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## Ken Smith's *A Book Of Chinese Whispers* John Taylor

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Ken Smith. *A Book of Chinese Whispers*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1987. 149pp. £5.95.

Ken Smith's *A Book of Chinese Whispers* is a heterogeneous collection that defies summing-up. Much more a "Collected Short Prose" than a thematically-unified volume, the book includes prose-poem sequences that have already been published separately, notably *The Atmospheric Railway*, *Island Called Henry the Navigator*, *The Wild Rose* and *Anus Mundi*. The advantage of such an edition is obvious: we can read an impressive variety of Smith's prose, which ranges in genre from personal confessions to fictive autobiographies, from historical fantasies to enigmatic vignettes, from thought-provoking fables to odd whimsies of erudition. Yet the disadvantage of an *omnium-gatherum* is that the intense single emotion created in a few sequences—such as the extremely moving *The Wild Rose*, devoted to the poet's deceased father—tends to be dispersed or refracted or diluted by what follows. Hence my recommendation to read this collection a very little at a time, over many sittings. Sometimes a mere paragraph will suffice, such as "The Joined-Up Writing," a fine melancholic expression of aging. "Amongst the jokes and the bars and the journeys and the love of good women," he concludes, "all the same I grow, as you grew years ago, 'weary of the autumn and the winter and the spring and the summer too.'"

Some texts protest, others chuckle or disclose fearsome realities, but many of Smith's most memorable prose poems are soft-spoken meditations, introspections or, as above, discreet messages to an absent companion. "Between the events, sometimes, a long shadow," he characteristically notes, "a Chinese whisper that turns out to be accurate, like an after voice chasing across the tape, like a footstep always just behind, a true echo." A meticulously factual writer, Smith indeed seems to envision writing as an attempt to capture and record these "true echoes" of experience. The experiences may not be his own, however, nor even reverberate toward him from the recent past. Born in 1938 (in East Rudson, Yorkshire), he might conceivably have eaten—as in "The Winter of 1941"—"mouthfuls of straw" from a mattress and "thought of all the feet whose dirt had sifted down into that straw, of all those born and died on that mattress, the copulating, the cries, the sickness endured there"; surely a first-hand knowledge of poverty and uprootedness underlies many poems; but he could never have eyewitnessed the ritual evoked in "Ghost Dancing at Wounded Knee," let alone the surprisingly frequent scenes reported from the Middle Ages. Whether dealing with suffering or self-deceit, Smith's ability to put himself in someone else's shoes astonishes. In "The Man in the Street Speaks Up for Himself," for example, he seeringly portrays, in the first person singular, a sort of multiple Nazi "Everyman" justifying the "odd jobs" that he performed during the Second World War:

"I printed up a few posters for Goebbels' office and helped put them up ... When the typewriters had to be changed I was the one sent round to put in the extra key with the runes. I had a small workshop and made swastika buttons, I was a shopkeeper selling flags and armbands and paper ... I was a tailor making uniforms and a cobbler who made jackboots, I sold gold braid to the navy... I drove a truck of Zyklon and dealt in barbed wire on the side ... I was a welder who fixed the exhausts leading back into the vans. I was a labourer, Heydrich hired me to get rid of his mother's gravestone..."

If there is a unifying link between the texts, it thus lies in the empathy—even when used for sarcasm—that Smith brings to his multifarious subjects; and to "himself," one must add, for an autobiographical writer necessarily "sees double." In his most sensitive prose (often concerning his friends or family), sorrow or remorse accompanies his desire to see the world as others see it. "This is instead of," he pointedly admits in a touching remembrance of "Joe," a friend who died of cancer of the liver (and whom the poet did not visit in the hospital). The best texts similarly leave it up to the reader to formulate their essential message, as if what really mattered lay slightly beyond the written words. And that message often involves the need for tenderness, in view of the transience of life and the obligations of living. Eschewing abstractions and in most cases employing a neutral, objective, unconnoted vocabulary, Smith's work nonetheless has acute moral consequences. In the longer narratives, these consequences are only gradually revealed, as in "The History of Stones," which begins, harmlessly enough, with an account of the narrator's passion for rock collecting. But his, albeit bizarre, collecting methods—he picks up stones in one country and reburies them in another—is eventually paralleled by the story of the breakup of his marriage.

Likewise, Smith or his characters—some resemblant mouthpieces, others manifestly stand-ins for *The Average Man*, still others real acquaintances—often search for something lost or removed. In the second half of this collection especially, it is love that turns out to be absent. This theme comes forcibly to the fore in "One of Our Objects is Missing," a long text in which the narrator first inventories his possessions, unable to put his finger on "something ... that is not here." His search and self-interrogation finally spiral into an attempt to "go back" over his life again, "slowly, like a nun counting her beads, a child his marbles." For this purpose, he invents another name for himself—Jack. Tellingly, this alter-ego leads the narrator back to his—their—first wife.

Near the end of his collection, Smith promises his "gentle reader" that he will "ere long" have the "narrative" that he "quite properly demand[s]." The few remaining "tales" of *A Book of Chinese Whispers* satisfy this request, but could Smith also have in mind our own private narratives, with which we

necessarily must grapple once we have put down his book? I think so. For it is in his discreet, intimist self-portraits that he is the most intriguing, ambiguous, provocative, paradoxically affecting us strongly, drawing us out. In a word, these are prose poems translatable into the secret whispers and arcane idioms of our own lives.

**John Taylor**