

Private Bestiary: selected unpublished poems, 1944-1993

By Kendrick Smithyman, edited by Scott Hamilton

(Titus Books, 2010)

Reviewed by Tim Bowron



The poet Kendrick Smithyman (1922-1995) remains – as Scott Hamilton¹ points out in his introduction to this volume – a largely unknown figure in the history of New Zealand literature. Despite enjoying a certain following among those who inhabit university English departments he has never acquired the level of recognition enjoyed by the likes of Allan Curnow and R.A.K. Mason (among the earlier generation of NZ poets) or James K. Baxter and Hone Tuwhare (in the younger cohort). The reason for this is to be found, Hamilton suggests, in the fact that his poetry is perceived as “difficult” and “academic” – frequently exhibiting a preference for the impersonal against the lyrical, the complex over the simple. Indeed it appears that Smithyman himself consciously embraced these hermetic qualities, writing in the 1954 *New Zealand Poetry Yearbook* (in a statement strongly reminiscent of both T.S. Eliot and Theodor Adorno) that:

Society is complex in its activities and its relationships, and the members of a community are complex. A section of the poetry of an advanced and intricate community must inevitably be complex, and because complex, obscure . . . We have to reckon in short that the mirror which art holds to nature may be a dark glass reflecting a paddock where undoubtedly dark horses are capering.

With this in mind, those readers coming to this volume without any previous knowledge of the Smithyman *oeuvre* may find themselves initially daunted by the often convoluted syntax and obscure historical allusions. However, some considerable assistance has been afforded to such readers by the addition of nearly sixty pages of notes in which the editor expands on some of the more oblique references found in the poems, along with the circumstances and context of their composition.

The poems themselves have been selected from among the many unpublished papers from Smithyman's personal archive – kept in the basement of the poet's home in Auckland until his death – which is likened by Hamilton to the “magic box” of Fernando Pessoa in both its voluminosity and bewildering variety. The reasons for their remaining unpublished until now are, as Hamilton notes, not always apparent:

Some of the texts Smithyman left out of his Collected Poems are notably inferior to his published work, but others are not. Smithyman was a very private man, and he may have held some poems back because of their subject matter. Other poems may have seemed to him to be too daringly experimental to share with conservative editors, and still others may have simply gotten lost amidst his vast output.

The title poem of the collection – “First steps into a Private Bestiary” – introduces one of the major themes of Smithyman's work: disillusionment with a Modernity which has cut humanity off from the chance of any meaningful relationship with the physical landscape:

Last night
 driving back from the Waikato
I numbered crossed stations of horror
grown somewhat expert in nightmare,
the City a communicative Beast,
 and mechanics of experiencing
along Route One.

Against this disconcerting vision which haunts the first two sections of *Private Bestiary*, entitled “Surplus to Requirements” and “Domestic Apocalypses”, the editor has chosen however to range a number of other texts which give some idea of Smithyman’s alternative to the totalising narrative of Reason and Progress: a celebration of figures and places at the margins of national history. Figures such as those encountered in “Pakeha Maoris” (dedicated to those 19th century European sailors who “went native” among the warlike tribes of the Far North) and places such as the old Maori settlement uncovered beneath South Auckland in “Open Day at the Dig”:

Informed diggers working against time
spade put walkway, nursery, boundary
marker, garden plot, the flat sub-text.
Not anticipated, house floors,
their hearths and post-holes. Everyone
asks the same question, “Who the hell
would come and live on a place like this?”
Even if, only in good weather.

Archaeology with its emphasis on the layered stratigraphy of human landscapes and ability to upset our fixed certainties of time and ‘place’ forms indeed a frequent theme in Smithyman’s poetry (see for example the poems “Tomarata” and “Where Waikawau Stream Comes Out”² from the 1974 collection *The Seal in the Dolphin Pool*). Yet for Smithyman even this careful scientific discipline is ultimately confounded in its ability to uncover the secrets of the landscape, and succeeds only in raising more questions than it answers.

In addition to these complications of time and space, generators of a new psychogeography of regional New Zealand that is analogous perhaps to Unamuno’s *intrahistoria* of the Castilian *meseta*, Smithyman also manifests a marked preoccupation with the nature of the relationship between language and empirical reality. In “In the Gap” for example we read the lines “Your world is full of bastard signs / and signals” which in turn calls to mind the passage from one of Smithyman’s most interesting works, “Reading the Maps An Academic Exercise” (*Stories About Wooden Keyboards*, 1985), in which the poet says “I cannot see our land clearly. / It comes and goes because covered in symbols. / Isn’t this symptom of a psychotic state?” Maps, symbols, language – all are unreliable and unstable – yet, paradoxically (as also for Baudelaire in his famous poem “Correspondences”), they are the thing which makes our existence possible for, as Smithyman says in his Heideggerian inversion of Rilke in “An Ordinary Day Beyond Kaitaia” (*Earthquake Weather*, 1972): “If we live in, we stand in language. / You must change your words.”

In the final section of *Private Bestiary* (“Silences and Spaces”) we see Smithyman take this injunction to possibly its ultimate conclusion with a couple of ludic, concretist-inspired pieces in which the component words have been completely reordered or fragmented to create fresh possibilities of meaning and interpretation. While such post-avant-gardist (as opposed to Modernist) techniques occupy undoubtedly a relatively minor place in Smithyman’s overall body of work, what nevertheless remains consistent throughout is his adherence to Heidegger’s dictum (pronounced in a commentary on the poetry of Hölderlin) that “...poetic images are imaginings in a distinctive sense: not mere fancies and illusions but imaginings that are visible inclusions of the alien in the sight of the familiar.” This continual calling of our attention towards the alien and the unfamiliar, the hidden, seems (in the opinion of this reviewer) to be the key to Smithyman’s aesthetic – certainly, at least, as far as it is manifested in the pages of *Private Bestiary*.

¹ Hamilton, besides being a published poet himself (regularly contributing to the journal *brief*) and author of a biography of the British Marxist historian E.P. Thompson maintains a lively weblog on literary, historical and political topics at <http://readingthemap.blogspot.com/>

² These along with the rest of Smithyman’s Collected Poems can be accessed online at <http://www.smithymanonline.auckland.ac.nz/>