
Finding The True Voice of Feeling: Kendrick Smithyman and New Criticism in New Zealand, 1961-1963

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Surprisingly enough, Kendrick Smithyman was often viewed in a pairing with the outrageous James K. Baxter during their early years, but similarities between them are hard to find.¹ Whereas Baxter was culturally rebellious, neo-romantic, and highly visible in New Zealand's literary and cultural scenes, Smithyman can only be described as conservative, intellectual and largely invisible to the wider New Zealand public. Yet his influence on New Zealand literature and criticism has been profound: as poet and theorist and close friend to several influential figures, Smithyman provided New Zealand literature with a highly independent cultural logician who imported New Criticism to the country and provided a welcome line of sight towards both America and the dawning postmodern age. Although often overlooked by literary historians, his series of essays on "Post-War New Zealand Poetry" presents us with evidence of a significant departure from the commonly accepted narrative of New Zealand's literary-critical development, and an extremely useful precursor when considering recent claims regarding the globalization of its literature.

Smithyman wrote "Post-War New Zealand Poetry" as a series of articles in the literary periodical *Mate* between 1961 and 1963. *Mate* was founded by John Yelash and Kevin Jowsey (who became Ireland) during the late 1950s, but the articles soon became unavailable and the editorial duties were passed on to a young Robin Dudding.² This small periodical took a broad line on its contributors, often including writers like Barry

Crump who were unknown to readers of *Landfall*, and over the years successive editors proved willing to experiment with a wide range of poets in addition to including work by Maori writers. Although the title was suggestive of the New Zealand mainstream, Dennis McEldowney notes that it also had connotations of “spouse or sexual partner and the cognate verb, more sinister meanings in chess and Maori”.³ *Mate* was a little magazine that positioned itself in the gaps of the New Zealand literary scene and found a degree of success because of this. Although Smithyman’s “Post-War New Zealand Poetry” was often obscure and always idiosyncratic, it nicely fitted an image of *Mate* as a literary periodical willing to go where more established magazines like *Landfall* might fear to tread. Periodicals like *Mate* were not afraid to challenge the mainstream and in some senses their very survival depended upon this. It was within this context that Dudding suggested to Smithyman that he write some critical articles on New Zealand poetry for *Mate*, and later prompted him to expand his ideas into a full-length book,⁴ published in 1965 as *A Way of Saying*.⁵

Smithyman was born in a small Northland milling town in 1922, the only child of a couple in their mid-forties who managed an old men’s home.⁶ He later noted in an interview with MacDonald P. Jackson that his “first playmates had an average age of something like eighty”,⁷ and his early reading was largely prompted by these old men who taught him from newspapers before he went to school.⁸ His family shifted to Auckland during the 1930s, and it was there that he began his literary career. While he was attending Point Chevalier school he met the future poet and historian Keith Sinclair, who was to become a life-long friend. The pair moved on to Seddon Memorial Technical College before Smithyman began studying to be a teacher at Auckland Training College

in 1940. While training to be a teacher (Smithyman later specialized in teaching special needs children), he began to publish in the college magazine, then edited by Robert Lowry.⁹ During his service in the army (and later the airforce) during World War II, the young Smithyman was able to get Lowry transferred to his unit and the pair spent their time writing poems on the back of forms used for recording items handed in for safe-keeping in the store.¹⁰ On his return from service abroad Smithyman married Mary Isobel Neal and remained with until her death in 1980.¹¹ After his inclusion in Curnow's *A Book of New Zealand Verse* in 1945, he went on to publish various works of poetry, including *Seven Sonnets* (1946), *The Blind Mountain & Other Poems* (1950) and *Inheritance* (1962).¹² By the time he came to write "Post-War New Zealand Poetry" he was well established as a literary figure in New Zealand, noted for his difficulty and breadth of subject-matter.¹³ He had a personality which consistently refused to bow to the New Zealand tendency to denigrate theoretical and intellectual complexity.

In terms of the local growth of literary criticism as a tradition in New Zealand, "Post-War New Zealand Poetry" can be seen as a clear example of a poet-critic attempting to explain his mode of writing to a wider audience. There is an interesting parallel between Smithyman and Baxter in this sense, because both were reasonably well-established poets who felt at odds with the common theme of cultural nationalism developed by the likes of McCormick, Curnow and Holcroft during the 1940s. As the twentieth century unfolded, modern poetry had tended more and more towards the obscurity that Smithyman (and to a lesser extent Baxter) practised; a tendency that New Zealand cultural nationalists often bewailed. Similarly, both Smithyman and Baxter wrote their criticism during relatively inactive periods in their poetic careers. Although

they can be viewed as New Zealand's most prolific poets, their criticism reflects a fallow period in their creative output where critical reflection allowed them to develop their thoughts and regain their artistic composure.¹⁴

The four essays that compose "Post-War New Zealand Poetry" analyse New Zealand poetry in terms of a perceived shift from a "romantic" style towards a more "Academic" mode. The first essay in the series, "The Sublime and the Romantic",¹⁵ finds Smithyman in a stubborn mood that condemns an inclination in New Zealand poetry that he viewed as romantic, misled and sickly. The essay is a fine example of the interaction of literary criticism with the wider literary scene, as Smithyman takes issue with McCormick, Holcroft, Curnow and other critics of criticism who adopt "mystiques of settlement, or theories of social process" in their interpretation of poetry. The essay is peppered with rhetorical questions that dismantle the presuppositions of earlier poets and critics alike with the insight that "[i]t is very important for a country to have an indigenous literature but, as soon as we begin thinking about the nature of that literature, reflection is bedeviled by language" ("SR" 27). "Post-War New Zealand Poetry" adds a note of caution to literary critics who feign to develop a national literature through recourse to history, sociology or some amorphous notion of "identity". With almost Wittgensteinian attention, Smithyman remained aware of the difficulties of language that make the explicit and programmatic development of a national literature impossible, and indeed dangerous. In his eyes such criticism lends "a desirable, but improbable, orderliness" ("SR" 27).

The central argument of the first essay centres around the concept of romanticism, and the way in which it manifested itself in the post-war New Zealand

literary scene. In particular, Smithyman attempts to redefine the concept in terms of Allen Tate's essay "The New Provincialism",¹⁶ which looked at literature in the southern United States ("SR" 30). Smithyman was prompted by an ongoing debate in New Zealand letters concerning the nature of nationalism, regionalism and internationalism (the debate referred to by earlier critics as "The South Island Myth"). His point was that the debate was suffering from shifting terminology that did little to extend an understanding of what New Zealand literature actually was, and in pointing towards the writing of Tate he hoped to lend a level of assuredness to the argument. His reference to Tate also sheds light on his critical orientation. Through his adherence to Tate and other New Critics Smithyman signals his distance from more mainstream practitioners of literary criticism in New Zealand.

New Criticism, as developed in the writing of John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren, constructed a "critique of modern America"¹⁷ that opposed the capitalist, commodity-based culture developing during the early twentieth century. Although the New Critics were often seen as formalists who insisted on criticism that looked only at the words on the page (rather than biographical, historical and social processes), their original impetus lay in a redefinition of the cultural aims of middle America. Like many of their postmodern successors, they opposed the romantic impulses implicit in literary critics from Matthew Arnold onwards, which deified the poet as cultural seer and placed the critic in a position of priest or midwife to the burgeoning cultural industry.¹⁸ Instead of relating texts to their cultural environment, they focused on the development of critical precepts that could be applied to any text, allowing a movement from the amateur man of letters towards the academic professional. The New

Critics were instrumental in the professionalization of literary studies and the movement away from philology and historical analysis towards criticism of the text as an object in itself.¹⁹ Smithyman was singular in the New Zealand context for latching onto these ideas and promoting the notion of a rigorous (and more internationally oriented) mode of academic criticism, once again suggesting his personal strength in opposing the status quo.

Smithyman's use of Tate hinges on a particular passage from "The New Provincialism" that is worth quoting in full, both as an indicator of Smithyman's antecedent, but also as a caveat to the common conception that the New Critics were against tradition and history in any guise:

regionalism is that consciousness or that habit of men in a given locality which influences them to certain patterns of thought and conduct handed to them by their ancestors [w]hen the regional man, in his ignorance, often an intensive and creative ignorance, of the world, extends his own immediate necessities into the world, and assumes that the present moment is unique, he becomes the provincial man. He cuts himself off from the past, and without benefit of the fund of traditional wisdom approaches the simplest problems of life as if nobody had ever heard of them before.²⁰

Paraphrasing Tate, Smithyman's argument in "Post-War New Zealand Poetry" is that the so-called South Island Myth debate suffered from a lack of regard for the essentially international and transhistorical nature of the human condition. The resultant cultural angst drew critics to the implicit conclusion that New Zealand's situation was atypical of human history. It was then natural for the misconception to grow that the tradition offered by western civilization was inconsistent with New Zealand's situation. In this manner potentially useful terms like nationalism and internationalism took on a local flavour that disguised their wider significance.

Smithyman attempted to reorient the debate towards a broader conception of the

New Zealand cultural context. Using Tate's logic, he argued for a more conscious mode of regionalism/nationalism (a "New Provincialism") that would be more accepting of New Zealand's position within the wider global context of western tradition and capitalist expansion. Implicit in this argument is a recognition that myopic cultural nationalism can lead to discussion that falters purely through an inability to draw on the fund of traditional wisdom present in the western world. Without this point of view, Smithyman argues, the development of concepts like national, regional or international run the risk of being merely local referents to intractable and cliquish literary debates. A critical apparatus such as this is "not informed enough to support a mature literature" ("SR" 30). Tate's "New Provincialism" was seen by Smithyman and the New Critics as a way out of this condition.²¹ The remainder of Smithyman's first essay in the series goes on to illustrate how this negative provincial outlook has retarded critical and poetic practice in New Zealand; how cultural myopia has led to pretension, sentimentality and a sickly mode of romanticism. More than any other writer present in New Zealand literary circles at the time, Smithyman advocated intellectual rigour as an antidote to New Zealand writers' flights of fancy.

Smithyman looks only at poets and critics who have published in the years since Curnow's 1945 anthology, preferring either those who have died or those whose work is not the subject of critical dispute in the hope that "we may see their work whole" ("SR" 31). Before examining the poets, however, Smithyman feels it necessary to destabilize the critical apparatus put forward by Curnow both in 1945, and later in the *Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* in 1960. The attack is mounted on two fronts. In discussing Tate and the New Provincialism, Smithyman uses Curnow as an example of the issues at

hand, pointing out that his use of the terms “regionalism” and “nationalism” (“SR” 29) are slippery at best, and have led Curnow to misinterpret both Smithyman’s own poems and those of Charles Brasch and Keith Sinclair. In addition (and in line with the central orientation of the New Criticism) he bewails Curnow’s “vatic utterance[s] which not many of us can take seriously” (“SR” 29) in a declaration that suggests Smithyman was uncomfortable with the positioning of literary critics as cultural seers. Once he has finished destabilizing Curnow’s position as critical seer, Smithyman moves on to an appraisal of a select group of poets. So “Post-War New Zealand Poetry” is a pointed attack on the hegemony exerted by cultural nationalists, with Allen Curnow being the most obvious target. It is an extremely early example of the kind of linguistic deconstruction we normally associate with the post-*And* generation.

The first significant poet to be examined is Ursula Bethell, with Smithyman noting that when her admirers’ criticisms are compared they seem to him to be “almost at loggerheads about her virtues”. Despite agreeing that Bethell has a capacity to communicate “grief, wonder, reverence, joy, and awe” (“SR” 32), Smithyman voices concern about defective craftsmanship that stems in his opinion from an excessive reliance on the Sublime style of the eighteenth century, once again pointing out the dangers of a turgid romanticism and an over-saturation of poetry with religious belief. In this context D’Arcy Cresswell’s poetry is also viewed as somewhat defective, and although Smithyman defends him against some of his harsher critics, he says he “would preserve no more than two or three [of his poems]”. He then goes on to “wonder if this would not be a wasted kindness”. Eileen Duggan is singled out for more fulsome praise due to her ability to delineate “simple revelation” (“SR” 33), but once again Smithyman

adds a caveat in that she is seen as a poet who too easily disregards the sensitive nature of her talent. Smithyman seems intent in all his criticism to take the gloss off the reputations of poets put forward by earlier critics (and present admirers) as important talents. His style is always reserved, with caveats attached in a very personal manner. In speaking of Duggan, for example, he writes: “If I say that at times we may be reminded of Emily Dickinson or Christina Rossetti, I am doing her some deliberate honour even if to be reminded is not to be moved to outright comparison” (“SR” 34). A partial explanation of Smithyman’s equivocal style is provided near the close of this first essay when he states that “categories such as regional or provincial, immanent or transcendent, are aids to order our thinking, but no more than aids” (“SR” 35). At all times aware of the restrictive nature of language, Smithyman refuses to build systems that might solidify into dogma. This orientation goes a long way to explaining his dislike of cultural myths and the positioning of critics as the arbiters of those myths.

Smithyman’s second essay in the series, “The Road to Academe” furthers his attempt to redefine the terminology used in the discussion of New Zealand literature. In this essay his main target is again “romanticism”²², but with a slightly different focus. A. R. D. Fairburn provides the impetus for his argument. Written in a breathless fashion that reflected his intense engagement with the topic, “The Road to Academe” launches into a discussion of Fairburn and R.A. K. Mason’s understanding of romanticism and what they believed to be its binary opposite in New Zealand, classicism. Smithyman first constructs a “monstrous hybrid” that posits a definition of romanticism culled from “Parrington, Read, Brooks, Trilling, Valery, Gide, Whitehead et al” (“RA” 35). The work of this list of eminent intellectual historians and literary critics is distilled into a definition that takes

romanticism to be essentially anti-scientific, devoted to nature and dominated by a reliance on the picturesque and descriptive epithets. The romanticist in this conception attempts to unify the dissociated sensibility of modern man through metaphor catalysed by “inspiration, spontaneity, enthusiasm or even ebullience” (“RA” 35). There could be no more stark opposition to Baxter’s position. Smithyman’s reason for developing such a definition was to examine how far Fairburn and other New Zealand poets reflected such an attitude, and to work out whether or not the term was wholly applicable to the New Zealand context. This was especially important for him because he was dismayed at the characterization developed by Fairburn and Mason of the dual tendencies in New Zealand literature. The romantic attitude was clear enough, but Smithyman was concerned that there was a conception in New Zealand that its opposite was classicism, or a kind of satirical anti-romanticism. Smithyman’s purpose in “The Road to Academe” is to show that contrary to this understanding, actual poetic practice in New Zealand indicated that the opposite to the romantic attitude was in fact “academic” (“RA” 42). One gets the feeling that “Post-War New Zealand Poetry” was a fierce rejoinder to those poets who had set themselves up as the dominant players in New Zealand literature with (to Smithyman) intellectually dubious credentials.

Smithyman’s first task was to dismantle the opposition of romantic and classic through reference to Fairburn (whom he held in high regard as a poet and personality). Essentially, Smithyman notes that although Fairburn does play the dual role of romanticist and satirist, these positions are not mutually exclusive in his personality. Rather, the satirist in Fairburn “operates as anti-romantic without eschewing his main commitment or allegiance” (“RA” 35). Smithyman is suggesting that the importation of

“the dreary quarrel of romantic and classic”²³ was anachronistic from the outset in New Zealand, built in the main through Fairburn and Mason’s dislike for the flaccid romanticism of *Kowhai Gold* and journalistic criticism. Although believing that they were dismantling New Zealanders’ naive reliance on the romantic attitude by inserting pointed social satire into the literature, Fairburn and Mason were actually only exploring the flip-side of their own (romantic) personalities. In Fairburn’s case Smithyman suggests that this was due to his inability to have “any but a shallow appreciation of the changes which came in the train of Auden” (“RA” 36). Rather than unquestioningly accepting the critical apparatus handed down to him by his elders, Smithyman criticizes the canon of New Zealand poetry and develops his own empirical observations.

Smithyman first explores one opposition that he posits as a possibility: that between the “tough-minded” Dennis Glover and Curnow and the “tender-minded” (“RA” 37) Fairburn and Mason. The suggestion proffered is that these poets exhibit opposite tendencies that might work for the entirety of New Zealand poetry. Using this distinction he goes on to divide various New Zealand poets into two camps: one composed of Mason, Fairburn, Hyde, Bethell, Duggan and Harvey; the other of Wilson, Johnson, Sinclair, Dallas, Joseph and Stanley. The centre shifts in this outline but Dowling, Brasch, Oliver, Curnow and Baxter seem to inhabit this region. In true Smithyman fashion, however, his own argument is soon undermined by the observation that “[a]llegiances shift, talents are re-directed, the shadows shift about. Students and lecturers go off, fed and unfed. The black-board is most meaningful when wiped clean” (“RA” 38). The inherent difficulty of Smithyman’s prose lies in its protean nature; as soon as the chains are tightened around a linguistic distinction Smithyman dissolves

them and starts afresh, always working towards his central conceit. In this case he begins to connect the “tough-minded” (“RA” 37) poets with a trend towards more intellectual poetry, soon to be characterized by him as academic. Rather than seeing the opposition in New Zealand literature as being between the romantic and the classic, Smithyman argues that it is between the romantic and the intellectual (or academic).

Smithyman begins his history of the development of intellectual poetry in New Zealand with Basil Dowling, whose poetry evolved from the “markedly romantic” towards “disciplined speculation” and “contriv[ed] wit”(“RA” 38-9). Smithyman perceives a development of the intellectual faculty in Dowling that eventually lends his poetry greater poise and depth of insight. Charles Brasch is also viewed as a progenitor of the academic stance in poetry, although Smithyman feels that his preoccupation with the myth of isolation is problematic and reflective of a personal anxiety that leads him to a creative impasse (“RA” 40). Hubert Witheford and W. H. Oliver are similarly placed as architects of the academic mode, with Oliver in particular being singled out as having the capacity to make much of the intellectual style (“RA” 41). Smithyman reserves his highest praise for C. K. Stead, however, whom he views as a writer well attuned to “tragedy, irony and multitudinous distinction” (“RA” 42). The pace of delivery is fast, with poets inserted into the discussion at an often bewildering rate.

It is significant that the essays attempts not only to dismantle the terminology of New Zealand literature, but to provide a place for Smithyman himself (who can only be described as an intellectually oriented poet). “The Road to Academe” dissolves the critical apparatus of Fairburn and Mason in order to legitimize Smithyman’s own mode of writing. In this sense the series is didactic and polemical. This is signalled clearly in

the last paragraph where Smithyman points out to his readers their poetic prejudices in a passage that is heavily influenced by the philosophy of the New Criticism:

We find it hard to be objective; we still suspect objectivity in criticism; we distrust and are reluctant to accept attempts to objectify poetry, to remove it from being merely something within a social process. Consequently, our reluctance is enlarged to the point of repudiating what I called the autonomy of the poem. The less objective, the more subjective, the nearer romantic a poem is, the more acceptable it is. What is more romantic is more re-assuring: it is also easier. What is more disturbing we discover the further from romanticism we get, where eventually we have to recognize the force and right of language in itself, and have to appraise what we would sooner ignore, our responsibility to and for our language. ("RA" 44)

This was a singular statement to make in the context of New Zealand literary criticism, because although Smithyman was speaking to the broader literary community, he did so in order to refute their critical technique. He certainly did attend to the function of poetry within New Zealand culture, but his adherence to New Criticism led him to eschew the employment of cultural and historical narratives in his interpretation of poetry, largely (the point is significant) to move away from the romanticism of earlier writers and critics. His attention to language and his belief in the "autonomy of the poem" anchor his criticism. The cultural aspect of his criticism is only related to a deadening reliance upon romanticism throughout New Zealand literature and criticism. In large part he was using the techniques of American New Criticism in order to move away from this preoccupation. Attention to language was the means by which this could be achieved.

The evolution of Smithyman's thought becomes apparent at this point in his series of essays. His third essay, "The Clayless Climate",²⁴ opens with the statement that a "main responsibility of a writer towards the language of his community is to preserve what he thinks are its virtues. Another responsibility is to purge that language of its defects, so far as this is in his power" ("CC" 29). On Dudding's advice, Smithyman took

this as his central idea in *A Way of Saying* (1965). His notion was that in developing their poetry, writers simultaneously tested the resources of their community's "*lingua franca*" ("CC" 29; emphasis in original), thereby discovering that community's "way of saying" and directing the language used towards more fruitful ends. Specific to this conception of the poet's responsibility is the assertion put forward by the New Critics that "[t]he form *is* the poem" ("CC" 29; emphasis in original). Poetry for Smithyman thus becomes an experiment with language that suggests new poetic forms, while at the same time challenging the linguistic preoccupations of his contemporaries. The only anchor to this experimentation is the belief that "[t]he form *is* the poem" ("CC" 29; emphasis in original).

"The Clayless Climate" raises Smithyman's pace of delivery to an extravagant level. References to international poets and critics as varied as E.M.W. Tillyard, Wallace Stevens, Dylan Thomas, Geoffrey Moore (editor of *The Penguin Book of Modern American Verse*), Walt Whitman, M.M. Mahood, Phillip Rahv, Dr. Johnson, Wordsworth, Roethke and e.e. cummings are set beside the New Zealand poets Allen Curnow, Pat Wilson, Keith Sinclair, Owen Leeming, Eileen Duggan and Fleur Adcock. No effort is made to provide background for each of these figures, and the effect is often confusing for the reader, who is forced to deal with Smithyman's idiosyncratic thoughts without proper initiation. Suffice to say that the list of poets and critics the reader is assailed with is generally viewed positively by Smithyman. He is certainly not embarrassed by the standard of New Zealand poetry. His major criticism in "The Clayless Climate" is reserved for "Clio", whom Smithyman pithily refers to as "the White Goddess" ("CC" 40) worshipped by cultural nationalists like Curnow. History and

spurious myth-making go hand-in-hand for Smithyman. “Post-War New Zealand Poetry” is thus quite pointedly anti-historical: Smithyman deals with terminology and critical methodology and has little interest in providing a historical or philosophical narrative to ease the passage of his ideas. In this respect he is typical of the more challenging Anglo-American critics who “have not always articulated a philosophic basis for their criticism, [but] have developed a methodology and principles – even, indeed, an implicit theory – that interpret, analyse and judge”.²⁵ Smithyman is singular in the history of New Zealand literary criticism in his refusal to move beyond the immediate necessities of poetic practice and into its philosophical and historical contexts. He focuses on his community’s *lingua franca* instead, because in his mind this has direct implications for poetry.

The continual reorientation of the terms of reference behind Smithyman’s arguments has parallels with the stream-of-consciousness technique. In this facet of his writing Smithyman is similar to Wyndham Lewis and Gertrude Stein. Conversely, Chapman and Baxter were willing to ease the passage of their ideas with simple prose. Smithyman’s attempt to reorient that rather simple debate in New Zealand poetic circles was a case in point. His aim was to point out that the debate over “South Island mythology” (“CC” 33) was fallacious and ignored the fact that the differences between New Zealand poets of this generation were only a matter of degree. He refers back to the conception of academic poetry that he developed in the preceding essays, and goes on to analyse this strain of poetry through reference to its central tendencies; “Oblique” and “Direct” (“CC” 31). He took the terms from E.M.W. Tillyard, and suggested that the “oblique” style of academic poetry in New Zealand could be distinguished from “direct” poetry through reference to its lack of attention to objective social concerns. Oblique

academic poetry tends towards playful “surface” (“CC” 31) concerns comparable with those to be found in American poets such as Wallace Stevens. Smithyman is quick to point out, however, that the use of the word “surface” does not connote shallowness, but “metaphysics” (“CC” 32). Where “direct” academic poetry focuses on the construction of myths of identity in relation to concrete places, “oblique” academic poetry is characterized by a “solipsist” (“CC” 33) orientation that continually asserts an absolute egoism (or, the notion that reality is entirely constituted from the mind of the beholder). The two standpoints are opposed in their attitude towards myth. Whereas one asserts that the construction of myths is a concrete activity that has a real and tangible association with its environment, the other asserts that all myth is artifice. Once again, Smithyman’s prose is dense to the point of incomprehensibility and it soon becomes necessary to extract his central arguments and display them in different terms. His point is actually quite simple: New Zealand writers have to deal with a “clayless climate” (“CC” 36).

Smithyman’s point is that New Zealand culture does not have an established tradition and therefore lacks depth. Any writer who approaches poetry in New Zealand has necessarily to take an intellectual stance, because there is no tradition to resort to for depth of feeling. Poetry in New Zealand (whether it had an oblique/metaphysical orientation or a direct/romantic orientation) is all *necessarily* intellectual, and therefore “academic”. Both groups involved with the South Island Myth write academic poetry: the difference is that one side practises oblique academic poetry, the other direct academic poetry. New Zealand’s clayless climate makes academically oriented writing a given; any differences are simply a matter of degree. It is thus easy to see how Smithyman views the construction of binaries such as Fairburn and Mason’s “romantic

versus classic” as fallacious. The centrality of this belief in Smithyman leads him into obscurity over and over again. Even the theme of exile is seen by him to be symptomatic of New Zealand’s essentially intellectual orientation,

because separation is not critically a physical affair but requires the commanded mind and emotion of the writer and hence becomes something other than we expect it should be - because of these complications the theme of exile spreads from being a romantic appurtenance and moves toward the province of academic poetry which places so much on the workings of the mind at the possible expense of the innocent heart. We come into, we live in, a clayless climate. (“CC” 36)

The remainder of “The Clayless Climate” goes on to examine Curnow as an (oblique) academic myth-maker (“CC” 40), even in his treatment of domestic scenes. Smithyman’s difficult prose is unrelenting:

They [Curnow’s poems] were domestic in this sense, that they stop short of intimacy, of extreme personal revelation. They are contained as the transactions of family life are and like family life share something of public experience without being fully public and without being wholly private. They are personal, but not passionate. Their immediacy, in terms of scene, supposes a much smaller area of reference, as to a bay within a harbour whereas formerly the properties of landscape and the larger view were supposed. (“CC” 41)

Despite a rather simple central argument, “The Clayless Climate” shows Smithyman at his most complex. In his final essay in the series he attempted to make amends, extending his discussion of domestic poetry in a manner that aims to close his overall argument and provide cogency to the essay series as a whole.

“The True Voice of Feeling”²⁶ examines the category of “domestic” (“CC” 41) poetry that Smithyman identifies near the end of “The Clayless Climate”. His aim is to explore the extent to which New Zealand poets develop “sincerity” (“TVF” 31) in their work, and to what extent they have been led astray by a too fulsome commitment to this sentiment. This particular essay was published again in Wystan Curnow’s 1973 anthology *Essays on New Zealand Literature* – a reflection of its importance to the

contemporary literary scene. Smithyman is especially interested in an apparent primacy of subject throughout New Zealand poetry which leads to a situation in which “what is said” is given greater weight than his own search for “a way of saying” (“TVF” 31). In his view poetry that exalts subject and asserts a sincere attachment to that subject tends towards the “neo-romantic” position he is at such pains to undermine. “[I]t is direct rather than oblique; a poetry of depth rather than surface”. In this mode of poetry there is an underlying attempt to express “the true voice of feeling” (“TVF” 31). It is interesting that although Smithyman did not hold to this poetic aim himself he still wrote about it in a balanced and appreciative manner. His aim in “The True Voice of Feeling” was not so much to criticize poetic practice in New Zealand, but to bring a new conceptual apparatus into the discussion.

Smithyman’s first realignment of New Zealand literary history is to exclude Curnow from his discussion of the nation’s subjective poets. His argument in “The True Voice of Feeling” centres around a discussion of Baxter, Louis Johnson and Basil Dowling. Other New Zealand poets like Peter Bland and Marilyn Duckworth are also mentioned, but remain subsidiary to his main argument. Roger Horrocks has noted that Smithyman was the first New Zealand critic to see Curnow in this sense, as a “maker of artifice”²⁷ involved in the cultural nationalist programme, but so aware of his role that personalism and subjective commitment became anathema as useful interpretative tools. As “Post-War New Zealand Poetry” draws to a close, Smithyman begins to defer more and more to Curnow’s position as the eminent critic of New Zealand letters. Indeed, in closing, he defers entirely to Curnow by quoting an extract from one of his better-known poems. It is as though in the course of writing “Post-War New Zealand Poetry”

Smithyman came to respect Curnow's critical position despite attempting to overturn the hegemony exerted by his terminology. The effect is one of empathy and admiration for Curnow's achievements, because Smithyman had also:

*found like all who had so long
Bloodily or tenderly striven
To rearrange the given,
It was something different, something
Nobody counted on.*²⁸

It is interesting to see Smithyman exploring a mode of poetry that (despite his viewing it as legitimate) was entirely different to his own. He sees direct poetry, or the poetry of subject or domesticity, as being predicated upon an ability to balance "intellect and the other . . . problem of sentience" (terms taken from Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*). The matter of intelligence relates to the philosophical truism that "while poetry is a mode of apprehension it is at the same time a way of making a statement" ("TVF" 32). Poetry implies the use of intelligence because in every poem there is a statement (implicit or explicit) that needs to be communicated in discursive terms. Poetry is equally dependent upon sentience, however, because a writer has to "defer to his own feelings while controlling them and while at the same time calculating to arouse among a reader's many sympathies the various but particular emotional responses" ("TVF" 32) he wishes to elicit. Smithyman's warning to New Zealand's more subjective or personal poets becomes explicit at this point, as he points out that "[t]he poem as voice of feeling cannot afford to deny that the reader's act of sympathy must inevitably entail some activity of intellect also" ("TVF" 32-3). Poetry of subject that denies the interdependence of intellect and sentience is doomed to lapse into the hackneyed neo-romantic verse so bewailed by New Zealand critics since Fairburn and Mason.

Baxter provides Smithyman with an opportunity to examine how domestic poetry could develop in a poet with genuine talent. Naturally, Smithyman suggests that over the course of his career Baxter has shifted from practising subjective, emotional oratory towards more ironic, intellectual and rhetorical poetry. At all times, however, “[f]eeling was being voiced, to someone” (“TVF” 34). Smithyman is suggesting that Baxter’s poetry has developed a greater balance between intellect and sentience as he has matured. He notes that “the truth of Baxter’s subject and his truth to it are in harmony, which was seldom hitherto his virtue” (“TVF” 35). Smithyman’s main criticism of Baxter is that he fails to be consistent. Despite artistic bravura and a prodigious output, he feels that Baxter frequently misdirects the reader out of a lack of feeling for the moral dimension of direct poetry. The argument is significant, because Smithyman is pointing out that a poetry of social significance can only lapse into confusion (or banality) for the audience if the moral implications of the setting are not adequately expressed. “The daemon of neo-romantic expressiveness is wrestled, but who goes to the fall?” (“TVF” 35). Whereas Baxter asserts the need for a spiritual element, Smithyman presses the moral dimension. Implicit in Smithyman’s argument, of course, is that poetry of social significance depends upon morality for its impact, and when intellect is over-ridden by emotion in the poet this impact is fatally undermined. “Uncertainty in the voice of true feeling becomes dubiousness about true meaning.” (“TVF” 35). The tone and terminological slipperiness of this argument is classic Smithyman. Direct poetry or poetry of social significance, neo-romanticism or direct academic, subject or moral exemplar? His terms constantly dissolve into one another to the point where the reader is left gasping at the intellectual gymnastics involved. In terms of his critical position

(again, like Wyndham Lewis or Gertrude Stein) Smithyman seems to settle for discontinuity rather than continuity. His aim is to challenge readers to step outside their mental habits and accept the arbitrariness of terminological distinctions.

The small scope of the New Zealand literary and intellectual scene was implied in the personal tone of most examples of literary criticism, but Smithyman frequently appears to have gone a step further and simply jotted down the vague ramblings of his mind in an almost conversational manner. The strategy is effective in that it differentiates him from other more mainstream critics like McCormick, Holcroft and Curnow. Take his transition from a discussion of Baxter to a discussion of Louis Johnson:

A deal of what one says about Baxter may also be said about Johnson. Yet, perhaps in drawing attention to what Baxter and Johnson have in common is going about things the wrong way. On the other hand, a usual discussion of their work emphasises the differences between them, principally in diction, and those features which are distinctive need no recapitulation at this date. (“TVF” 36)

Smithyman goes on to write about Johnson in a personal manner that, again, befits the small scope of the New Zealand literary circle during the early sixties. Smithyman characterizes Johnson as a person with a certain Sartrean insight into the banality of human existence, coupled with a Kierkegaardian quest to find “the Self in the Other” (“TVF” 37). This in turn leads him towards a recognition of human suffering and the Absurd. For this reason he believes that much of his poetry took an existential turn that moved from the socially significant instance towards a conception of the banality of human existence. This searching for ultimate human motivation and experience is suggestive to Smithyman of an attempt to find an ultimate symbol, “that something other than and more than either image or symbol which Graves, and Wimsatt, call the *ikon*” (“TVF” 37-8; emphasis in original). Smithyman feels that Johnson is ready “to formulate

his world-view as a system with more to it than the curiosity or humanitarian sentiment on which he has been content to rely” (“TVF” 38). The tone is at once personal and supportive.

Smithyman’s discussion of Johnson leads him into an examination of “urban” (“TVF” 39) poetry, because it is this factor that seemed to him to best characterize the Wellington poets. Poets like Bland, Doyle, Slater, Duckworth and Challis all practised poetry of social significance and like Johnson had a slightly Sartrean interest in their immediate (urban) environment. These poets minimize landscape and surroundings in their verse in order to meditate upon the human significance “of a coffee house conversation” (“TVF” 39). This “School of Johnson” is further characterized in Smithyman’s criticism by a tendency to over-emphasize the intellectual side of its meditations at the expense of feeling, to the point where many of its poems lapse into arid vignettes of city life. Once again, the balance between intellect and sentience is lost. Smithyman explains this imbalance through reference to the Wellington poets’ two other tendencies: personalism and the use of poetry as short fiction. Both of these aspects suggest that “Wellington poetry showed itself drawn towards conditions which are the staples of prose” ” (“TVF” 41), or more specifically, journalism. Smithyman is quick to point out that this journalistic mode of writing is quite different to that undertaken during the 1920s, relying more on a depth of feeling and specific subject-matter than florid verse, but it is still essentially personal because “[t]he personal element is at once a product of youthfulness in writing, of a community which has a strong inclination to write to and for other writers, as well as being part and parcel with a declining or changing romanticism” ” (“TVF” 42).

The assertion of a regional quality in New Zealand writing was quite tendentious at the time “Post-War New Zealand Poetry” was written, and Smithyman’s prose reflects this. As he draws on the South Island Myth debate, there is much argument over whether or not New Zealand writing should be viewed as regionally differentiated. Earlier on in the series he suggests that it is useful to speak of the Auckland Metaphysicals, and in “The True Voice of Feeling” he speaks of a typically Wellington mode. Although he uses these distinctions to order his critical narrative, he appears loath to become engaged in a debate concerning the overall merits of such a view. Rather, he equivocates and asserts that such distinctions have merit even if they tend to obscure differences between members of the group:

In spite of Doyle’s disavowal, then, of any Wellington group, in spite of the lack of cohesion of the possible School of Johnson we may conclude there were attitudes and practices which brought into being a regional quality that while playing down the importance of scene made its regionalism otherwise distinct. The very unimportance of scene may be exploited . . .” (“TVF” 42)

It is this kind of logic that allows Smithyman to move into a deeper discussion of Wellington personalism, exploring Challis, Bland, Fleur Adcock and Marilyn Duckworth. All these writers suggest a movement within the School of Johnson towards existentialism and a greater detachment “which can make much of the Absurd” ” (“TVF” 44). This noted, Smithyman appears in two minds over the applications of a personalist mode of poetry in New Zealand, wondering “whether, bluntly, we are interesting enough as people”. He regrets the movement in New Zealand poetry towards “nonconformist” avant-garde practices that appeared incongruous to him given the New Zealand setting. In this sense he sets himself up as one of the “conservatives” (“TVF” 45) of the New Zealand literary scene with a critical assertion that says a lot about the increasing

diversification of literary practices during the post-war years. Existentialism, neo-romanticism and the avant-garde had begun to compete with older positions like cultural nationalism by the 1960s.

So as not to conclude on a negative note Smithyman moves on from the Wellington group to a discussion of Owen Leeming, whom he views as having achieved “a nice poise between the sentient and the intellectual capacities” (“TVF” 46). In addition, Leeming suggests to Smithyman that it is possible to write in a personalist mode without moving towards domestic vignettes and regional tendencies. Similarly, Leeming symbolizes to Smithyman a use of history that is not monolithic, but rather a “mediation of the influences of a past upon a present condition” (“TVF” 46). This balanced poetic nature is suggestive to him of Leeming’s Catholic background which may also enrich the poetic life of New Zealand generally. This is simply because “there is a latent importance in the existence of a group of like-minded writers who have a community of belief” (“TVF” 47). Despite often espousing elements of the New Criticism, Smithyman (like the New Critics themselves) does not argue for a total divorce from history and tradition.

Smithyman’s historical sense was certainly more informed by elements of the New Criticism than any other practitioner of literary criticism in New Zealand. “Post-War New Zealand Poetry” is the most idiosyncratic of New Zealand’s critical works for this reason: there is no historical or sociological narrative to order the author’s ideas. The resultant obscurity is, however, in large part purposeful. Following in the wake of essays like *Letters and Art in New Zealand*, *A Book of New Zealand Verse*, and “Fiction and the Social Pattern” (which all had strong elements of historical narrative interwoven with the

literary criticism) Smithyman felt it necessary to assert himself as a practising poet first and foremost. His agreement with many New Critical precepts pressed him further in this direction, to the point where he actually states that “if you eschew an historical approach you make difficulties for yourself, and these articles have tried to minimise the effect of the literary history and to seek for tenable generalisations” (“TVF” 40). “Post-War New Zealand Poetry” was thus first and foremost an effort to redirect the critical apparatus of New Zealand literature towards more useful terms. This can be seen in the constant mention of occasional reviews in literary periodicals like *Kiwi*, *Hilltop*, *Arachne*, *Poetry Yearbook* and *Landfall*. Critics as varied as Donald Davie, Jonathan Bennett, J.C. Reid and M.K. Joseph are considered alongside Mason, Fairburn, McCormick and Curnow. No source of material or opinion is eschewed in the interests of transparency. Critical opinions are not accepted or challenged on the basis of an external historical, sociological or philosophical narrative, but on the basis of Smithyman’s own actual experience as a poet. The approach was difficult for the lay reader, but stimulating and rebellious in the context of a small literary milieu. In particular, Smithyman’s position was a direct rejoinder to literary critics like Robert Chapman and Bill Pearson who used sociology as a basis for their analyses. His contribution to New Zealand literary criticism lies in his insight that tradition is handed down through various linguistic means, and therefore fidelity to it should be more about fidelity to the language of a community than to narratives of colonization and material advancement.

Smithyman’s criticism was thus determinedly literary in orientation. Although he clearly engaged in the ongoing conversation of New Zealand literature (especially through reference to Curnow) he eschewed a cultural approach in favour of direct

engagement with the *lingua franca* of New Zealand's poetic community. Likewise, his unrelentingly difficult prose is in many ways a reaction against what he perceived to be a too-fulsome acceptance of the historical, cultural and sociological approaches of McCormick, Holcroft, Curnow and Chapman. Despite this, his criticism is peculiarly self-reflexive, to the point where "Postwar New Zealand Poetry" quite openly operates as an authorial reflection upon his own preoccupations and poetic concerns. The essay is also highly educative, in that Smithyman was attempting to introduce a new mode of critical analysis into the discourse of New Zealand criticism. "Postwar New Zealand Poetry" is a quite remarkable essay for this reason: Smithyman manages to critique New Zealand literature without a specifically cultural approach, using the New Criticism instead. The essay thus suggests a degree of modal variance in New Zealand literary criticism that is not often noted. Although Smithyman's approach did not fit in with the general direction that literary criticism was taking and is infrequently referenced, it stands as a testament to the personal force of New Zealand's literary-critical tradition; the way in which it has allowed individual authors to delineate their own concerns, react *against* the dominant tradition, and suggest new ways of reading and interpreting New Zealand literature.

"Postwar New Zealand Poetry" thus filled a gap in the history of New Zealand literary criticism at the same time as it reoriented the nation's gaze towards America. The 1960s were relatively quiet in terms of literary-critical activity, and Smithyman's introduction of American New Criticism provided a timely corrective to previous work that had been biased towards historical and sociological inquiry. Moreover, the essay was unusual in that it was written over three years, allowing Smithyman's ideas to develop in

tandem with feedback he received along the way. Its publication in *Mate* signalled a deepening of New Zealand's literary-critical infrastructure as well, reflecting a slow movement away from the hegemony exerted by *Landfall* in the post-war period. By focusing his criticism on poets who had published since *A Book of New Zealand Verse*, Smithyman updated the canon and gave voice to poets who had fallen into the shadow cast by Curnow's seminal work. Although at times difficult, Smithyman's prose reflects a desire to extend the criticism of McCormick, Holcroft and Curnow into more self-conscious areas of inquiry. In broader terms, it reminds us that the globalization of New Zealand literature began a lot earlier than some would have us believe.

NOTES

¹ MacD. P. Jackson, "Interview with Kendrick Smithyman", *Landfall* 168 (1988), 411-12. [Possible to clarify the force of this reference? Does Jackson compare the two writers or does he see similarities as hard to find?]

² McEldowney, "Publishing, Patronage, Literary Magazines", in Terry Sturm, ed., *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*, Auckland: OUP, 1991, p.670.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ "Interview with Kendrick Smithyman", 414.

⁵ Kendrick Smithyman, *A Way of Saying*, Auckland and London: Collins, 1965.

⁶ Peter Simpson, "Kendrick Smithyman", in Claudia Orange, ed., *The Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, Vol. 5: 1941-1960, Auckland: Auckland UP and The Department of Internal Affairs, 2000, p.485.

⁷ "Interview With Kendrick Smithyman", 404.

⁸ *ibid.*, 405.

⁹ "Kendrick Smithyman", p.485.

¹⁰ "Interview with Kendrick Smithyman", 407-8.

¹¹ Peter Simpson, Introduction to Kendrick Smithyman, *Selected Poems*, Auckland: Auckland UP, 1989, p.12.

¹² "Kendrick Smithyman", p.485.

¹³ "Interview With Kendrick Smithyman", 411.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 444. [query page number – is interview more than 30 pages long? 414?]

¹⁵ Kendrick Smithyman, "Post-War New Zealand Poetry: The Sublime and the Romantic", *Mate* 8 (1961), 27-36. Subsequent references cite "SR" and are incorporated in the text.

¹⁶ Allen Tate, "The New Provincialism", in Allen Tate, *The Man of Letters in the Modern World: Selected Essays 1928-1955*, Cleveland and New York: Meridian, 1964, pp.321-31.

¹⁷ Mark Jancovich, "The Southern New Critics", in A. Walton Litz et al., *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, p.204.

¹⁸ Daniel Green, "Literature Itself: The New Criticism and Aesthetic Experience", *Philosophy and Literature*, 27 (2003), 62-79.

¹⁹ Douglas Mao, "The New Critics and the Text-Object", *English Literary History*, 63, 1 (1996), 227-54.

²⁰ "The New Provincialism", p.325.

²¹ Smithyman's insight into this facet of New Zealand culture was not entirely original. J. C. Beaglehole's essay "The New Zealand Scholar" (1954) had also argued for a more positive approach to the provincial dilemma.

²² Kendrick Smithyman, "Post-War New Zealand Poetry: The Road to Academe", *Mate* 9 (1962), 34. Subsequent references cite "RA" and are incorporated in the text.

²³ Herbert Read, cited in "RA", 34.

²⁴ Kendrick Smithyman, "Post-War New Zealand Poetry: The Clayless Climate", *Mate* 10 (1962), 29-42. Subsequent references cite "CC" and are incorporated in the text.

²⁵ Daniel R. Schwarz, *The Case For a Humanist Poetics*, London: Macmillan, 1990, p.1.

²⁶ Kendrick Smithyman, "Post-War New Zealand Poetry: The True Voice of Feeling", *Mate* 11 (1963), 31-48. Subsequent references cite "TVF" and are incorporated in the text.

²⁷ Roger Horrocks, "The Invention of New Zealand", *And* 1 (1983), 28.

²⁸ Allen Curnow, "The Unhistoric Story", cited in "TVF" 48; emphasis in original.