

The Sacrificial Poetics of A.J.M. Smith

Claudine Gélinas-Faucher

Volume 36, Number 1, 2011

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl36_1art11

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Gélinas-Faucher, C. (2011). The Sacrificial Poetics of A.J.M. Smith. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 36(1), 186–203.

The Sacrificial Poetics of A.J.M. Smith

CLAUDINE GÉLINAS-FAUCHER

IN HIS INTRODUCTION TO THE RECENT edition of *The Complete Poems of A.J.M. Smith*, Brian Trehearne notes that although Smith's productivity seems to have begun declining almost as soon as the Depression began, the years "1932 to 1934, including the year's unemployment so daunting to Smith as an academic, were remarkably productive in his emergence as a poet" (xliv). Thus, Smith was undergoing one of his last significant bursts of creativity even as he was beginning a shift toward the security of a career as scholar and anthologist of Canadian literature. This two-year period seems to have been a transitional phase for Smith, from the culturally confident 1920s to the darker, more doubtful years of the Depression. The poems I will discuss here were produced during this period of transition. I will argue that Smith's earlier verse, as exemplified by poems such as "Like an Old Proud King in a Parable" (1928), "Good Friday" (1929), and "To a Young Poet" (1934), serves to establish a model of self-sacrifice for the poet by stressing the precepts of modern poetry at the expense of recognition and popularity. By the mid-thirties, however, Smith's sacrificial confidence shows signs of weakness, and poems such as "A Soldier's Ghost" (1934) and "Chorus" (1936) point to a darker, less assertive articulation of the value of personal sacrifice. Smith's interest in stories of sacrifices is directly related to his ideal of the poet as a sacrificial figure. By portraying instances of sacrifice in Greek myth, Christian doctrine, and in the more contemporary socio-political context of war, Smith puts forth his sacrificial poetics in an attempt to negotiate the relationship between the poet and his readership and, more broadly, the poet's relationship with society.

In "Wanted — Canadian Criticism" (1928), A.J.M. Smith points to the absence of a critical audience as one of the causes of backwardness in Canadian literature: "A small population engaged in subduing its environment and in exploiting the resources of a large new country may very easily develop an exaggerated opinion of the value of material things, and has some quite understandable doubts as to the necessity of

artists" (31). This situation, Smith argues, gives rise to a tension between business and art at the heart of which stands the Canadian artist, who must therefore choose between the commercial success of "He-man Canadiana" and the anonymity of true poetry (31). For Smith, as for the "serious Canadian writer," this is a "vital question, for to him the confusion between commerce and art presents itself in the light of a temptation to effect a compromise. If he chooses to work out his own salvation along lines which cannot be in keeping with the prevailing spirit of pep and optimism he finds himself without an audience, or at least without an audience that will support him" (31). This is a difficult question indeed, and yet in Smith's language, succumbing to the "temptation" of this "compromise" is tantamount to sin. It represents an unforgivable breach of artistic integrity. There are a multitude of magazines that are ready to pay the poet handsomely, but only "if he will cease to be an artist and become a merchant" (31).

Smith reiterates this claim in an address he delivered at the Canadian Writers' Conference held at Queen's University in Kingston in July 1955. He argues that "the audience [a poet] writes for primarily is made up of specialists, enthusiasts, craftsmen and experimenters — in other words, for *other poets*" ("Poet" 20). While this limited audience may signify less commercial success, to Smith it represents a source of accomplishment and advancement. Indeed, this selective audience "keeps the creative artist on his toes" and ensures that the poet will "strive for perfection and be dissatisfied with any easy solutions or cheap effects" (20). Smith thus stresses that peer recognition is (or should be) more important to a poet than popular acclaim. If the poet compromises his art for the sake of appealing to a wider audience, he "ceases to be a poet" (18). To Smith, then, the vocation of poet implies a sacrifice. The poet must be willing to forego broader recognition and acclaim in favour of something infinitely more valuable: excellent poetry.

For Smith, this sacrifice is inextricably intertwined with an unflinching poetic integrity which demands that poetry "fuse thought and feeling" ("Rejected" 40). Indeed, like T.S. Eliot and the metaphysical poets, to whom he owes many of his poetic convictions, Smith believes in an intellectual poetry that is also powerful by virtue of its emotional charge. As Sandra Djwa writes, these two influences helped Smith shape his own aesthetics of intellectual detachment and emotional intensity: "Smith, who had earlier written a master's thesis on the poetry of W.B.

Yeats, had come to believe that the heart was subordinate to the intellect in the hierarchy of the poetic process. Distinguishing between romantic and metaphysical poetry, he favours the metaphysicals and Eliot's 'intensity'" (31-32). Smith's belief in the subordination of emotion to intellect does not imply, however, that he repudiates emotion altogether, as the latter is recuperated into intensity. In "A Note on Metaphysical Poetry" (1929), Smith explains that emotion, like intellect, is an essential characteristic of metaphysical poetry, though it "does not come directly through the senses. It is kindled only after an intellectual process, and if it differs in kind, it at least differs nothing in intensity from the feeling expressed in the most romantic poetry" (61-62). Smith, then, believes in a poetry that will yield intensity and feeling, perhaps the more so because it has been restrained. He explains that in a poem, "what is felt gains in power if its expression is controlled, dammed up, channeled, and then let loose in the right direction and at the right time" (*Exploring Poetry* xv). Smith's poetry therefore represents a challenge for his audience. The reader must make an intellectual effort in order to be rewarded both intellectually and emotionally. One can easily see how this poetic stance may result in a significantly smaller readership.

For Smith, the sacrifice of the poet takes place in the abdication of success in favour of an art that reconciles thought and feeling, intellect and emotion, detachment and engagement or, more in tune with Smith's own vocabulary, "craftsmanship" and "intensity." Sacrifice as an abstract notion, however, inevitably implies both detachment and intensity. One must be detached from one's self, from others, or from material wealth while intensely embracing the faith or belief in the validity of the sacrifice itself. As a modernist, Smith stands at the centre of his own aesthetics of sacrifice and understands the need for the poet to sacrifice not only popularity but also, to a certain extent, personality in the creation of modern poetry. This notion of the poet as one who suppresses his own personality in order to become a "finely perfected medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations" is not Smith's own, and he repeatedly acknowledges the influence T.S. Eliot's "Impersonal theory" on his own poetry (Eliot, "Tradition" 29). Having established his poetics on the conviction that poets must sacrifice popularity and personality for their art, can it come as a surprise that so many of Smith's poems depict figures who give up their lives for an ideal they hold dearer still?

Smith's prescriptive poetry, as articulated in "Like an Old Proud King in a Parable" and "To a Young Poet," has been explored in depth in the existing criticism on his work. My aim, therefore, is not to offer an original reading of these poems but rather to use them as touchstones to explore poems which, though not explicitly about the act of writing, exemplify the poet's aspirations and fears vis-à-vis his own craft and its reception. These two poems portray speakers who may not be Smith himself but who are poets nonetheless and who, as such, put forth a sacrificial poetics. In "Like an Old Proud King," the speaker wishes to imitate the "bitter king" (1) who relinquished his kingdom in order to "cage a heart that carolled like a swan" (7). He appeals to his father to let him "die / From this fat royal life" (11-12) so that he can sing the "difficult, lonely music" of his "heart" (16). Like the king, the poet needs to give up a "royal life" in order to dedicate himself to his art. This image parallels the figure of the poet sacrificing wealth and fame in favour of a more accomplished poetry, albeit a more "lonely" one. Though his retreat implies a harsh solitude amidst the "barren rock" (15) of the "northern stone" (5), the poet is as eager as the king to flee the "fawning courtier and doting queen" (2), embodiments of an indiscriminate and affected readership. The speaker here bears an uncanny resemblance to A.M. Klein's poet who, unable to carve out a place for himself in society, "lives alone, and in his secret shines / like phosphorus. At the bottom of the sea" (104). Only in anonymity can both figures re-conceive their poetry and find release from the demands of their audience.

The speaker of "Like an Old Proud King" must initiate and undergo a form of alienation in order to become an accomplished poet. This necessary sacrifice ensures that his poetry will transcend the unrestrained and insignificant lyricism of a carolling heart. Smith's rejection of romanticism is clear, and critics such as I.S. MacLaren have argued that the poem's speaker wants to be free from the "trappings of poetical convention being imposed upon him," which he figures as "Smith's delineation of the demands made on the Canadian poet to talk romantically of snowshoes, etc." (62). MacLaren's comment may be somewhat acerbic, but he is justified in claiming that Smith, like the poem's speaker, must accept "an abdication of his public role" in order to transcend "the easily made poetry 'embroidered' by luxuriant but vacuous emotions" (62). Accordingly, the form of the poem pro-

gresses from a public address (the parable, whose purpose is to teach), to a series of more private musings. The speaker's single line, "O who is that bitter king? It is not I" (10), signals this turn inward. It introduces the voice of the poet-speaker, the "I," whose assonance increases from this point onward. In the two final stanzas, the speaker addresses his "Father" (11) and, finally, his own "heart" (16). This gradual shift from the public to the private does not, however, give way to a burst of lyricism. Smith's poem remains technically oriented, in tune with the notions of purity evoked by the description of the "inviolable air" (6) and the "immaculate" (8) king who sleeps "alone" (8). Although the poem seems to preach an intellectual, and therefore "difficult" poetry, it does not reject emotion altogether. The speaker's aim is to "cage" (7) a heart that sings, which suggests that poetry must be forged by constraint and craftsmanship. One must exercise patience and skill to fence in something as wild and strong as a heart. But to produce excellent poetry, one must specifically cage a heart and not, say, a brain, which suggests that though poetry is shaped by intellect, it is very much alive and pulsating. Certainly, poetry is a "difficult, lonely music" (16), but it is undeniably emotional if it comes from the "heart." The centrality of the heart in "Like an Old Proud King" exposes Smith's aesthetic endeavour as one that demands the synthesis of craftsmanship and intensity, but this synthesis can only be made possible through the poet's sacrifice of his own emotions.

The redemption of craftsmanship and intensity through sacrifice resurfaces in "To a Young Poet," as a presumably older writer urges a young poet toward an art that is "a hard thing done / Perfectly, as though without care" (15-16). Though poetry is the result of hard work and technique, it must appear seamless. In this poem, Smith juxtaposes the mythological figures of Iphigenia, whose "fatal dance" (6) associates her with the notion of intensity, and Artemis, whose "stern" "face" (10) embodies the austerity of pure intellect and whose skill in hunting has been honed to perfection. In the Greek myth, Artemis demands the sacrifice of Iphigenia in exchange for the fair winds Agamemnon needs to reach Troy. Smith seems to be implying that the act of writing demands a parallel sacrifice. Artemis demands the sacrifice of Iphigenia; technical poetry demands the sacrifice of emotion. The dichotomy seems irreconcilable and, as a result, Smith seems to insist on a poetry that is "designed and grave" (3). But if we accept Euripides's version of the

myth, according to which Artemis whisks Iphigenia away to Tauris where the young woman becomes her high priestess, the binary is transcended. The sacrifice need not be one of intensity. Rather, emotion and feeling become essential servants of technique in the same way that Iphigenia becomes a votary of Artemis. After all, a goddess without worshippers ceases to exist. Similarly, a perfectly crafted poem is of no interest if it contains no passion. Therefore, the poem argues (though intensity is ultimately subordinate to technique), the poet should always strive toward a balance of both aesthetic qualities.

Anne Compton has argued that "To a Young Poet," in fact, holds up the model of Iphigenia for the young poet: "Just as Iphigenia managed an 'elegant . . . dance' at her own sacrifice, thereby becoming a priestess in Artemis's cult, so too the young poet must be graceful in duty. The poet is to be a servant to her calling as Iphigenia served Artemis in her temple" (151). This reading, though differing from my own, indirectly acknowledges the importance of the poet's dedication to his art. The poet must accept a sacrifice of recognition and agree to serve poetry as his only goddess. Here, the parallel between Iphigenia and the poet takes on additional meaning because, though the young woman avoids death and becomes a votary of Artemis, she lives out the rest of her life in reclusion. Iphigenia's life may have been spared, but she never returns to her family and friends. The young woman's sacrifice serves to re-establish the relationship between humans and gods, but as a result, she can no longer be a member of that society. In the same way, as Smith suggests in "Like an Old Proud King," the poet's complete and unfailing devotion to his art necessarily implies the renunciation of public acclaim and may even result in isolation.

In *The Science of Sacrifice*, her study of sacrifice in modern American literature, Susan Mizruchi designates "unification" as the most significant purpose of sacrifice, for it "speaks to sacrifice's function in heightening the spirituality of the community as a whole. The act of sacrifice ascribes a point in time, a mappable, physical space, where the sacred and the secular meet" (74). Because the object of sacrifice is unification, she argues, the role of sacrifice in a modern context is crucial: "sacrifice is about relationships, sustaining connections of mutuality, which are themselves sources of renewal" (75). Sacrifice, then, is an act of social unification. Smith adopts a similar stance toward poetry. In his "Rejected Preface" to *New Provinces* (1936), he stresses the import-

ance of poetry as more than a mere “record” of “private emotions” (41). To Smith, the poet “must try to perfect a technique that will combine power with simplicity and sympathy with intelligence so that he may play his part in developing mental and emotional attitudes that will *facilitate the creation of a more practical social system*” (41; emphasis added). Poetry, like sacrifice and as sacrifice, has a social vocation. It heightens not only the spiritual but also the intellectual qualities of its readers and thus promulgates a more unified society. Smith’s belief in the social function of poetry is very much in line with T.S. Eliot’s conviction that poetry “enlarges our consciousness or refines our sensibility” and, in time, affects “the speech and the sensibility of the whole nation” (“Social Function” 18, 22). Like Smith, Eliot is also distrustful of public acclaim and argues that poets who gain a large audience very quickly are probably not doing anything new. And yet, Eliot stresses the importance of an enlightened, though limited, readership:

But that a poet should have the right, small audience in his own time *is* important. There should always be a small vanguard of people, appreciative of poetry, who are independent and somewhat in advance of their time or ready to assimilate novelty more quickly. The development of culture does not mean bringing everybody up to the front, which amounts to no more than making everyone keep step: it means the maintenance of an *élite*, with the main, and more passive body of readers not lagging more than a generation or so behind. (21)

It is the novelty of the poet’s art that makes him appeal to a significantly smaller audience. With time, however, the effects of his poetry will trickle down to the rest of the population. In poetry, as in any sacrifice, therefore, the importance of the readership as witnesses of the validity of the sacrifice, small as this readership may be, is crucial.

In “Choros,” Smith takes up the sacrifice of Iphigenia as a central theme to illustrate the tension between the modernist poet’s aesthetics and his role in society. This time, the “knifethrust of silver” (7) seems to indicate that the young woman’s sacrifice has truly taken place. Smith’s poem demands an intellectual effort and assumes that its reader is not only well-versed in Greek myth but also patient enough to work through its intricate sentence structure. The verbs come late in the sentences, which seem weighed down by an excessive use of commas. And yet the poem is intellectually rewarding to the reader who will notice its

rhythm and structure, an almost perfect iambic pentameter embedded in a structure akin to the terza rima (in which the first and third line of the first tercet rhyme, while the first and third line of the next tercet rhyme with the second line of the first tercet). It was Dante who first made substantial use of the terza rima in his *Divine Comedy*, a work that fascinated modernists such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Given the limited possibilities of rhyme in the English language (in comparison with Italian), Smith's use of the terza rima is a technical feat. It is also, however, a dialogue of sorts between the poet and his predecessors, a conscious allusion to Eliot and Pound's reverence for "the aquiline patron of international Modernism" (Heaney 16). By invoking this kind of poetic authority without stressing it, Smith echoes "Dante's intense interest in the relationship of poets to one another — and thus in questions of origin and descent, poetic paternity and filiation" (Hawkins xvi). With the use of the terza rima, Smith positions himself within a modernist tradition, but his attention to technique extends beyond this stanzaic structure. His poem describes the deceased young woman's "Wry lips, dank hair, taut throat, and marble eyes" (5), which "Mix in the pulpy salt of foam, and hiss" (6). The multitude of hard consonants conjures up images of an angry sea, which subsides, in the third stanza, into the gentle yet potent liquids of the "Waves" brought on by the "new wind" (8). Iphigenia's sacrifice has thus forced the sea and winds, heretofore as "Moveless" and "unmoved" (1) as the soldiers' "torches" (2), to swell up in anger at the excitement of the sacrifice and to subsequently docilely carry the army's ships to their destination. Smith has evidently crafted this poem attentively, yet it conveys incredible power in the horror and beauty of the sacrifice it portrays.

In "Chorus," the figure of Iphigenia serves as an alter ego to the poet, whose sacrifice and devotion to the modernist aesthetics of detachment and intensity entail some form of estrangement, a social death of sorts. In Euripides's play *Iphigenia in Aulis*, Iphigenia becomes the only means of appeasing not only the goddess Artemis but also, and perhaps more significantly, the increasingly impatient Greek troops. Agamemnon, though initially averse to killing his daughter, eventually understands the function of her sacrifice in re-establishing social cohesion:

Agamemnon: But don't you see — I am in a trap.
 There is no escape. My way leads straight
 into blood . . . into her life blood. I must . . . !

Menelaus: How “must”? Who can make you kill your own child?

Agamemon: The Greek army — every last man in it.
(511-14; original ellipses)

Similarly, Iphigenia’s intended spouse, Achilles, opposes the sacrifice until, threatened with stoning by an angry mob that includes even his faithful Myrmidons, he also recognises the inevitability of her death. The most significant moment of the play, however, occurs when Iphigenia herself emphasises the significance of her death: “Father, here I am. Look. I give my body away. / Take it, take it for our country’s sake, / For the sake of all Greece” (1552-54). Iphigenia understands that her sacrifice will eventually signify a reconciliation with the gods as well as a victory over the Trojans, but she also understands that her sacrifice has more immediate social and political implications for her “country.” It will appease the soldiers and reinstate Agamemnon as the head of his army. Iphigenia’s sacrifice will also reconstruct the Greek army’s sense of community or *communitas*, “a spirit that binds together socioreligious life yet is beyond social structures; a spontaneous emotion, often experienced through the sacred, that makes an individual feel at one with his community, its experiences, and its memories” (Foley 91). In this sense, her sacrifice truly is both sacred and secular. Her death will help allay the anxieties and doubts of a weakened and insecure army. It will enable the Greeks to reassert the validity of their endeavour through their common past and unified future.

Although the subject of Iphigenia’s sacrifice is central to “Choros,” one cannot ignore the importance of the poem’s speaker. The title of the poem identifies its speaker as one of Agamemnon’s men, who bear witness to the sacrifice of Iphigenia. The title is an allusion to the Greek word *choros*, a group of actors whose original role was to react emotionally to the events portrayed on the stage. For Augustus William Schlegel, in fact, the *choros*, or chorus, represents an ideal audience: “whatever [the chorus] might be and do in each particular piece, it represented in general, first the common mind of the nation, and then the general sympathy of all mankind. In a word, the chorus is the ideal spectator. It mitigates the impression of a heart-rending or moving story, while it conveys to the actual spectator a lyrical and musical expression of his own emotions, and elevates him to the region of contemplation” (70). For Schlegel, the chorus is the ideal spectator because it is able to

channel emotion into contemplation and therefore unify and elevate the members of the audience. The chorus is always aware of the importance of the tragedy's catharsis in bringing about unity. (The chorus, made up of several actors, speaks with one unified voice and almost always speaks the closing monologue; in this sense, each member must sacrifice his own unique impressions).

The chorus in Smith's poem not only represents the ideal spectator but also the ideal reader. The speaker, as a member of Agamemnon's army and a member of the chorus, understands the validity of Iphigenia's sacrifice and its signification for the Greeks. The wind now "bellies *our* creaking sails," suggesting that the speaker and the social entity to which he belongs are now unified in their purpose (9; emphasis added). He is a witness to the sacrifice, seemingly detached from its moral implications yet himself, like the "torches" (2), "caught in the dead face" (1). Though he does not wield the knife, the speaker is complicit in the killing and, through his faith in the event's outcome, channels the intensity of the moment. Similarly, Smith seems to be implying, the reader should recognise the importance of the poet's sacrifice and, though he or she is detached by an intellectual effort, also serves to channel the intensity of the poem into a heightened state of consciousness. It is this consciousness which is meant to unify the audience and, in Smith's words, "facilitate the creation of a more practical social system."

In the sacrifice of Christ, Smith finds a figure replete with notions of detachment and intensity, spirituality and social unity. These associations arguably represent the reason why so many of Smith's poems take up the theme of Christ although, as Smith himself admitted, he was not a religious man. Late in his life, Smith wrote to Sandra Djwa that poems such as "Good Friday" should not be read as expressions of his own beliefs: "I, of course, respect genuine religious poetry like Herbert's, Donne's, Vaughan's, or Hopkins' — even Eliot's, and I have written some poems, well done enough to fool people into thinking they are genuine, but they aren't" (qtd. in "Notes" 564). Again, in 1976, Smith cautioned Larry Shouldice, editor of *ellipse* magazine, against misrepresenting him to French readers: "I'm afraid . . . you may be tempted to present me as a religious poet, but this would be a mistake" (qtd. in "Notes" 564; original ellipsis). It is Christ's willingness to become a scapegoat, the magnitude of his act of love and its social repercussions,

that make him such an attractive figure for the modernist poet. Indeed, as Thomas J. Cousineau observes, a quintessential characteristic of modernist writers is “their defense of a solitary protagonist who has become the target of communal violence” (17). Cousineau argues that the moral interest of such an endeavour “lies — not in the defense of the victim or even in the imputing of the blame to the fictional community — but in the revelation of the complicity that makes of ourselves as readers an all-too-real community whose own scapegoating impulses have been successfully enlisted in the narrator’s cause” (18). The interest of the figure of Christ for Smith, then, is twofold. It enables the poet to exemplify the very palpable effects of Christ’s sacrifice on the figure of the witness, while portraying Christ as a paragon of sacrifice the modern poet can admire. If the Greek chorus is an embodiment of the ideal reader, Christ represents the ideal poet.

“Good Friday” is an excellent example of the potential emotional value of technically inspired poetry, for it conveys the energy of an ardent faith within the limitations of restrained verse. The several changes it underwent are studied in depth by Michael Darling in his essay “A.J.M. Smith’s Revisions” and are too numerous to explore in this essay. Smith’s numerous changes were aimed at driving the poem toward an impression of compact intensity. Its stanzas were shortened from six lines to four, with the fourth line indented to strengthen its impact. According to Darling, Smith followed the recommendations of Marianne Moore and expunged the “imprecise rhymes, faulty rhythm, and repetitious diction,” the main weaknesses of the original version, in order to achieve a clear, precise, and efficient verse (15). The final, pared-down version is a formal representation of Smith’s poetics of sacrifice. Stanzas, lines, and words have been sacrificed in order for a purer, more powerful poetry to arise. Significantly, Smith re-introduced the image of Christ’s face as “a faded flower, / Drooping and lost” despite Moore’s suggestion to remove it (7-8). For Darling, “It seems likely that Smith wanted to retain the human and pitiable quality of Christ’s physical appearance, as it contrasts with the vast potential of His powers” (16).

This sense of repressed power is enhanced by Smith’s description of Christ’s restraint on the cross, though he could “have dried up the wide sea / And the wind stilled” (3-4). Smith’s description of Christ’s self-imposed constraint indeed portrays him as the ideal poet, whose

sacrifice gives rise to a perfect symbiosis of detachment and intensity affecting the very society that has condemned him to death. Though he could “shatter if he willed / the sea and earth and sky” (14-15) with a cry, as the poet may unleash the easily dissipated energy of amorphous poetry, he contains his power and channels its potential, which highlights the intensity of his suffering. His restraint on the cross is what gives his death meaning. The poem overwhelms its audience with the intensity of the moment it depicts, which constantly threatens to “shatter” the constraints of its form. Similarly, the speaker is overwhelmed by Christ’s conscious decision “As man to die” (19), a “chivalry more difficult” (20) but infinitely more rewarding.

Christ’s death epitomizes the self-effacement of the poet which Smith, as an early disciple of T.S. Eliot, believed to be an essential component of modern poetry. As Brian Trehearne writes, Smith’s work demonstrates a “long-standing and passionate intellectual debt to Eliot’s ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (1919). Smith’s reflections on the essay over the course of his career reveal his characteristic attitudes to artistic influence and to lyric expression to have their major source in Eliot’s poetics of impersonality” (“Impersonality” 196). Smith’s engagement with Eliot’s essay helped shape his own poetics of impersonality, by which the “I” of the poem is not the voice of the poet himself. In this sense, modern poetry truly does represent a sacrifice as it compels the artist to stifle his personal, subjective impulse in favour of a more calculated voice. Eliot stresses this act of renunciation as a fundamental feature of the modern poet: “What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (“Tradition” 28). Christ as a poetic figure thus represents the ideal modern poet because, though subject to doubt and fear, he must repeatedly choose self-sacrifice. In every second that passes lies the temptation of ending his suffering. This continuous reassertion of his choice ultimately culminates in a literal extinction of his personality.

Smith’s indebtedness to the metaphysical poets has been acknowledged, and Anne Compton argues that “Good Friday” is “surely modelled on Donne’s ‘Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward’” (126). Like Donne’s poem, Smith’s “Good Friday” records “not just the immense spiritual benefits that ensue from the sacrifice of the suffering Jesus but also the prodigious psychological costs of that beneficent sacrifice for

the mortal worshipper" (Schoenfeldt 562). In both poems, the speaker is unable to come to terms with the magnitude of the act of love to which he is the spectator. Smith's poem mirrors Donne's poem because the central theme of the Passion is "not the tortured body of Jesus but rather the ethical, intellectual, and finally emotional difficulty of accepting unequivocally the extravagant mercy achieved by the extravagant agony at the center of the Christian dispensation" (562-63). In other words, the poem is less about the sacrifice itself than about its repercussions on humanity. The speaker of "Good Friday," though not directly responsible for Christ's death, knows himself to be its beneficiary and thus cannot help but be "Struck, as with darts" (11), by his all too "human agony" (12). The poem's final stanza illustrates the speaker's poignant feeling of inadequacy:

What answering meed of love
Can this frail flesh return
That is not all unworthy of
The God I mourn? (20-24)

The speaker is tormented by his incapacity to repay the debt incurred by Christ's sacrifice. But "this frail flesh" designates not only the speaker; it implies that all mankind is implicated in the outcome of the sacrifice. "Good Friday," like "Choros," therefore suggests that sacrifice serves a purpose of social and spiritual unity; humanity is unified in its unpaid debt to its saviour. Anne Compton argues that the speaker, "although he is affected by the passion, remains powerless to do anything" (129). This is not entirely true. The sight of Christ's agony targets the speaker's "heart and eye," indicating that he continues to face the "god" (24) on "the bitter tree" (1) throughout his suffering. As a contrast, Donne's speaker, unable to cope with the "spectacle of too much weight," "deliberately rides away from the east, the scene of the sacrifice" (Schoenfeldt 560). Christ may well embody the ideal poet but if there is no witness to his sacrifice, it carries significantly less weight. There must be someone to tell the story of Christ's restraint on the cross, someone to be immediately affected by the intensity of his agony. In a similar way, the poet's sacrifice implies a limited readership, but the capacity of his poetry to effect social change depends heavily on this limited readership, one that T.S. Eliot would designate as the "small vanguard of people" that form the "*élite*."

The importance of a witness to the act of sacrifice is perhaps nowhere as poignantly explored as in "A Soldier's Ghost." In this poem, Smith uses the casualties of war as a backdrop to project his own anxieties about the poet's inability to address his audience successfully and his fear that the poet's sacrifice may be in vain. The poem appears to portray a soldier of the First World War who, upon witnessing the "regiment of young" (2) too eager in "upholding the service" (8), feels compelled but seems helpless to warn them against becoming, like the generation before them, "Bones" (9) "Distilled in the frontier sand" (10). Smith's aesthetics of detachment and intensity take form in the poem's structure. Smith, in a letter to W.E. Collin, communicated his conviction that the poem is a stylistic achievement: "the technique is that of pure poetry" ("Two Letters" 85). Indeed, "A Soldier's Ghost" strikes the reader with its minimalism. Smith has deliberately trimmed the lines and has made sure that every word counts. By doing so, he exemplifies his own conviction that form and content "should be merged into one — a single and complete artistic whole — form the body, and content the soul: the one but the visible manifestation of the other" ("Contemporary" 30). But the technique of the poem does not eclipse its power, for as form and content reinforce each other in meaning, so too does "A Soldier's Ghost" achieve a true symbiosis of craftsmanship and intensity.

The poem affects the reader by its formal representation of the soldier's inability to articulate his distress. His failure to find the appropriate words to warn the younger generation of the dangers of unquestioning patriotism is exemplified by the single-word lines. Language breaks down for him, and he must, instead, rely on the strength of the imagery these single words convey. The speaker's utterances are formulated as questions, underlining his lack of conviction in his capacity as a communicator. Smith uses a dash on the sixth line to represent the visual equivalent of the "stalled" (6) soldiers but also, indirectly, to illustrate the speaker's hesitant and fragmented discourse. This fragmentation is further underscored by the alternation of shorter and longer lines, which seems to indicate that the soldier's speech similarly alternates between hesitation and volubility under the emotional strain. In a similar fashion, the final quatrain, written in italics, adds texture to the poem and introduces a second voice as a form of response to the soldier's monologue. The presence of this second voice, a second-level witness, offers a

different reading of the situation while emphasising the soldier's verbal collapse.

The speaker of "A Soldier's Ghost," like the sailor in "Choros" and the believer in "Good Friday," also witnesses a sacrifice. The soldier is at once detached from the sacrifice to come and intensely bound up in the sacrifice of the past, as one of its victims. This soldier has made the ultimate sacrifice for king and country. The speaker's elegiac tone, however, casts a doubt on the pertinence of his own sacrifice. Indeed, though Mizruchi argues that in the fiction of modernist writers such as Henry James, sacrifice often proves "critical to the reconciliation of intergenerational conflict," the soldier's sacrifice here seems not to have united but, in fact, widened the cleft between two generations (195-96). What is left of the older generation is now incapable of communicating effectively with the younger generation. The speaker's failure to speak is thus echoed in the younger generation's inability to enter the dialogue because the young soldiers' patriotic energy makes their "throats break" (3). The failed communication between these two generations presents an interesting parallel to the poet's anxiety as to whether or not he can effectively engage his readership in a similar dialogue. As Brian Trehearne notes, the speaker's "opening question — 'How shall I speak' — underscores Smith's recurrent fear of the modern poet's loss of voice," but it also exemplifies the fear that the voice will not be heard ("Impersonality" 207). How shall he speak, if nobody is listening? Smith's fear that there are, in fact, few ideal (or modern) readers points to the underlying fear that his poetry, like so many of the soldiers' "bones" (9), will end up "distilled" (10) into oblivion. At this point, it seems, Smith's sacrificial confidence was beginning to break down.

The last stanza, however, offers a redemptive quality in the act and suggests that the soldier's sacrifice, like the poet's sacrifice, is never in vain. Significantly, "A Soldier's Ghost" was originally entitled "Chorus," and it seems evident that the final quatrain, with its solemn and emotional tone, is meant to serve as the poem's chorus. This chorus is at once removed from the sacrifice of the soldier and invested in it. Presumably not a soldier, this second voice has never witnessed the mud of Flanders, now become the dried "frontier sand" (10). But like so many others, he or she most likely lost a brother, a cousin, a friend. This voice's closing statement recuperates and rehabilitates the sacrifice of the soldiers as a valid one. Indeed, the chorus suggests that the "Distilled"

(10) "bones" (9), as time passes, become a "hieroglyph / Of ash" (17-18) which, rearranged, spells out "love" (20). In other words, the sacrifice of the soldier is an act of love, and this is its own validation. In a similar way, as Peter Stevens writes, for Smith, "the poetry itself becomes an expression of love" (4). The poet may have a limited audience, but poetry, because it is sanctified by love, is its own reason for existing. The poet's sacrifice, therefore, though it is recognized by a limited audience, is never in vain. The poem further ends on a very hopeful note. The chorus is indeed a good enough reader to decipher the "hieroglyph / Of ash" and understand that it represents "an anagram / Of love" (23-24). If the chorus is able to conceptualise the symbol of the "hieroglyph" and recognize the inverted order of the "anagram," there is hope that the reader will be able to process the allusions, figurative language, and complex sentence structure of modern poetry in order to receive intellectual and emotional gratification and thus achieve an elevated state of consciousness. There is hope, moreover, that the sacrifice of the poet, and the exertion of the reader which may result in its recognition, will help foster a renewed sense of community.

Smith's interest in stories of sacrifice is, as I hope to have demonstrated, inextricably linked to his modernist aesthetics. His conviction that the poet must be willing to sacrifice recognition and public acclaim in favour of a poetry that is both skilfully crafted and emotionally potent is put forth not only in his prescriptive poetry but also, more subtly, in poems less explicitly about writing. While the particular emphasis on sacrifice in his poetry sets Smith apart from his contemporaries A.M. Klein and F.R. Scott, Smith's approach is subsumed in a shared concern by Canadian modernists with questions of audience and reception. In their works, all three poets eventually explore the poet's relationship with society. Though the central figure of the poet is crucial to Smith's poetics of sacrifice, then, it is undeniable that Smith shares with many of his modernist peers an anxiety about the absence of a capable readership, one that is ready to take on an intellectual challenge in order to access the poetry's emotional potential. In light of Smith's fall from the Canadian canon, this fear seems only too justified. Smith seems to believe in the power of poetry to effect social change, though his claim is admittedly vague as to what this change implies more specifically. But for poetry to have an influence, it must reach out to an audience, no matter how limited this audience may be. A tension therefore arises

in Smith's poetry, between the essential act of sacrifice and the fear that there will be no witness to channel its intensity. Nevertheless, faithful to his artistic integrity, Smith makes no effort to appeal to the masses through a pathetic exploitation of patriotic themes or easily digested style. This, to Smith, represents a necessary sacrifice.

WORKS CITED

- Compton, Anne. *A.J.M. Smith: Canadian Metaphysical*. Toronto: ECW, 1994. Print.
- Cousineau, Thomas J. *Ritual Unbound: Reading Sacrifice in Modern Fiction*. Newark: U of Delaware P, 2004. Print.
- Darling, Michael. "A.J.M. Smith's Revisions." *Canadian Poetry* 11 (1982): 7-25. Print.
- Dudek, Louis, and Michael Gnarowski, eds. *The Making of Modern Poetry in Canada*. Toronto: Ryerson, 1970. Print.
- Djwa, Sandra. "Metaphysics and Dry Bones." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 3 (1978): 17-34. Print.
- Eliot, T.S. "The Social Function of Poetry." *On Poetry and Poets*. London: Faber, 1957. 15-25. Print.
- . "Tradition and the Individual Talent." *Points of View*. London: Faber, 1941. 25-32. Print.
- Euripides. *Iphigenia in Aulis*. Trans. Kenneth Cavander. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973. Print.
- Foley, Helene P. *Ritual Irony: Poetry and Sacrifice in Euripides*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985. Print.
- Hawkins, Peter, and Rachel Jacoff. *The Poet's Dante*. New York: Farrar, 2001. Print.
- Heaney, Seamus. "Envy and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet." *Irish University Review* 15.1 (1985): 5-19. Print.
- Klein, A.M. "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape." *Selected Poems*. Ed. Zailig Pollock, Seymour Mayne, and Usher Caplan. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1997. 99-104. Print.
- MacLaren, I.S. "The Yeatsian Presence in A.J.M. Smith." *Canadian Poetry* 4 (1979): 59-64. Print.
- Mizruchi, Susan L. *The Science of Sacrifice: American Literature and Modern Social Theory*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998. Print.
- Schlegel, Augustus William. *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*. Trans. John Black. London: Henry G. Bohn, 1846. Print.
- Schoenfeldt, Michael. "'That Spectacle of Too Much Weight': The Poetics of Sacrifice in Donne, Herbert, and Milton." *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31.3 (2001): 561-84. Print.
- Smith, A.J.M. "A Note on Metaphysical Poetry." *Canadian Mercury* (1929): 61-62. Print.
- . "A Soldier's Ghost." Trehearne, ed., *Complete* 117. Print.
- . "Choros." Trehearne, ed., *Complete* 25. Print.
- . "Contemporary Poetry." Dudek and Gnarowski 27-30. Print.
- , and M.L. Rosenthal, eds. *Exploring Poetry*. 2nd ed. New York: Macmillan, 1973. Print.
- . "Good Friday." Trehearne, ed., *Complete* 144. Print.
- . "Like an Old Proud King in a Parable." Trehearne, ed., *Complete* 8. Print.

- . "Poet." *Writing in Canada: Proceedings of the Canadian Writers' Conference, Queen's University 28-31 July, 1955*. Ed. George Whalley. Toronto: Macmillan, 1956. 13-24. Print.
- . "Rejected Preface." Dudek and Gnarowski 38-41. Print.
- . "To a Young Poet." Trehearne, ed., *Complete* 17. Print.
- . "Wanted — Canadian Criticism." Dudek and Gnarowski 31-33. Print.
- Stevens, Peter. "The Legacy of A.J.M. Smith." *Canadian Poetry* 11 (1982): 1-6. Print.
- Trehearne, Brian. "Impersonality, Imitation, and Influence: T.S. Eliot and A.J.M. Smith." *The International Reception of T.S. Eliot*. Ed. Elizabeth Däumer and Shyamal Bagchee. London: Continuum, 2007. 195-214. Print.
- . "Notes." Trehearne, ed., *Complete* 483-633. Print.
- , ed. *The Complete Poems of A.J.M. Smith*. London: Canadian Poetry, 2007. Print.
- , ed. "Two Letters from A.J.M. Smith to W.E. Collin." *Canadian Poetry* 54 (2004): 76-96. Print.