

Teemu MANNINEN  
Poetry and criticism

#### LEMON YOGHURT

You never know what word or gesture  
topples which construction.  
You can code systems for controlling databases,  
respect the objectivity of objective reality,

but is anyone able to stare at a weird-ass conch  
lighter than a cloud's shadow  
or a bleak, numb, punctured eye?  
Maybe this question is dumb.

Maybe I can't blame everyone else for my interior life.  
What's most important in both of us  
does not reduce itself to berries on the outer edge of the bush,  
and truth does not float nimbly in the air

like somewhere in between words and deeds  
a fat glamour, sexual fruit.  
There must be a way to reach a destination  
without this stealth technology,

these productive ecological models,  
control of orgasms. You have to know how to shut up,  
how to pretend to be something other than  
a life lived outside epochs of awesome discounts,

these sides of ovens and these black lumps.  
After the conference I slept  
for eight hours. I ate lemon yoghurt.  
I was not to be seen.

#### THE SWINE

The sun crawls on a hill to become a monument.  
The fat forest loses weight to become a park.  
A dark lion is preserved in the zoo.  
Sold salmon freeze in the ice-box.

The loin-mass of the large householder  
molders in the rotten words of the pageant winner.  
Under the pale wan vaults of the heaven  
the fisherman drives his green sedan

on his way from market-hall to Espoo's streets.  
The roadside wheat ripens for the machine.  
The roadside wheat is suitable as fodder  
for the swine that was born for slaughter.

#### MON PRINCE CARNAVAL

When the ducks in the morning twilight howl their pining  
we remember in vain those ancient, far-off times  
when dining together was a family affair,  
a nose a soul's door, and the green outboard motor  
took dad out on the lake to swindle the vendance.

In vain, because when you finally get to see all this,  
you come to realize that dignity was never coequal:  
that fruits borne distinguish the bank manager  
who murdered his brother, and the victorious greening  
of moss stagnates our stride as the silver light strikes.

Therefore, as the day breaks, you trail the stained pens  
and old lighters in industrial buildings  
where fans stitch together their favorite characters  
and understand the lyrics of songs given as gifts:  
that the frozen lake sings to those it drowns,

that, dressed in the clothes of former chains we were free,  
wind in our hair through ravines and shadows of mountains.  
Today we assemble the cartoons of metal fixture lines  
content to have coffee in the severe winter night  
crawling along the stretches of suburb we pray

"Que me veut mon Prince Carnaval?",  
but the day finally ends beyond good and evil.  
The slave lets a heavy lid fall over a humble eye.  
The curlew limps in hay in the relics of a dead lake.  
The stock market does not sleep, it sings of the joys of desire,

sin's disproportionate sack that's larger on the inside  
than out. A Spanish purple plum answers

the stock market's note on the shelf of an Alepa. It sings  
of ancient, strange, foreign cultures,  
millennia beyond written time;

a young, swarthy man who hunted wild beasts,  
a nocturnal castle with a tower, and in the tower  
an old man, who thought hard upon the movement of stars  
and spat on the face of God. Neither of them will you listen,  
o night, a stone statue in black water.

#### THE WANDERER

From the pines' embrace the wanderer  
plies to a green pond's niggard bank.  
The restocked eider flounders to wing,  
weakly sputtering water about.

Dusk crawls into the boring park.  
A lazy deer starves in the copse,  
the blunt snout snatching at a question.  
The human mind is nothing but incursion.

An old pot boils on the fire.  
Expensive fibre dries on a branch.  
At night the mustard's yellow glitter  
grinds the skin of charred banger.

#### THE CROW OF GOLGOTHA

A crow sits on the scaffold of Golgotha's  
collar in the painting by the elder  
Pieter Bruegel. The to-and-fro  
traveling of humankind is something  
in the background of what's happening,  
like a portrait of a count whose title  
passed onto an uncle, but the fore-  
ground's taken over by the sable fur  
with silver clasp. I do not know  
if the old masters knew of suffering.  
They knew optics, the geometry of gesture,  
what the eye, purblind, projects onto  
a canvas, but suffering? That's beyond

our debating. All we know is this:  
the hangman's mule is scratching its  
behind on bark while the guillotine  
is raised upon the square. Further back  
are children skating. On the tongue of art  
a taste is forming, an ever-refining picture  
of an incidental detail in the scarlet cap  
of the ambassador, a blown up skull that  
cannot be deciphered. "Remember me",  
it grumbles, but the children go on skating,  
like bits of embalmed lentils drying in  
the canvas tomb of a stomach buried in  
the coffin of a pharaoh's mummy, and you  
have to decide, right now, if the joke's funny.

#### FLUENT NARRATION

On Sundays the dilapidated winter upholsteries  
flutter their nostalgia for somewhere,  
scramble for kisses and cocks  
so that the stomach turns toward the spine's side

and yells out its yearning two hundred kilometers away,  
but the squirrels have gone to sleep,  
and the lakes are all frozen over.

The heart does not lie:

something has really gone,  
a cycle's come to an end, a movement has been removed,  
the willow trees have put on autumn's trousers.  
It has come time for doubt to focus on everything, to point out

that we aren't making any damned interior design show here:  
that a decision to step out of the frame is a political choice,  
migrating birds against windows,  
fish stocks change dwelling places,

but, because we constantly face cities that are even fatter than before,  
cities in whose intestines a year-old laminated floor  
is already crackling, as if someone were standing at the door  
and knocking, that's why,

if they hear my voice and open the latch, I wish  
for these words to be devoid of everything new:

only this fluent narration,  
my frail voice far up high in my mouth,

o you who have strayed to my door:  
on this rotten branch of destiny my only wish  
is that you might be able to see through everything  
a human being represents for itself.

#### MEMORY'S FLAKES

It's really easy to paint with words in this human lottery.  
We say, "a river", "a church", "a railway station"  
as if that was somehow essential, but a meter's  
length of rail is not commensurate with personal  
things. How do you give reasons for Pasila? How can you  
defend yourself against bitterness? And what does sorrow feel like  
when you see an ant hill, intelligence in a place  
where you never believed it? In this time of the final  
tsunami we should not be trying to make forecasts,  
so just sink your spoon in the sauce while you try  
to forget what the back row was sarcastically muttering,  
because isn't this domestic life actually pretty nice,  
it's nice to be able to use finger paints, to learn  
knitting, writing these reports about the phenomena  
of your interiority, but do you think there's any way  
to understand that dancing without a reason was  
just an excuse for idleness? Before us, two psychological  
spaces present themselves, and we have to choose:  
an enormous, focus-grouped and web-marketed parking  
lot for additional nutrients for stay-at-home dads,  
and another, a green, lush forest road made for cars  
and we are traveling through it very, very slowly,  
as if we were being led to slaughter, but around us  
memory's flakes float gently & get stuck on our eyelashes,  
as if a mechanical ritual inherited from a depressed mother  
was repeating events from the tent of familiar salesmen:  
how at first we offer food, then use computers,  
lift, carry, hold items in our hands, touch, investigate,  
then listen to demos, sign contracts, and finally  
wait for our payment between the floor and the sofa  
in the office, this perfectly sensual generation,  
a highly educated object, specks for lunch at work,  
commuting's cute like a compendious musical taste,  
a poignant kid, well-assembled air conditioning.

## BATS

The ripe bats trickle in trees.  
A new grave distills in the mist.  
A thousand fat flowers sleep  
in the deep mouth of a black ravine.

A naked girl laughs, vomits.  
A dark drunk boy in tall grass  
worms towards the nymph. A stench  
of willowherb chokes the riverbed.

A genial wind fans. The girl's  
virgin Vespa is safely secured  
in the forest's confident bosom.  
A tarred boat sloshes in the stream.

## THE SNAKE'S SEED

The graveyard gives off a funny hum. The mattress of rot proceeds.  
Young girls in a cheap bistro eat red meat with squelchy teeth.  
One must let go of ambition, relinquish the need to give explanations,  
renounce the desire to perform, the belief that I have something  
special to say. History was not made for us, wasn't meant for us.  
It never could have been. We must be content with these trinkets  
stolen from our parents, because the police can lurk anywhere,  
orcs have made an ambush in Isengard, and even if all the important  
lines are filmed in close-up, in the background a very European  
kind of liberal guilt is sighing. This is the seed of the snake:  
a suspiciously abundant gathering of childhood mood swings,  
sexual fulfillment like fried bananas, or the drippings of slaughtered  
sacrifice -- shadows from a thousand butterflies in an empty  
hallway bought on credit, a place you come to with worn-through shoes.  
But: we're still alive, although the girls keep consuming fillet.  
And: "Let's not dwell on the past", sways the old turgid gay,  
Pan, from between the primeval tables. Spot me a fag, you horny dude,  
spot me a village of shambling shame of an ancient, hoary people.  
This greased-up bodily substance. This sieve, with these wings.

## BLUEBERRY TIME

In the midpoint of your life, having strayed  
from the right path you finally find a trail,  
the horizon's beach, the reeds, that beauty  
is something other than offspring,

music sometimes a sign of weakness,  
a cordoned island, open-air prisons, everyone  
has their walk among the shining crystals.  
And the extent of benediction? Puppy eyes

and package tours, camping grounds.  
Give thanks for all the gifts, traveling  
is the greatest thing to ever happen,  
something really big. Here lies all of our

allotted knowledge. The wallpaper is not  
a screensaver. The bottom of a brown squirrel's tail  
is brown. Blueberry time has come.  
Sparkle in the dome of sky like comber drowns.

## SUNSHIP

And there will come a time when we  
will belong together like a real family;  
the phone goes off in the synagogue  
and you notice what kind of mask  
you are supposed to wear. You think  
it will be lovely like a nest rocking  
gently. But beauty was only a property  
that woke up the onions of years,  
questions of morality on an airport  
of cakes: that perception is an intuition  
of what is conceived, the science  
of reason's atmosphere, chromatic,  
modulating music the courage of matter;  
the sausages of self-control  
and the potato salad of despair.

Our mind sits on its swing, collecting  
tricyclic medicines, weight indexes,  
rainbows in a community center garden party,  
and stupidity remains the most important  
learning environment for adults.

Why do I keep on asking myself:  
why art thou so depressed, o my soul,  
why can you not find peace?  
Maybe because it's just too easy to say  
that humans do not have souls,  
especially if you want to annoy  
a religious person. It's easy to say  
that behind everything there's your parents  
moaning, behind everything there's also  
the dog, the lamp, a mother  
always already hissing the metaphysics  
of a blind grandmother, and sometimes  
there are even people living in the bedroom  
paying rent while pieces of fleshy  
sentimentality burst into existence  
between or maybe even inside them.

Meanwhile, the space energies of paradise,  
like the gold standard, are romantic memories,  
but clams, we're told, can improve  
your manhood. The warm nights are erotic.  
Thanks to the japanese, vampires now have  
a synthetic blood supply, and Man,  
who was at once a mixture of hiccups  
and symbolism, walked a little  
further from the path, raised her skirt,  
saying: "These useless commissions  
of council blocks and detached housing,  
these traitorous strips of brown turkey  
and of polycarbonates, these bloated brains,  
these unnecessary mistakes,  
these hospitals, these harbors  
of everything that is dead and gone  
are the ones who have come out of that  
great agony, which kept on piling up  
and piling up until it burst forth  
in the form of an eating disorder."  
But you know what? These people are innocent.  
These unfortunate ones are your brothers  
and sisters in spirit. They are the wind,  
the stars, and the albatross.

And when the night finally stretches  
and squeaks over all the land  
and covers these self-evident  
banalities with its chilly attitude,  
these paper factories will, against  
all odds, flung through mountains



of doom and past bedrooms of distress,  
arrive at your door and become  
your sunship, and you will ride them  
over the dark, shipwrecked sea,  
and on that night, stretching over  
every lame thing the sky has ever  
known, all of your childhood Christmases  
will finally have been given a home.

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### The Anxiety of Necromancy

Clark Ashton Smith, "the Keats of California", can, for a good reason, be called an impossible poet: he is one of the first in the history of poetry to be able to write genre poetry – horror, fantasy, science fiction. Born in 1893 in Long Valley, California, Smith was homeschooled. His family was poor, and so was Smith for most of his life. He started writing at the age of 11, and sold his first short stories to pulp magazines at the age of 17. When he was 19 years old, the decadent San Francisco poet George Sterling became his mentor (Sterling himself had been the pupil of the famous horror writer Ambrose Bierce).

Even though he was first and foremost a poet, Smith – who also worked as an illustrator and a sculptor – is better known for his connections with the weird fiction movement gathering around such pulp magazines as *Weird Tales*, *Wonder Stories*, and *Amazing Stories*. Among his fantasy cycles are the far future Earth stories situated on the continent of Zothique, and the stories about the medieval Averroigne. Smith also collaborated with R.E. Howard and H.P. Lovecraft; among his lovecraftian inventions are the cursed book of Eidon and the frog god Tsathoggua.

But what was Smith like as a poet? In a word, supernatural: his subjects are the laments of necromancers and wizards, the wisps of lotus mists, dream visions, far stars and the horror of the gulfs between galaxies, the atmospheres of weird planets and the pale, demonic nymphs who inhabit them.

But for all his breathless invention it can, perhaps a little paradoxically, be said that there is nothing original in Smith's poetry. His work is entirely composed of pastiche. What more, this pastiche itself is a product of a kind of misreading, a literal-mindedness which amounts to a historical nearsightedness. For Smith developed his own poetic style out of imitating – not directly, but "through" his own pulp and genre context – the poets of the French decadent movement and the early surrealism and fantasism of writers such as Arthur Rimbaud, Charles Baudelaire, Isidore Ducasse, Théophile Gautier and Gérard de Nerval.

An illustrative example is provided by Smith's sonnet "On Re-Reading Baudelaire", which is of course itself a riff on Keat's "On Reading Chapman's Homer":

Forgetting still what holier lilies bloom  
Secure within the garden of lost years,  
We water with the fitfulness of tears  
Wan myrtles with an acrid sick perfume;  
Lethean lotus, laurels of our doom,  
Dark amarant with tall unswaying spears,  
Await funereal autumn and its fears  
In this grey land that sullen suns illumine.  
Ivy and rose and hellebore we twine.  
Voluptuous as love, or keen as grief,  
Some fleeing fragrance lures us in the gloom  
To Paphian dells or vales of Proserpine. . . .  
But all the flowers, with dark or pallid leaf,  
Become at last a garland for the tomb.

Here the symbolic ennui of Baudelaire is gathered and condensed, all the regalia of the forebear collected and stored in a palace of memory, the poem which is a place unto itself, an imaginary, formal land. Here, Baudelaire's flowers of evil bloom in a garden which is composed of and by the sonnet qua sonnet, through masterful command of rhythm, sound and sense: every line "loaded with ore", as Keats suggested a poet should do.

This is not so much imitation as it is a kind of *callida iunctura* in the manner of medieval poets, whose imitative poetics Smith's technique resembles more than any modern poet: it is a gathering of traditional topoi, the "places" of argumentation, imagery or description, which functions as an analysis of what, in that which is to be imitated, needs to be focused on, improved, or interpreted. It is a reading of a forebear as a catalogue of one's own future projects. In this sense Baudelaire's "Benediction", when translated by Smith himself, becomes at least in my mind a prediction of what Smith himself will write:

Man's sorrow is a nobleness, I trust,  
Untouchable by either earth or hell;  
I know to weave my mystic crown I must  
Tax all the times, the universe as well.

But treasure lost from old Palmyra's wealth,  
The unknown metals, pearls out of the sea,  
Can't equal, though you mounted them yourself,  
This diadem of dazzling clarity,

Since it is perfect luminosity,  
Drawn from the holy hearth of primal rays,  
Of which men's eyes, for all their majesty,  
Are only mournful mirrors, dark and crazed!

Here we experience all of Smith's themes: the sorrow of being lost to all previous systems of collective, cultural or historical meaning, and the relentless search for a new, primal meaning by "taxing" all times and the universe itself; also the theme of "lost" knowledge revealing the

being of history as death; and the projection of symbolism's obsession with material culture onto archaeological and anthropological material.

If we but gain one more level of experience (roleplaying pun intended) we will be able to read this poem from the point of view of fantasy and science fiction, and end up with the poetic program of a Smithian poet: a kind of necromancy, where forgotten forms of life, the rotting corpses of literary history, become filled with a fantastic vitalism that is disconcerting because it represents the anxiety of influence itself, the anachronistic necrofilia of the poet:

#### Necromancy

My heart is made a necromancer's glass,  
Where homeless forms and exile phantoms teem,  
Where faces of forgotten sorrows gleam  
And dead despairs archaic peer and pass:  
Grey longings of some weary heart that was  
Possess me, and the multiple, supreme,  
Unwilderer hope and star-emblazoned dream  
Of questing armies. . . Ancient queen and lass,  
Risen vampire-like from out the wormy mould,  
Deep in the magic mirror of my heart  
Behold their perished beauty, and depart.  
And now, from black aphelions far and cold,  
Swimming in deathly light on charnel skies,  
The enormous ghosts of bygone worlds arise.

These "enormous ghosts of bygone worlds" illustrate what the science fiction author M. John Harrison has called the "literalization of metaphor", or the "colonializing" appropriation of a literary forerunner's poetic imagery or narrative worlds in order to "really live in them". But whereas Harrison describes the literalization of metaphor as a process of adaptation decay (the process of ever-increasing banalization and commercialization through subsequent adaptations of a fictional world), Smith's work is more in line with what Thomas M. Greene, in his book *The Light In Troy* has called heuristic imitation: "Heuristic imitations come to us advertising their derivation from the subtexts they carry with them, but having done that, they proceed to distance themselves from the subtexts and force us to recognize the poetic distance traversed. (...) [an] informed reader notes the allusion but he notes simultaneously the gulf in the language, in sensibility, in cultural context, in world view, and in moral style."

Greene is discussing the problem of anachronism and historical belatedness faced by a Renaissance humanist who aims to imitate a classical forebear, but his typology of imitation is actually quite useful for analysing any historical period where an earlier text from a culture which is incommensurate with one's own time and place needs to be incorporated and adapted to fit with one's own means and aims. Heuristic imitation is a kind of modernizing, then: "The poem becomes a rite de passage between a specified past and an emergent present. (...) Thus the imitative poem (...) acts out its own coming into being [and] creates a bridge from one mundus significans to another." This idea of heuristic imitation helps us to see why Smith, and the concoction he devised – science fiction poetry – was impossible.

In all periods there have been genres or at least ways of writing which appear, from the point of view of that period, and for reasons which aren't always very obvious, to be beyond the capabilities of the current literary devices as well as the imaginative abilities of contemporary writers. We do not find psychological realism or stream of consciousness in medieval romance, nor do we find epic poetry of the Homeric vein in our time.

The appearance of a new style, a new device, or indeed a new genre is therefore always a rupture in the literary system of a period: it marks a moment when something previously impossible has suddenly been made possible. But the appearance of this "something new" must always be contained already in the logics of the past, or it could not have developed at all; the anxiety of influence is a necromantic misreading, a spell gone wrong, it is Frankenstein's monster that has been cobbled together out of the discarded corpses of yesterday.

In this manner Smith succeeded in literalising into imagined worlds that which for his French forebears was either sensual illusion or a too-intensely experienced reality. In other words, he did what heuristic imitation often does to its examples, and, in a way, what popular literature often does to high art: turned into psychological realism that which was linguistic fantasy. He described as livable those worlds and places which had originally been merely argumentative, illustrative topoi for the agonism between imagination and reality.

Such an interpretation is made ironic by the fact that the French poets Smith was imitating had themselves arrived at their aesthetic approach at least in part by a heuristic misreading of the horror and fantasy tales of Edgar Allan Poe. Then again, we could also claim that Smith's early and original fan fiction is something new in the history of poetry. In his best poems, such as "The Star-Treader", he forgets to imitate a style and almost accidentally creates his own, an intense, linguistically revisionary naivete drunk on the dark reaches of the imagination, something which was, because of the aesthetic upheavals related to the rise of modernism, becoming truly impossible in a much more desperate way.

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