably here he typed "Babbled o' green fields" as an initial correction to the *Canadian Forum* reading, and then went further by hand, restoring the full preposition. [\[back\]](#)
41. Smith has drawn an arrow indicating that this short line is to be joined with the previous one. [\[back\]](#)

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