

# A Tribute to the Late Martin Seymour-Smith

*Chris Nicholson*

*(a version of Chris Nicholson's tribute was delivered by him at the White Goddess conference this summer)*

Martin Seymour-Smith died on the 1<sup>st</sup> of July this year. It seems fitting to take this opportunity to say a few words about him. It's lucky that my words are few or we would be here all night! It is odd that I should be saying a few words about Seymour-Smith for various reasons, but most particularly because I never met him. Five years ago, as an undergraduate, I took the liberty of phoning him up to ask annoying questions about his Graves biography. When a rich and sandy voice replied it seemed perfectly delighted with the attention, answered all the questions I had asked and then proceeded to answer quite a number of those that I hadn't. Largely, he spoke about Graves, largely he spoke about literature, but interspersed were comments about Anthony Storr, the psychologist, and his thousand pound suits, why Big Bang theorists should study works on the Kabbalah and how he approved of dogs (which makes you wonder what might happen to dogs in general if he didn't). He spoke rapidly and endlessly without pausing to think. He already knew what he thought because he worked it out by writing about it, and he wrote endlessly.

Listening to him, and when one got the chance, talking to him, was such good fun that out phone calls became a regular thing. I would call him up, brimming with enthusiasm and the cheerfulness of student life, 'how are you?' he would ask, 'couldn't be better' I said, and the terse reply came, 'why not?' It was worth it, with my growing knowledge of Graves and a strangely increased ability to be rude, I

was able, with a good deal of pleasure, to upset or annoy my tutors in 20<sup>th</sup> Century poetry who seemed hell bent on keeping Graves' work outside of the Canon. And it is this job of establishing Graves' proper and singular place within the Canon of English literature that Seymour-Smith primarily achieved.

Apart from the Graves biography he wrote many other characteristic works like the *Guide to Modern World Literature* which many of us will know. It is a staggering thing to have read the whole of literature, and to be able to offer first hand and wise commentary on it, and some have doubted that he did so. All I know is that when once, trying to catch him out, I asked him what he thought of Etienne Leroux, a brilliant but obscure South African writer whom nobody else I know has ever heard of, he told be his opinion without hesitation. On another occasion he mentioned that he had just finished reading a historical novel of about 230 pages which, he put in casually, had taken him forty minutes.

His edition of Shakespeare's sonnets is still one of the best, and a very shrewd piece of work. Then there is the biography of Hardy. Bold and enthusiastic, in it he argues that Hardy was something like the greatest writer since Shakespeare, not just a mild nature poet, but a prophetic and natural (as opposed to self-conscious) modernist. And of course we know how Graves favoured Hardy's poetry, reading and re-reading it. A personal favourite of mine is a curious book called *Novels and Novelists*, a joint venture with twenty-two other writers. When I mentioned this to Seymour-Smith despite these twenty-two others, he quipped, 'I wrote most of it.' He certainly wrote the introduction which is a brilliant, engaging and surprising history of the novel.

Within all of those works and in everything he wrote he was arguing, sometimes very considerably and sometimes bloody-mindedly. He loved nothing more than a literary battle and like Graves he had to put his last half-penny down. But this was all part of his eagerness, and there have been few writers more eager, to find what he called 'the genuine'. It was this search for the genuine that made him such a good biographer, his portraits could be human, could show a writer being ridiculous as they often are, without belittling his own stature.

His argumentative trait could be a cruel one, especially when exacerbated by drink. Like a lot of clever men he could not tolerate what he saw as stupidity in others. He used the word a lot, 'Yes but you see he's stupid,' he would say particularly engaged in another habit of his,

name dropping. He would drop a name (Richard Dawkins was a recent favourite), bounce it about for a while, then shoot it into the waste basket of stupidity, and it was a very full basket.

Seymour-Smith did seem superior, but anyone who has read his poetry, which by the way is remarkable, would have seen a different picture. His poems are scathingly self-critical and delicately lyrical, within them he seems to find himself, his whole self, in the exact acceptance of loss and the terribleness of beauty; and this is why, quite rightly, he so admired Rilke.

### *I Was A Young Man Once*

I was a young man once  
 Never was one such;  
 Nose-flute, shoulder-bird,  
 I lived  
 In a water-wheel  
 And heard no music  
 But my own.

Why did I not fire  
 That jewelled gun I had  
 To end it all?  
 My story'd have been pretty then.  
 But now I have to add  
 To those old fantasies  
 Another's tale.

That is a poem of stories, both complex and simple. The fantasies of the young, and the tales of the old separated into stanzas of equally separate styles of diction which hi-light the contradictions inherent in a long life. The following poem is also broken up into stanzas, but here each has its own rhythm, message and emotional content or tone which perhaps, suggests the series of letters giving the poem its title.

## *Letters*

A bloody rorschach  
Stains the choleric sky  
Of this ash-written day.  
Transforms my letters to you  
Into a cinereous alphabet.

I do not want to challenge you  
Or be an I who, since its futurity  
Invaded your gaze, must stand and suffer  
Hundredly your infallible destiny,  
Face writhing like a mirror of your pain.

My days are disabled  
By my history:  
How could say  
'You are my Alpha'  
Without your eyes clouding over  
With multifarious qualms,  
Closing to shut off with smooth lids  
That half-doubtful, half enchanted look?  
How much is it my unripeness  
That you're not resistible  
In this land of chattering dead?

Your moon in ice and my moon in water  
Are the same moon. I tremble  
As I remember  
When I was not there:  
Your grief as you watched alone  
Your heart's moon broken  
In the spume of waterfalls.

Don't let this chlorotic sky, or my letters,  
Make you weep.  
Be in your old heart entire, asleep –  
Watched over not by me  
But by my desire to keep  
You enclosed forever  
In ancient undefeat.

Don't weep because I weep.

I hope these examples serve to show the richness of his poetry which is open to anyone who chooses to examine it closely.

Seymour-Smith then was an incredible polymath with a ferocious appetite for learning. He could be cruel and superior, but he could also be very funny, approachable and kind. I am grateful for the fantastic conversation and encouragement he offered me as a young student over the recent years. I asked Garath Reeves about Seymour-Smith a short time ago. He said that while they hadn't been in contact for a long time, he nevertheless remembered vividly that when he was an undergraduate, about twenty years ago, Seymour-Smith had behaved very kindly and warmly towards him. He had taken him under his wing, he was provocative and encouraging and wrote him long letters crammed with interest and learning. I don't find such private kindness at all surprising coming from one whose public face was perhaps a different one.

Having said all this I wasn't surprised that the New York Times Obituaries quoted Seymour-Smith's description of himself, as, 'tense, malarial, angry as a bull when roused, stooped, ugly, clownish, bearded and a compulsive talker who seldom allows anyone to get a word in.' Very apt, but I would stress that he was also kind.

*Wilderness*, 36 poems (1972-93) by Seymour-Smith are published by Greenwich Exchange and can be ordered from Waterstones book shops.