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WILLIAM OLSEN

Poetry and Vision

Visionaries, even if they happen to be like our Campana, are inevitably the most artless, the blindest of creatures on this earth.

—Eugenio Montale

I am afraid to start this essay on “vision” in poetry because, like many Americans, I have been blessed and cursed with an acute terror of sounding high-minded. It’s easy to guess where this terror comes from, but difficult to challenge it, and these days difficulty in poetry must with every breath justify its existence. Now when I find myself at the head of the workshop table, I can see firsthand how often a young writer’s ambition toward “vision” in poetry is used to excuse a myriad of indulgences, that is, easy, paid-off absolutions. So often young writers *do* mistake mystification for mystery, obscurity for difficulty. I envy how my students can invent their sensibilities from scratch. Yet their sometimes arrogant insistence on freedom from expectation must have something to do with their sense of a prolonged and painful adolescence, with having physically left their homes and yet finding themselves *in loco parentis*, in purgatorial dormitories—still tethered financially to their parents. Their impatience is lovely, but impatience can lead to a mistaken notion of vision: the invention of inwardness through inscrutability. True, young poets have to defend their impulses before they can afford the leisure to examine them. Yet such un-self-questioning inwardness may not be vision at all.

What *is* vision in poetry? Vision doesn’t happen without maturity, but along with maturity, maybe a certain unanswerability is also necessary. And unanswerability makes those who consider themselves the mature guardians of a reckless world a little nervous. So—and perhaps very justifiably—Montale’s appreciation of Dino Campana that I’m quoting from betrays a little ambivalence: elsewhere Montale characterizes Campana as a *voyant* “visited by too many abstract possibilities,” feeling no limitations in poetry,

no need to answer to the exigencies of reality or prevailing taste. For Montale, this visionary is blind; he goes his own way, but he also stumbles into walls. A visionary poetry presumably becomes a heightened account of those stumbles. Curiously, the elder poet's characterization of the young Campana resembles our own culture's stereotype of visionaries as young, idealist, naive, beclouded more than clarified by possibility, and potentially self-destructive because not of this world.

I must say I can't think of one poet-friend, however transcendental (to use another out-of-fashion epithet) his or her poetry may be, who would admit to being a visionary. It's easier by a few degrees to admit to having a drinking problem. Moreover, our culture's current caricature of visionaries as misfits has longstanding precedents. Here are some of the ways the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *visionary*: "given to fanciful and unpractical views"; "having little regard to what is actual or possible"; "speculative, dreamy"; "seen only in a vision, unreal, non-existent, phantom, spectral"; "existing in imagination only, imaginary, not actual or real, incapable of being carried out, fantastic." A visionary is "one who indulges in fantastic ideas or schemes." With these dictionary definitions in mind, it's hard to imagine a visionary making it to the corner store without falling into a manhole.

What also explain our distrust of visionary elements in poetry are our misapprehensions about ourselves and our hopelessly human motives. To take just one instance of how our collective self-distrust tempers our aesthetic responses to the world, consider how connected our attitudes toward the human body are to our aesthetics. We view our bodily senses as extensions of base—that is, untrustworthy—instincts. The prevailing attitude toward sensory vision since the Romantics has been a prejudicial one, informed by our attitude toward sensory vision in nature. At worst, sight is a hunting sense, with predators often having the sharpest sight (eagles can see their prey from a distance of two or three miles), and at best it is a defense against hunting. We have come to understand all sensory and perceptual activities as survival skills. And sight is no different from the rest. Seventy per cent of our species' sense receptors cluster in the eyes, so perhaps the unusually exaggerated importance our nervous systems grant to the sense of sight has as much to do with the success of our species as a huge cerebrum or an opposing thumb.

In light of a more empirical world view, we now regard sight, not as the Elizabethans did—as the most nearly angelic sense in the hierarchy of senses—but as the hyper-rationality of the hyper-predator. It was Wordsworth who bequeathed us the notion of the "tyranny of the eye," thereby associat-

ing eyesight with practicality and, in his case, by extension, with rapaciousness, with Monarchy, with absolutism, and with the Age of Reason—as if the mind-forged manacles could be so forged if a rationalist should happen simply to glower at a slag pile of crude iron ore. Harold Bloom has articulated the Romantic disposition against literal vision even further: one way, Bloom says, that the poet achieves an “autonomous imagination”—as if autonomy were a desirable goal—is by shifting senses somewhere in the midst of a poem from sight to hearing. For Bloom, to achieve an autonomous imagination is to escape the realm of necessity and to transcend all those messy, strictly animal drives which are so good at disguising themselves as human reason. Our “eyeteeth,” to use Robert Lowell’s compound noun for the shapes human avarice finds in poetic perception. *Vision*, unbridled, or—as Bloom might put it—unhumanized, as a proposition for the vast range of human activities that inform our arts, becomes a doubly-losing one: to sharpen the sense of sight is only to make us at once more bestial and more hopelessly cerebral.

When the poets of our time do admit visionary ambition into their poems, they tend to do so with a qualifying irony, an irony that only sometimes forces its way into the central ambiguities of experience, but that just as often distances the speaker from his or her own sense of how seriously troubled about experience he or she is. What has emerged in much of English and American poetry, in response to the Romantic sublime, is a counter-sublime, a provisional attitude towards the very importance of the human condition and the human imagination, an attitude held onto so fiercely—as, say, in the fiercely self-limiting poems of Elizabeth Bishop—that that fierceness itself becomes a measure of transcendence. As a rule, since the largely experiential poetry of the Romantics, what tensions arise out of poems which admit to visionary impulse arise out of the worry that vision itself is invention—prefabrication masking as discovery. The fear that the vision was faked may end up having more dramatic possibilities than the vision itself. Even the poets themselves define poetry by negation, circumspection: it is a “perfectly useless activity,” says Bishop, an “extravagance about grief,” says Frost, a “serious joke,” says William Stafford. So the counter-sublime of skepticism replaces Romantic notions of ambition with the newest expression of anthropocentrism: *tough-mindedness*. Meanwhile, our critical theorists are equally loathe to admit that the current linguistic skepticism of post-structuralism is by nature phobic towards every moment of human discovery except the present moment. Yet we should be careful not to be absolutist in our skepticism. We might even note in passing and while our moment is passing that our time is only that, our time and no prior

generation's and no succeeding generation's.

For vision in poetry can't be all avarice. I think the way vision works in poetry owes to some like elemental conviction that what is seen is there *to be seen*. Call it longing, call it wariness, call it territorial, but the impulse to have a look around is as strong in nature as it is in art. This is why the modern intellectual is unnerved by vision: vision implies belief, even if belief amounts to no more than unwavering incertitude. The world seems to yield to the seer, the seer is stunned by that yielding. The seer, therefore, also yields: in some momentary paralysis of avarice and fear in the face of the extraordinary. Call vision stupidity, even: it is indifferent to survival, it is a superfluity of Being. And I'm not talking about Romantic notions of reciprocity, because when you are rapt enough with that you see it doesn't matter whether the world out there harbors sublime threat or promises natural joy. For as sight in nature, vision in poetry satisfies some primal need for validation, assurance, certification, the sense of *thereness* and *hereness*. A visionary poetry answers the human cry of that primal, animal need with the feeling that for once something has been wrested from the unending encounter with reality. There is this feeling in any poem that sustains its vision—whether that poem be a quiet lyric instant or a loud rhapsodic sweep—that something, the world we suffer or the attitude with which we suffer, takes hold, finds focus. And within that hold the poet can be halting or confident, faltering or sure-footed, earnest or ironic, committed or skeptical. What is won, what is wrested from the encounter may be only the knowledge of endless struggle or of an uncertainty far darker and less poised than cynicism. Yet something *is* arrested, acknowledged if not owned. Whether that irreducible something is created or destroyed in the process, invented or discovered, enjoyed or suffered, there is a sense, brief or prolonged, of a truce between the *pressures* of reality and *expression*. If nothing else, vision is one way of shattering expected rhetorical patterns, of shattering story or meditation or essay or lyric for the fitful energy released by that shattering. Ultimately, at its most forceful, vision in poetry gives the impression of seeming to be received, not invented, not even discovered: discovery still implies a slight degree of volition.

Consider a well-known poem of John Clare's, titled, simply, "A Vision." The simplicity of this title, given the broad ambition of a poem that in sixteen lines encompasses a man's entire personal history, is an expression of the counter-sublime. Temperamentally, this poem seems sublimely resigned: it may be about how in later years Clare fantasized an ideal love that he had lost because of his madness, a fantasy that objectifies a profoundly subjectified bereavement. It is love elegy, it is epitaph, and it is epic self-

reappraisal. Its vision differs from the more explicit visions in our poetry—like the dream vision of *The Pearl*, or the opening of Eliot’s “Burnt Norton,” or the opening lines of Rilke’s first Duino Elegy. In those poems vision unfolds as narrative; in Clare’s poem vision accretes epigrammatic generalizations about the hidden narratives that occasion the generalizations. Clare’s vision arises largely out of a sense of loss and betrayal:

I lost the love of heaven above,
I spurned the lust of earth below,
I felt the sweets of fancied love,
And hell itself my only foe.

I lost earth’s joys, but felt the glow
Of heaven’s flame abound in me,
Till loveliness and I did grow
The bard of immortality.

I loved, but woman fell away;
I hid me from her faded flame.
I snatched the sun’s eternal ray
And wrote till earth was but a name.

In every language upon earth,
On every shore, o’er every sea,
I gave my name immortal birth
And kept my spirit with the free.

On the surface, this doesn’t sound like a vision at all—until the brag (one of the most selfless brags in poetry) of the last stanza—but like a plaint. Clare’s poem exists in part as a lovely game he plays upon our expectations rising from the claims of the title. What haunts me most in this poem is how the compensatory powers Clare ascribes to the inner life—embodied by the phrase “the glow / Of heaven’s flame”—prove in the third stanza chiefly to be linguistic powers, powers Clare presents as illusory and—in this stanza’s last nearly hopeless line—as contemptuous of earth itself. It’s the vanishing of earth and not the imagined death of the poet that, understated as it is here, threatens to thwart the speaker’s attempt to recover from his losses. Granted, the apparent finality of the twelfth line makes the leap from defeat to the recouping vision that emerges from life’s summarizable wreckage a bit implausible. Yet what a strong sense of retrieval this poem achieves, despite its unassuming demeanor. It finds its form in its belief that form is redemptive. And it somehow maintains an unassuming voice through and

beyond its affirmative leap—partly because of the absence of any transitional tag to begin this stanza and partly because the fourth stanza is for the most part parallel syntactically with the first three stanzas. Even the Promethean imagery is put modestly: the speaker “snatches”—what verb could be less auspiciously heroic than “snatches”—the sun’s ray. As for the Adamic act in that twelfth line, of writing till “earth was but a name,” the tone seems more hapless than tragic. And the poem turns neither in the third nor fourth stanza but in the inapprehensible white space, the pause between stanzas, at which point the speaker’s hope renews itself blindly, and as mysteriously and unaccountably as earth reappears in the fourth stanza. Then Clare the moping poet-lover becomes a sort of Everyman. In Clare’s “Vision,” however implicit and self-reflective and oblique, it is the belief in meaning—even the meaning of failure—that grants the poem its shared generosity, just as the speaker’s refusal to abscond from the mayhem of experience paradoxically guarantees his certain release from personal limitation. And this happens because for a brief instant the sense that the past is ghostly non-existence is held in abeyance.

What I sense at the end of this poem is a sigh of relief, an existential recognition against the larger claims Clare—or the culture in Clare—makes of himself to *have* an enduring vision. In the struggle against those larger claims, some *provisional* sense of validation has been wrested. The poem garners this sense of validation in an indirect yet adamant insistence on unanswerability. This is what makes “A Vision” seem so modern. Clearly Clare is playing off our two fairly opposed meanings of vision in poetry: one, a momentary apparition of something not normally present to the eye or apprehensible by an effort of will; and two, a consciously drawn scheme or consistent philosophy that makes the poetry of a single poet cohere into a characterizable set of values. In “A Vision,” Clare opts for the former: he surrenders an entire life to the momentary attainment of a single truth.

For understandable reasons the critic-theorist prefers to emphasize vision in the latter sense, if only that he can have something to talk about besides tugged heartstrings. This is the reason that Yeats and Eliot still tower as gods among some scholars: these two poets insisted on formulating and codifying a comprehensive worldview, one that can overshadow in importance—that is, in scope—the poetry itself. To this end, poetry exists to meet the specifications of vision, which in turn becomes more and more a regulatory force. My guess is that the claims of these two warring senses of vision—apparition versus construction—are largely irreconcilable. Auden, in his famous revision of “We must love each other or die” to “we must love each other *and* die,” disfigured his line when he squelched whatever inner

prompting fueled it in its original and opted for consistency of worldview. He gained prominence in his own mind as a thinker but he censored that unanswerable logic which can never be systematized. Since building a comprehensive vision is an act of conscious self-definition and since self-definition can't exist in the swamp-life of the subconscious, poets aspiring toward epic greatness often feel this tug of war between these two senses of vision. This is why a poet like Derek Walcott prefers the poem to show its seams, so that we know it is a made object, something struggled with and therefore something that speaks of Herculean effort; hence this line from *Midsummer*: "The lines I love have all their knots tied in." If vision as apparition is effortless, vision as construction is tortuous: torture speaks of character, and character alone speaks of greatness. Hence in the "Broken Tower," one of his many poems that take the form of a dream vision, Hart Crane expresses his anxiety that the apparition behind the poem is too passing for him to impose a self-defining structure upon it:

And so it was I entered the broken world
To trace the visionary company of love, its voice
An instant in the wind (I know not whither hurled)
But not for long to hold each desperate choice.

Apparition in Crane is an ether that must vanish for more structural epic intentions to take place, but it is the passing-ness of these charged prolongations that creates the poignancy of Crane's work.

In both the apparitional and in the the constructive sense vision has entered the poetry of a younger-to-middle generation of American poets, thereby returning poetry to its more primitive functions and reintroducing as modal possibilities hallucinations, dream-truths, rhythmic heave, and rhapsodic transport. Consider that haunting dream-vision "In the First Hour of the Night" by Frank Bidart, Paul Muldoon's poems about hallucinogenic experiences in *Quoof*, or the poetry of some of the British Martian poets, or Donald Revell's cubist hallucinations in *Erasures*, or Denis Johnson's millennial visions, or Lynda Hull's Hart Crane-laced visions of American disenfranchisement. Consider, in a more sober vein, Edward Hirsch's sanely prophetic poetry. Or Gerald Stern's arguments for a poetry that accepts its ecstatic nature. Or the continued metaphor of memory as a Virgilian underworld in Seamus Heaney's *Seeing Things*. Or Louise Glück's *The Wild Iris*, an extended account of a garden wherein all living things exercise the right to a clarifying vision of mortality. Maybe none of these poets has the lifestyle that a poet like Campana did. None of these poets as far as I know is guilty in his or her poetry of being given to fanciful, impractical views, having

little regard to what is actual or possible; nor is their poetry especially dreamy, unreal, non-existent, phantom, spectral, and so forth. None of them has shirked the earthly, the finite or the private. Yet in one way or another each of these writers tends toward a vatic, high-style poetry, if only out of the foundations of a demotic, low-style poetry.

Carol Muske, in *Red Trousseau*, her fifth book of poems, is one such poet. As far as the wars of fashion are more honorably waged in individual poetry than in essays, *Red Trousseau* is a fascinating book of poetry. The degree to which it eschews straight narrative for a more speculative poetry—its penchant for questioning the motives of poetry itself—may not be news. What is new, what has remained pretty much unseen in contemporary poetry, is how Muske partakes of the post-modernist strategies of, as Ihab Hassan put it, “language in quest and question of itself,” while remaining absolutely faithful to the usual life, the life whose intransigence baffled us whatever our aesthetic. Her newest poetry operates out of the fear that, if the brute literal fact of an unmalleable world isn’t taken into account by poetry, then poetry in its most radical ambitions will remain effete. Muske uses an unadorned, usually non-figurative style to battle her own facility with an epiphanic poetry, as if the flashy blinding image might be nothing more than gratifying fetish, a quick way to forestall the certain disappointments of longing.

Red Trousseau strains to achieve an overarching vision almost against the poet’s wishes. But the poems themselves, taken singly, insist on validation through unanswerability. They refuse Jungian myth-making, they dispel their own symbols—like the aggregate symbol of the trousseau—as soon as they express them, and they question their own narrative structures as authorial and therefore potentially tyrannical. They question notions of justice and propriety as phantasmagorias no less ghostly than the phantasmagorias of the inner life. Eschewing metaphor, they prefer to be frank about the impulses beyond metaphor. So this poet who writes so marvelously about her husband-actor’s role in the cinema, who simulates at the same time she criticizes as patriarchal the disembodied omniscience the cinema makes possible, who refuses any consoling belief that narrative is restorative and history is cyclical as a means of false reassurance that devalues personal hurt, who battles against archtypes themselves as collective fetishes, who refuses any confessional stance as a morally coercive stance that martyrs its practitioners to Judgement—this always personal, often domestic poet participates in myth-making only to understand the human foibles behind myth-making. And the subterfuge behind myth, laid bare, turns out to be more mysterious, more captivating, more heartbreaking than

myth itself. Myth isn't God-reaching, it's the play-acting of Eros. What light is shed in this poetry is shed within non-negotiated conversation, the self listened-into—the only time personal and cultural forces have an unrestrained dialogue. The rest is not only dross, but as Muske puts it in “Unsent Letter”:

consecutive murderous insights,
like our life stories, assembled from
little convenient logics, strategies,

slow death by interpretation

Interpretation means the loss of something more crucial than self-awareness: humane response. These poems are rife with interpretable dramas: the drama of a child playing at being a human mutant fly; the Hellenistic drama of a “light-eyed drunken girl” baring her breasts for the approving sailors of the S.S. Eisenhower; the courtroom dramas of the Salem Witch trials conflated in the title poem with the mutely ecstatic drama of a romantic tryst between speaker and other; the self-generated drama of a night of insomnia; the drama of watching, detached and spectral, a husband play in a production of *M. Butterfly*; the drama of a speaker's supervising a kindergarten field trip to a police precinct. It is up to the poet to observe these dramas accurately and then to meet them with vision, not interpretation. For interpretation demands consensus, consensus means exclusion, exclusion means the suppression of the erotic, and—to go on—the suppression of the erotic ultimately brings on social violence. So in “Field Trip” the rather omniscient narrative toward the end of the poem melts away, and the adult voice is subsumed by a child's voice and a child's adult-ridden perspective of a child's world:

...Now he comes
to the gangs, how they own certain colors

of the prism, indigo, red—he doesn't tell
how they spray-paint neon FUCKs over
the commissioned murals. The kids listen
to the story of the unwitting woman

gunned down for wearing, into the war zone,
a sunset-colored dress. She was mistaken
for herself: someone in red.
She made herself famous, the way people

do her, but unconsciously—becoming
some terrible perfection of style,
bordering as it does, on threat.
The sergeant lifts his ceramic mug,

etched with twin, intertwining hearts,
smiling like a member of a tribe. Later,
on the schoolroom floor, the kids
stretch out, drawing houses with chimneys,

big-headed humans grinning and waving
in lurid, non-toxic crayon. Here is
a policeman, here a crook. Here's a picture
of where I live, my street, my red dress.

Our planet, moon. Our sun.

Here the bogeyman of a police sergeant is our stand-in literary critic: he interprets, he filters out ugly truths, he keeps his signifiers abstract. His methods of representation are hopelessly non-representative: he sticks literal murder sites with “colored glass hatpins.” His methodology—such as it is—denies its own violent impulses and therefore can't hope to cope with the violence of his city. And then, when it would seem that the retarded veracity of a child's crayon drawings can fairly stand in for our bumbling narratives, something happens on top of the pretense of description: the speaker hears her over-controlled voice become as ingenuous in its territorial insistence as a child's voice. She, too, has a red dress: she, too, is a likely target for inner-city terrorism. And she, too, painted in lurid and non-toxic crayon (what a wonderfully implicit criticism of Freudian sublimation), is trapped in “some terrible perfection of style.” Yet not entirely: in the last line we pull away from this strangely comfy scene of a police office to a cosmic frame. We admit the inhuman forces which revolve around us and around which we revolve. A kid's drawing, to be sure, but a vision of cosmic integration as well. Hence the poem ends with a shared possessive, “our sun”—a crayoned drawing of a sun, a non-toxic literal sun: an irreducible if not quite affirming life-force.

The quietness of the leap from personal to public perspective reminds me of the end of the Clare poem and suggests one purpose of Muske's marvelously flat descriptions. Only against so flat a descriptive surface can Muske veer from the impassivity of the strictly visual, or what in the title poem she calls “God's bright murderous gaze,” to the mayhem of sympa-

thetic response. So Part III of the title poem begins with a character reading historical accounts of the Salem trials, then slowly works a way into the defendant's unjustly troubled conscience. The result is a "blind" vision, rendered with an omniscience which for compassion the cinema can't begin to approach:

...that she midwifed
the stillborn, curdled milk, spied, screamed at climax,
grew wings—and worse, Looking over her shoulder,
I saw her laughing he said laughing at me

till at the end, days later, she could feel
her way eagerly, blind, cleansed of memory,
through the maze of metal doors to the last door:
the single depthless mirror.

Shaped by the culture which tries her, this defendant's ultimate vision of judgment may have no celestial grandness behind it, and yet in its headlong—and blind—way through a maze of obstruction it still stumbles toward revelation. And the "she" is twofold, referring both to the defendant witch and to the other "she," the late-night reader of America's dark history who somehow feels herself to be on trial, too. Unanswerably, inexorably, the mute anguish of the defendant is brought to light and given voice.

In the book's most ambitious poem, "My Sister Not Painting, 1990," Muske explores similar censorial forces behind our aversion to private vision, this time an uncle's World War I trench vision of an erotic Christ-man-woman appearing before the fallen corpses of his comrades:

Terrific, she says, now not to paint this story:
Not paint here: the snow riddled with holes,
shrapnel pocks, little yellow lacework of piss
or *here*, not paint Uncle bearded, raving
on his knees? Not paint *here*, his friend, the corpse,
boots and helmet, mouth open in song—half of
a silent aria, the cement duet of *pain, sky, pain,*
sky? Here. Not paint the soldier-Christ-woman
with her removable heart atorch, her black brassiere,
sheer black stockings?

Not paint *here*, the center,
bruise-colored, tumescent, his bloody hand on himself.

If this passage indicts the entire male world for engaging in insane war, the

final effect is understanding, not criticism—the effect of the passage’s “obscenity” is to broach the distance between the speaker at her remove from unpalatable experience and this uncle who, finding himself his troop’s lone survivor, hallucinates a savior for company. And if his savior happens to be a sexual fantasy and it’s death he gets off on, don’t we, too? *Red Trousseau* is a frightening book of poetry, unnervingly generous, and unmediated by cheap self-righteousness. Its moral energies derive instead from how the distancing powers of private speculation give way to the immediacies of shared vision.

In Charlie Smith’s third book of poetry, *The Palms*, Smith, like Muske, tilts himself more fully than in his first two books to a visionary poetry. Smith has also written four novels, though I’m not sure anyone coming to this new book of poetry would deduce this from the poems alone. What narrative propensities do enter these poems do so in miniature, by way of vignette and anecdote, and these miniatures are truncated even further whenever it happens that the need to tell a story is outweighed by the need to comment on story or, in some cases, to critique the need of commentary. And when Smith sees his own self-appraisal as approaching the egocentric, often—mid-sentence even—he redresses its various forms by way of more narrative digression. If Smith’s methods are sometimes convoluted, those convolutions, these dovetailing spasms of inner volition, may be exactly what fiction, in its necessary fidelity to story line, can’t do. It would be stupid to measure this poet’s poems against his fiction, or against fiction period. What distinguishes Smith’s new book is its ability to juggle rhetorical forms, to shift midstream from story to discourse and back to story. He is not, to my understanding, a meditative poet: the voice is too out-of-control, the syntax too hurried in its pacing, the eye too avidly pressed to the lens of description, for this poet to hope to achieve the consolations of meditative distancing. These poems are disrupting rather than integrative. Disruption is the first fact of the emotional life, and of a visionary poetry: what makes Smith’s poetry appealing is his ability to transfigure disruption into some last-ditch shot at honesty. The characters and personas who with the poet inhabit these poems make themselves known as victims of their own or of a general recklessness. Smith’s *dramatis personae* include a man who kills his brother with a shotgun, a woman not only murdered but dismembered by her husband, a speaker who finds himself reflecting on his love life while part of a screaming crowd at a car race, a mother who climbs on the corpse of her dead husband in an effort to understand the nature of attachment beyond the lost fact of the object of attachment, a speaker who in his passion for his

lover climbs “higher than suicides climb,” and a poet-speaker addressing Lautréamont as “mutilator of souls.” Speakers at wit’s end and passion’s cul-de-sac, with little left to do but retreat and retrieve.

I’ve made Smith’s book sound bleaker and crazier than it is. It is not moral rage or emotional intensity but delicacy of attention that gives Smith’s new poetry its spiritual candor. Amid their ambitious agenda of creating a self-portrait which is also a portrait of America out of a fiction of selves, these poems propose almost endless powers of clarity. *The Palms* is humane because of its failures, and if it delivers not all of its ambitions, at least it doesn’t die a mannered defeat. Instead, for the most part, the poems admit to what Allen Grossman calls “the great privilege of the hero”: they create a picture of the human image by allowing their speaker heroic dimensions and by raising those heroic dimensions to an even greater magnitude through the orchestration of multiple private histories. In our weaker moments we aspire to great strengths, these poems say again and again, and no portraiture of the human image is complete unless it includes our most delusive ambitions. And this is the sense of vision that arises in Smith’s book: a vision that finds something like oneness in the fact that our longings speak the same mortal grammar that nature and the social world speak, that “if life will fade like visioned dreams” as John Clare put it, the very fact of fading testifies to our contiguity with our surroundings and to our capacity to understand our passing moment in time.

Consider the title poem’s at-once casual and symphonic cadences:

When the sun went down in L.A. that day I was driving
a rental car east on Sunset Boulevard,
worn down by the endless internal battering,
and looked back to see the vivid capacious burned oceanic light,
the dust in the air that made the light palpable and beautiful
hanging over the pastel city, and saw the crunched little stores
with their brocades of steel locking them up
and the narrow streets springing downhill like madmen
running away; and there was a ridge that blocked the sun,
a scruffy torn wall of yellow earth with a few small houses on top,
widely spaced, disconnected-looking, though down from them
there was a neighborhood of bunched-up shacks
and a street that wound through patches of willow and bougainvillea;
and on the ridge that was sharply defined by the
rotted unmanageable light, there were a few palm trees,
untouched at that moment by breeze so that their tops
hung limply; and they seemed, black against the huge sky
of Los Angeles, like small dark thoughts tethered

at the end of reason's thick ropes, hanging there in gratuitous solitude,
like the thoughts of a man behind a cluttered restaurant counter,
who speaks no English, wearing a hat made of butcher paper,
who slaps and slaps his small daughter, until they both are stunned,
stupid and helpless, overwhelmed by their lives.

The mock-apocalyptic mode here makes me think some of Denis Johnson's poems, but the visual strengths of this poem, the representational force of it, is a little less privatized, less surreal, than Johnson's. It is stylistically unadorned: only the syntax, as opposed to the narrative eye for urban details that are actually static and homely, is headlong and thrashing and restless. This poem finds many of its imagistic correspondences through humor, and it very quietly dissembles its heroic pretenses. In this diurnal apocalypse of a sun going down in the city of fallen angels, as the speaker drives down—get it?—Sunset Boulevard, narrative unfolds almost exclusively through the sense of sight, as revelation. The neurotic landscape is infused with the speaker's anxieties, left unsaid except where a few Allen-Ginsberg-like strings of attitudinally-piled-against-each-other adjectives surface. Yet the total effect is not to give sway to the poet's own emotional turmoil but merely to admit that our emotions do color our sense of place and to allow subjective responses due proportion and nothing more.

Indeed, a lot of the details actually seem quaint. Their quaintness—the fact that this is a “pastel city” with “crunched little stores” and their “brocades of steel” which are protective bars, the “scruffy torn wall of yellow earth with a few small houses on top” which are not disconnected but “disconnected-looking,” the “bunched-up shacks” and the “few palm trees”—almost makes our infernal unreal city seem, as some ironic product of self-loathing, lovable. And the elongated syntax suspends time and slows down this vision of accelerated urban blight—seen, after all, through the window of a car—almost to the point where our affections can keep up with the scenery flying by. The landscape becomes overtly internal only after the first break in the syntax, that semicolon after “hung limply”—at which point the speaker smuggles into the poem the presence of his own association-making consciousness. Yet even the “small dark thoughts” of the palms are not wholly brought out of the speaker's sense of disenfranchisement; they hang instead in their “gratuitous solitude.” Subjective response finally widens out to a last fractured glimpse of a nameless man—who is this guy wearing a hat made of butcher paper?—and his daughter whose dual story we know only through their abusive relationship. Both father and daughter, the perpetrator of violence and the victim of his violence, are “stunned” (this sense of being stunned which the speaker implicitly shares), and the

poem ends in a shared vision of unspeakable astonishment. More importantly, it ends with the dissolve of the already tenuous dramatic presence of the speaker, who has vanished from his own narrative almost as strangely as the streets of this blighted city have been emptied of their denizens—where is everybody this dusk?

Smith is very good indeed in poems like this that match their imaginative sympathies instant by instant with carefully wrought detail and that leave self-doubt present but not theatricalized. Other poems that make a huge case for their failure, that end in what is now maybe the most recognizable rhetorical move in contemporary poetry, the aesthetic disclaimer, are, as a rule, less successful. Such is the case with the initial poem of this volume, "My Parents' Wedding." What more heroically sweeping way to begin a book of poetry than to lyricise the nuptials that account for the speaker's own conception? This poem begins in humor, with a sweetly parodic resummoning of the speaker's parents in their young adulthood, "like Adam and Eve sneaked back into the Garden / and no God, no burning sword barring the way, / no terrible accusations and thunder, no rejection..." But it ends in a sudden halt, by averring even its parodic enthusiasms—"and it is one week / before he will find her in bed with his best friend." The poem's deflation of its own methods seems not so much heartbreaking as bathetic, even more bathetic for how few claims it makes on the speaker's emotions. His mother's infidelity is alluded to offhandedly, in a would-be bittersweet understatement. Yet it *is* the last line of the poem, so the understatement has a cymbal-crashing effect. In "The Ecstasies" Smith apologizes for his obsession with his mother—why is it that a poet, that anybody for that matter, must apologize for this elemental obsession—as an example of poetic cowardice:

I can't help it; I am sure by way of this
that there is more to life than we want
to admit or know, though, as always,
substance without form
is unseemly, and, at bottom,
incapacitating. I don't know why
I insist on talking in this arch
and mocking way...

It isn't the fact that Smith stops the action of the poem to comment on his own processes that makes this passage seem coy; it's that the commentary itself, offered as self-scrutiny, seems so *effortless*. When contemporary poets since Lowell, Plath, Roethke and company get too nervous about vi-

sionary derangements of sense and logic that naturally accompany more Orphic forms of the lyric, they tend to mask those derangements in postmodernist eschewals of seriousness. Amazingly, in this halfheartedly crazy passage—who would have thought this possible—even *glibness* seems postured.

So okay. It's Smith's willingness to experiment with tone, to challenge the claims of "tonal consistency"—the best model for tonal consistency I know of is the flat-line electrocardiogram of a corpse—at the expense of surface finish, and, sometimes at least, to maintain a seriousness of purpose, that gives his poetry its faltering nerve and therefore its believability. There is perhaps nothing so tonally corpse-like as postmodernist archness in poetry. Smith at his best is a visionary poet after the earthly fashion of his mentor James Wright, and his mixture of a gently comic sensibility with Promethean urge gives his visionary poems their human dimensions. Of any of the poems in *The Palms*, Smith speaks most powerfully his commitment to an earthly, embattled vision in "Lies to the Dying," a lovable fiction that begins with a goofy descent into the underworld and dovetails all at once in invective and self-scrutiny and sympathy and insensitivity and embitterment and defiance:

Someone will create from your lives a story that tells
a truth you were waiting to hear, that is nothing like
the truths we learned in our days of power;
he will use other domesticos, other quick, toothy animals
another lover or two, thinking beasts, a white-haired woman
squatting at the edge of a grassy pond
perhaps, or someone no one can think of now,
and from this you will begin to encounter, deep in your
bodies,
the movement in another part of your brain
that you confused with heart of spirit.
You will step out under the scarlet starfire
and stand there holding someone in your arms
whom you can't even imagine now,
ready for the next terrible venture, for the next slagheap
to climb and clamber over the top of singing
or crying, forcing your pity into the lives of your friends,
taking in your skinny arms one more time these bent
and troubled creatures, these midgets and postures
dripping stinks their fathers tried to forget,
smashing your fists into the face of all that you love.

A poetry of vision: in Smith's and Muske's newest books, in the work of a growing number of contemporary poets, a visionary stance has emerged not only as rhetorical device, and not primarily as mystical disengagement from the world, but more than anything as a way to experience the world in all its hurt mutuality. The success of such a poetry can be measured by its ability to admit not only the poet's hurtness, but also the poet's ability to hurt. Muske accomplishes this by owning up to her complicity in co-authoring our often unwholesome cultural drama; Smith accomplishes this by acknowledging himself as one more character in that drama who survives through grotesque abuses and mismanagements of desire. Both are moral poets, yet both refuse to mitigate the extent of human suffering by codifying it in a system of moral values. For both poets vision remains as unanswerable as the material and emotional injuries that occasion vision.

I'll end this essay with an account of one of my own injuries, a physical one. Just once have I been blinded by the light, and literally: when I was thirteen, a batch of explosive powder I was making for some homemade M-80s—a volatile mixture of potassium chlorate, charcoal, and sulfur—blew up in my face. I ignored the advice of all the manuals and ground the stuff with mortar and pestle. The next thing I knew I couldn't see, or almost—my corneas scabbed over with scar tissue, what light passed through to my optical nerves was undifferentiated, milky, not outside light nor inside light. A light like a bad prayer. My parents rushed me to an emergency room, where an intern scraped my eyes clean with a Q-tip, then bound my head in bandages. I spent two weeks in the St. James Hospital in Chicago Heights functionally blind. I wish I could remember some details from those two weeks, but the little I remember includes the voices of my caring family at my bedside (and at my command in a sense), the deep masculine and deferential voice of my roommate who was a man in for a routine appendix operation, and the voice of the nurse. What seems stranger than my inability to remember "details" from those two weeks is my inability to remember what must on my part have been, initially anyway, unmitigated fear. And though I learned later that the return of my sight after the intern removed the scar tissue might have only proved to be momentary, this possibility never occurred to me, or I don't remember it. What I remember best was not my own terror but the sound of my father's voice when he first rushed downstairs and saw whatever horrible sight I'd turned myself into. *O no O no O no* is what he cried, a cry as of yet unqualified even by sorrow. And though I can't remember feeling any hurt on my part, I could hear *his* hurt as plain as night. When the bandages were removed and I was wheeled out of the hospital, it was an early fall evening in 1968. I was happy to see

my relieved parents and the hospital visitors walking back to their cars and the streetlights above us all and the normal qualified darkness of a city sky.

I wouldn't trade all the blinding light in the universe for that feeling of getting out of the hospital and back into my moment in my city, my history. And I'm convinced that vision in poetry has to work a little like this, that vision has the feel only initially of an unfortunate plunge into the doubting self and self-forgetfulness but then of a return, a reconnecting with the people you love and the people you sort of know and the people you don't know at all. The total strangers it was such a relief to be able to see again.