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# The Poetry of Iain Crichton Smith

John Blackburn

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## EDITOR'S FOREWORD

The *Scotnotes* booklets are a series of study guides to major Scottish writers and literary texts that are likely to be elements within literature courses. They are aimed at senior pupils in secondary schools and students in further education colleges and colleges of education. Each booklet in the series is written by a person who is not only an authority on the particular writer or text but also experienced in teaching at the relevant levels in schools or colleges. Furthermore, the editorial board, composed of members of the Schools and Further Education Committee of the Association for Scottish Literary Studies, considers the suitability of each booklet for the students in question.

For many years there has been a shortage of readily accessible critical notes for the general student of Scottish literature. *Scotnotes* has grown as a series to meet this need, and provides students with valuable aids to the understanding and appreciation of the key writers and major texts within the Scottish literary tradition.

Lorna Borrowman Smith
Ronald Renton

## NOTE ON REFERENCES

The page references are to Iain Crichton Smith: *Selected Poems* (SP) published by Carcanet in 1985 (paperback) and Iain Crichton Smith: *Collected Poems* (CP) published by Carcanet in 1992 (hardback).

### The Dedicated Spirits

The dedicated spirits grow
in winters of pervasive snow
their crocus armour.
Their perpendiculars of light
flash sheerly through the polar night
with missionary fire.

The red and sombre sun surveys
the footsteps of the ancestors
in the white ghostly snow:
from pasts without a season they
inhabit the imperfect day
our grieving spirits know.

About us the horizon bends
its orphan images, and winds
howl from the vacant north.
The mapless navigator goes
in search of the unscented rose
he grows in his heart's south.

Turning on the icy wheel
of image without substance, heal
us whatever spirit lies
in polar lightning. Let the ice
break, lest our paralysis
destroy our seeing eyes.

The faceless night holds dialogue
with us by the ancient rock.
The demons we abhor
dwell in the waste of mirrors we
choose to protect us from the fury
of the destructive fire.

O chosen spirits turning now
to your large skies the sun from snow
has swept at last,
let music from your rising wings
be heard in islands where we sing
to placate a lost ghost.

Iain Crichton Smith was born in Glasgow in 1928. Two years later, his parents, both of Highland origin, moved to the Isle of Lewis. His father died not long after this move and the family, three boys, was then raised by Mrs Smith in fairly Spartan conditions in the crofting township of Bayble. His formal education took place in the local primary school and then in the Nicholson Institute in Stornoway. After the Nicholson, he went to Aberdeen University from which he graduated in 1949 with an honours degree in English. In 1950 the family moved to Dumbarton. In the years immediately following, he qualified as a teacher of English and then did two years National Service before taking up posts first in Clydebank Academy and then, from 1955 to 1977, in Oban High School. In 1977 he retired from teaching to become a full-time writer. In the same year he married Donalda Logan and they spent their married life together in the village of Taynuilt in Argyll.

Crichton Smith travelled extensively, lecturing and giving poetry readings in Australia, Canada, Israel and Germany. He also visited, without literary commitments, many countries including Spain, Turkey and China. He was awarded honorary doctorates by the Universities of Glasgow, Dundee and Aberdeen and was for a time a visiting professor in the Universities of Dundee and Strathclyde. One of the major figures of 20th-century Scottish literature, he died in October 1998.

# THE DEDICATED SPIRITS: THE POET'S PURPOSE

Iain Crichton Smith's first collection of poems was published in 1955 by Malcolm MacDonald, Edinburgh. It was a slim paperback volume called *The Long River*. I want to begin this consideration of Crichton Smith's poetry by directing attention to the first poem in that collection (which is also the first poem in the *Collected Poems*, published by Carcanet in 1992) because in that tightly-packed poem are to be seen a surprising number of hints of things to come. Some of these hints will serve to start us on our study of the poetry.

In 'The Dedicated Spirits' (CP: 1) we read of spirits, souls, who survive in the darkness and chill of long polar nights. These spirits are pictured as crocus-like perpendiculars of light which burn with a missionary fire, a fire, that is, which may be thought to bring with it some form of truth or salvation. There is no attempt in the poem to say what that truth might be. There is only a plea that whatever spirit dwells in polar lightning should save us from a paralysis which would destroy our ability to see, to see clearly and truly. Similarly, there is no clear indication of what kind of salvation might be in mind, nor for that matter is there any specific reference to salvation in the poem, but there is mention of a journey towards an unscented rose and at the end of the poem the spirits rise with music in their wings towards a sky made clear by sunlight. This imagery would certainly seem to imply the idea of salvation which is inherent in the word 'missionary'.

At no point in the poem does Crichton Smith claim that he is to be counted among the dedicated spirits but the reader is left in little doubt that he regards himself as at least following in the way of these great souls – he respects them, he is on some kind of journey in the direction of the beauty which is part of their world, he wants to see clearly to the truth of things and he, like them, is singing, even if at the time of writing it is a lonely song in a barren land. So we are left with a fairly strong impression that Crichton Smith sees his role as a poet as being in some sense a 'missionary' one; he is there to seek out the truth of things and to bring some kind of salvation, some kind of help or comfort, to his readers or listeners.

Truth and comfort do not, of course, necessarily accompany each other. Crichton Smith is all too aware of this and that is why, in 'The Dedicated Spirits', we find mention of mirrors which



protect us from the 'fury/of the destructive fire.' What he means here is that when we look closely into the true nature of things we may find there a fire, that is a terrible truth about ourselves or about the world in which we live, which will be too much for us to bear and which will therefore destroy us. To protect ourselves from such fire, we place between it and ourselves mirrors which are arranged so as to distort and disguise the real nature of the fire and so preserve us from it. We invent, as he tells us in a later poem, such things as pictures, poems and music which act as screens, or mirrors, between us and the fire. But the poet, the truth-seeking poet, cannot indulge in mirrors. He cannot avoid direct confrontation with any fire he may find, whether it is the fire of the 'demons we abhor' or, as the last stanza of the poem seems to imply, the great fire of the sun, the bringer of light and beauty, which melted the wings of Icarus as he flew too close to it. So the poet without the protection of mirrors is at risk.

To reinforce what I have said about the missionary intention and the risks seen to be associated with it, let us look for a moment at two short extracts, a poem from the sequence 'Love Songs of a Puritan (B)', which is to be found in the collection *Thistles and Roses*[1] and a statement made by Crichton Smith during a series of conversations in 1977.[2]

First the poem. In this the truth-seeking role of the poet and the dangers attendant on it are the focus of attention.

> To stand so steady that the world is still
> and take your cold blue pen and write it down
> (all that you see) before the thought can kill
> and set on the living grass the heavy stone
> is what you're here for, though the trembling hand
> shake with the terror of that nothing which
> opens its large void mouth as if it yawned
> like a drunk man lying in a starless ditch.
>
> To hold quite steady while the helmet burns
> down to its slow white ash and lips turn sour
> and the eye like a yellow lamp stares down and
> mourns
> with abstract vision at the yellow flower
> is the true victory till the day turn kind
> and brighter weather fly about the mind.

Here the image of the destructive fire has been replaced by the image of the open grave and the great void into which it invites

the writer who must, however, if he is to remain faithful to his calling, 'hold quite steady' and keep on recording everything he sees. That he tells himself 'is what you're here for'. He must not let his keen awareness of death and nothingness terrify him and cause him to throw his work aside in despair.

One other remark may be worth making about this poem. The 'thought' in the third line is an abstract thought. What Crichton Smith is saying in this poem is that the poet's task is to record all that he sees, or, it could be said, all that he is aware of in his senses. His task is not to construct theories out of concepts and abstract thoughts in the way that philosophers or sociologists or economists, or, for that matter, politicians or preachers do. The poet has to stay close to actual experience and work with that – how things look, how people seem to feel, how he himself feels in their presence. So, in this poem he is afraid that he will not manage to record these living sensations before some abstract thoughts will come into his head and take his mind off what is there before it, the living grass. In the last six lines, the sestet, of this sonnet, it appears that abstract thoughts have indeed invaded his mind and caused it to turn sick. The helmet of his head burns down to a white ash and the lips turn sour and the eye becomes like a yellow lamp looking down on a yellow flower. Yellow is a colour used by Crichton Smith to signify sickness or mental ill-health. Here, it seems, the thoughts which have arisen in his mind on confronting the grave and the void have indeed killed off his ability to feel positively about life; all he can do is to stay steady, not to give way to fear, and to wait for better times. He is a poet at risk from his awareness of the grave and the strange, difficult thoughts which are occasioned by it.

What now of the other concern of the missionary poet – not truth but comfort? The kind of comfort Crichton Smith has in mind is the comfort derived from a sharing of experience, from human understanding and companionship. This is what Crichton Smith said in our 1977 conversations.

> Poetry should not be a game. One writes a poem because one feels deeply about something and somehow or another what you feel deeply about happens to coincide with what a number of other people feel deeply about. Poetry is not an affair of words. I mean you can be the most brilliant word-manipulator in the world and yet not be a poet because you have to have this feeling and people have to feel in themselves that what you're talking about is something that is meaningful and important to them. If it isn't then it's a failure. I always come back to that.[3]



So, to summarise, for Crichton Smith poetry, at least the best poetry, has something of a missionary function. It probes for the truth of things, however complex that truth may be, and it brings to its readers some kind of comfort, even if only the comfort of knowing that the poet is aware of and cares about what matters to the reader in question. In his probing the poet himself runs the risk of coming up against realities which are almost, or actually, too hard to accept. He puts his mind at risk, as do famous thinkers admired by Crichton Smith, like Freud and Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein. The poet, however, is different from these in that he does not work in abstract thoughts, concepts; he works close to the actual experiences of life, the sights and sounds and scents of life and all the inner feelings which are aroused by these.

One comment is needed though, before ending this preliminary survey of Crichton Smith's view of his role as a poet: missionary zeal does not necessarily exclude humour. It is true that the wild, absurd, humour which characterises some of the best of Crichton Smith's prose is not so much in evidence in his poetry. But it is there in places, even when the overall intent is anything but lighthearted, as, for example, in 'The White Air of March' (SP: 58; CP: 154). This to those who know the man is not surprising. Strange though it may seem to say at the end of this account of the seriousness with which Crichton Smith works as a poet, he can be one of the most comical of companions and a speaker of spontaneous wit and good humour. He has on several occasions referred to Walpole's dictum, "This world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel." (See SP: 58; CP 154). In Crichton Smith's work, comedy and tragedy are both to be found, sometimes very closely intertwined.

## NORTH AND SOUTH

'The Dedicated Spirits' may be seen as a poem in which Crichton Smith sets his course as a poet. In it there is also the first appearance of one of the most pervasive themes in his poetry, particularly in the earlier poetry. It may be called simply the theme of North and South.

Consider the poem again. It begins in the polar night and then moves south, a little, to a land still cold and northern. The images of this desolate country are 'orphan' ones and they are twisted out of shape by the horizon. And through this world howl the winds which come from a further and more vacant north. From this north the navigator goes in search of some rose, some living beauty, the nature of which he does not properly know, because he has never, in his north, met with it; it is as yet 'unscented'. But one thing he does know and that is that the rose will be found, if at all, growing in the south, the south for which he longs, 'his heart's south'.

Just how he will reach that south is not, however, clear, for he is 'mapless'. His northern world can provide him with no map, no guide, to help him reach the south. Moreover the journey, if we pay heed to the title of the collection, *The Long River*, is going to be a lengthy one, not across seas, but along a river, past the banks and all that happens thereon. And there is no mention of a destination. Who knows if there will be one? The day, remember, is imperfect; there may be no happy end to the journey, no sense of completion.

This contrast between a symbolic North which is characterised by darkness and chill and harshness and a South which is full of light and warmth and gentle beauty permeates the work of Crichton Smith, both the prose and the poetry. I think, therefore, that one of the best ways into the poetry is to focus upon this North/South symbolism to see how it appears in the early poems, what Crichton Smith seems to mean by it and what other ideas soon emerge alongside it. For this purpose I want to turn to another early poem, 'Some Days Were Running Legs' (CP: 2).

In this poem Crichton Smith recalls childhood experiences on the Isle of Lewis. In the first two stanzas, the images are those of joy and light and colour. The children, boys it appears, were happy, running around, going home in the red glow of the sunset, hearing the old men saying that the next day would be a fine one too. They look forward to their game of throwing stones at sticks. (Not, as one might suppose, sticks in the water or sticks set up in



a field but, in Crichton Smith's memory at least, telegraph poles. The game was to hit the little china cups on the cross-trees.) Then, at the start of the third stanza, a change takes place. The poem becomes more agitated. The images are of storm and stress and menace. Rain floods forever the green pasture, horses turn their backs into the wind (a sign of coming storm) and, in the sea, the toothed rocks are seen looming 'sharp and grey'. The sound of the language of the poem is roughening too; the letter 'r' is grating in the ear and the 't's are putting a stiffness in the lines.

And then comes the last climactic stanza. The people of the island cover their mirrors with shawls so that the lightning will not be attracted to them. (The reader might well suppose that the fear was that the shining glass of the mirror would somehow attract the lightning flash. But that was not the reason for the shawling. To the people of Lewis the mirror was an object associated with vanity. It was only prudent therefore, when God's wrath was rolling round the heavens in a thunderstorm, to cover the 'sinful glass'.) This lightning is linked in the poem to the speed of the eel, the eel which lives in the ocean. The island is, as it were, caught in this night of storm between the mighty forces of sea and sky. But suddenly the poem quietens. We move from night back into evening and there the squawking of the black rooks (erroneously printed as 'rocks' in CP) seems to be enveloped in and calmed by the gentle evening which flows back around their wings.

Now clearly we have here an opposition of North and South; the first two stanzas belong to the South and the latter two to the North. And at the end of the poem it is the South with its soothing power which prevails. But it is the black crows which most need our attention.

Why are they referred to as 'roman rooks'? It seems best simply to follow Crichton Smith's own explanation. The Romans, because of his own schooling, he associated with harshness and violence, and he remembered that the Romans had an eagle as their symbol. So, it seemed appropriate to add an edge of violence to the rooks by calling them 'roman rooks'. The small 'r'? A capital 'R' seemed to be overdoing it. Then, he added, the rooks came from the left because that to the Romans was the sinister side – the word *sinistra* in Latin was the word for the left hand, and that was the hand in which the dagger was hidden behind the back. And the word black? It applied to the rooks and, of course, to the Romans too with their black gowns, just like the flapping wings of the crows. This was the explanation. But, the reader may object, the Romans did not wear black gowns at all. Their togas were

white. How did the poet come to overlook this fact?

Crichton Smith's reply was significant. It had never occurred to him to picture the Romans in anything but black gowns. All gowns in his experience were black – the gowns of ministers and of teachers, both figures of authority and violence. The ministers preached hot hell-fire and the teachers wielded belts. So Romans came easily to mind, in black.

So our black crows, alias the black-gowned Romans, alias the black-gowned teachers and ministers of Lewis, emerge as significant figures in Crichton Smith's early life. Something more now needs to be said about and around them – not the crows, not the Romans, but the black gowns of the Lewis of Crichton Smith's experience.

In the essay 'Real People in a Real Place' Crichton Smith makes it clear that the ministers and teachers of his island were respected within a clearly defined moral and social context.[4]

In Gaelic there is a word *cliù* for which there is no ready English equivalent. It means something akin to good reputation. To be accorded reputation in Lewis, however, a person had firstly to believe in and act in accordance with the moral values of the community and secondly to have some skill which could make a contribution to the community. Now, since the skills which ministers and teachers had to offer were regarded as being very important to the community, these people, if they were good at their work and observed the customs of the community, were given great respect. Crichton Smith once told, for example, of how the boys in a school class had been belted by the headmaster for throwing snowballs at the minister's son, not because they had bullied the boy in any way, but simply because he was the minister's son (1977 Conversations).

The authority of the black gowns, then, carried the weight of the whole community. When the headmaster wielded the belt he was defending not just the minister's status in the community; he was, in effect, defending the whole moral and social framework of the community itself. So these black figures in Crichton Smith's young world were indeed impressive, and to be feared.

Yet the picture is still not complete, for intermingled with the moral and social values of the islanders was another potent element in island life, the particular form of Christian belief which held sway in the island. The influence of this belief on the mind of Crichton Smith is so pervasive that some knowledge of it seems essential to any adequate understanding of his work.

The two churches which dominated the religious life of Lewis



as Crichton Smith knew it as a boy were the Free Church of Scotland and the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. Both are Calvinistic churches. The Calvinist believes that human beings are the descendants of the sinful Adam and Eve and must, for that reason, be themselves by nature sinful, imbued with original sin. They are not, therefore, fit to enter Heaven. There is, moreover, nothing at all that they can do to redeem themselves and earn a place in Heaven because, since they, in their corrupt state, have no free will they cannot rid themselves of their sin. The only possible way for them to reach Heaven is for them to be granted entry by God, not for any good they have done in this life, but simply because God chooses to admit them, to place them among those elected to Heaven. The choice, the election, will, indeed, have been made outside of this time in which we live, for God, the all-knowing one, must have known from the beginning of time (if time indeed has any relevance in this context) who is and who is not to be saved. This part of Calvinist doctrine is known as predestination: individuals are predestined to be saved or not to be saved.

"To be saved from what?", one might well ask. The answer is stark and uncompromising – Hell. Those who are not among the elect will burn in Hell for ever, through all eternity. I well remember Crichton Smith telling, years ago, how his mother and her friends expected a minister to be able to make his congregation tremble and even collapse from their seats by picturing for them the horrors of Hell. Ministers who could not do this were scoffed at and dubbed "wooden ministers".

How many, then, might be expected to be saved from Hell and elected to Heaven? According to the Calvinist, few. The great mass of the human race is doomed to eternal fiery torment.

It should now, I think, be possible to appreciate the significance of the black crows flapping in from the left. They symbolise not only the frightening authority of the figures in black gowns; they carry with them the whole ethos of a community, and a stern reminder of what in the poem 'Going Home' (SP: 37; CP: 176) is called 'the great fire that is behind our thoughts'.

It should be possible too now to understand why Mrs Scott in *Consider the Lilies* has no interest in the names of birds and flowers.[5] She has, like her mother before her, other things in mind – the fear of Hell and the hope of finding in a text from the Bible or in a word or two in a sermon the voice of God telling her that she is among the saved, the elect. What do birds and flowers

matter in such circumstances? And what do mirrors matter, and poetry? Practical things matter: we have to sustain ourselves through this life which God has given us. But pretty things, or even beautiful things, are of no consequence at all really. And, of course, we should keep God's law. Even if so doing does not ensure that we shall gain Heaven, still we should keep it, for it is God's – and those who break it should not be forgiven; they should be punished.

The following brief anecdotes will, I think, at this point need no explanation.

One day Crichton Smith's mother found him making little wooden hens in an outhouse. She was puzzled and annoyed. She asked, "Why do you make wooden hens when the Lord has made real ones?" Another day, a generation earlier, one of his mother's brothers was found, when he was three years old, tipping some milk from a cup onto the stones at the front of the croft house. He wanted to see the white milk make splashes. His mother saw him and took him and put him in a creel and hung it over the peat fire. She told him that he would stay there until he had learned not to waste God's good gifts. The neighbours approved. (*A Writer's Journey*, Part 1, Section 1, 'The Divided Ground')

## THE LAW AND THE GRACE

In the previous section we saw some evidence of the North/South divide in Crichton Smith's work and we saw in particular that looming large in the North of his experience were the doctrines and figures of the Calvinistic churches of his native island. This puts us now in a position to understand one of the other major themes in the poetry, the theme of law and grace. The law, as one might expect, belongs to the North and the grace to the South. What I want to do in this section is to consider a few poems which, more than others, are about this theme. First, however, it seems best to offer some exposition of what Crichton Smith means by these terms, law and grace.

What grace appears to mean, in part, for Crichton Smith is that sense of inner harmony and beauty which can suddenly take possession of us for a moment or two. Such moments are always unpredictable. They may occur when we are looking at a work of art or listening to a piece of music or reading a poem. Or they may occur when we see a bird in flight or a deer in movement against a skyline. Suddenly, for example, when we are listening casually to a singer we realise that we are not just listening to a pleasant song; we are aware of a change in our feeling; our spirits soar, usually not for long, but they soar and we feel within us a strong sense of beauty and calm. We feel at peace with the world and with ourselves. That kind of feeling is what Crichton Smith called 'aesthetic grace' (*A Writer's Journey*, Part 1, Section 3, 'Grace'). He is careful to say that such moments of 'aesthetic grace' may not always be associated with things we usually think of as gracious or graceful. It may be a deer which occasions the feeling, but it may also be a footballer in his fluent skill with the ball.

Besides 'aesthetic grace' Crichton Smith spoke of another kind of grace, what he called 'theological grace'. In fact it might be just as well to think of this kind of grace as simply 'human grace'. This differs, as he described it, from 'aesthetic grace' in that it involves not just a feeling of inner harmony within oneself but also an upsurge of well-wishing towards another living thing. In such a moment, one involuntarily extends a kind of blessing to another – which is probably why Crichton Smith used the term theological when describing this kind of grace. This is exactly what he is writing about in 'Two Girls Singing' (SP: 19; CP: 48).

In contrast to such grace, 'aesthetic' or 'human', there is what Crichton Smith calls 'the law'. By this he means any set of rules, regulations, precepts or standards which governs how people feel

and how they behave. 'Law' tells us how to write a piece of music according to the rules laid down for writing that particular kind of music; 'law' tells us how to behave. 'Law' may even insist on how we should think. 'Law' is predictable and orderly, and sets around us stone walls. It is a restrictive force impinging on the individual and his inborn spontaneity. Law can, of course, enable us to tame the confusion and the conflict which surrounds us and which is in our own minds too. It can, therefore, make life secure for us. But that does not alter the fact that it is a restrictive force and, if we pay too much heed to it, then things may go terribly wrong with us.

No attempt has been made in the foregoing to distinguish between types of law which may be harmful and types which may be beneficial. As one would expect, the type which Crichton Smith usually has in mind is the law of the Calvinist and that is what he objects to in the poem 'The Law and the Grace' (SP: 21; CP: 54).

'The Law and the Grace' is a difficult poem. Its language is, by Crichton Smith's standards, unusually abstract. We find 'angels', 'black devils', a 'stone', 'patriarchs' mentioned, but none of these amounts to a precise and effective image. They function more as rather generalised and sweeping metaphors than as images which we can picture and to which we can respond. And the rest of the language of the poem is abstract too: 'law', 'grace', 'hypocrisy', 'blasphemy', 'falsehood', 'free', 'perfect', 'design', 'imperfect', 'insufficiency'... What gives this poem its force is not imagery but the rhetorical vigour with which the poet addresses the patriarchs.

What then is the argument of the poem?

> It's the law they ask of me and not grace.

The 'they' are the patriarchs of the last line – one may presume them to be the officers of Calvinism, the ministers and elders and teachers in the community. They demand that he, the writer, should conform to their laws and so be what they think he ought to be, even if it would be hypocritical of him to be so. They 'know no angels'. They are, that is, unaware of the fact that people can, in their moments of human grace, be like 'angels', metaphoric angels perhaps, but 'angels' nonetheless. The force of the demand that the writer should conform to the ways of the patriarchs is increased by the allusion to religious persecution and torture. The patriarchs, the upholders of the law, will resort to torture to force him to follow their ways, their laws. At this point the poem needs to be carefully watched, for the tone becomes momentarily



sarcastic and the meanings of key words in it begin to shift backwards and forwards between the two sides of the conflict. The 'grace' which is to be brought to a malignant head is grace as understood, or rather misunderstood, by the patriarchs. It is a perverted, false grace. And the 'angels' who wish him to be wholly dead (devoid of spirit) and who wish to stand beside the stone they set on him, the gravestone, are to be thought of as agents of suppression. These angels may be either the stone angels one sees on gravestones or the supposed angels of the church, in truth the black devils. These angels-cum-devils seem to be moved by some force within themselves to war against life, against beauty, vitality, human emotion. They want to drive life out of the living. (The image of the stone is used here, and elsewhere, by Crichton Smith to signify a heavy dead weight upon the human heart.) The poem ends on a defiant note. He, the poet, has his own true angels. These true angels restrict and suppress no-one. They are for him beings – either vaguely imagined or else imagined as particular 'dedicated spirits' he has known or read about – who set for him the standards of truth and the examples of human feeling to which he aspires. These angels sometimes leave him, seem to desert him, but when they come to his mind, he is humbled and made incapable of speech by their judgement of him – in fact his judgement of himself in comparison with them. This, he suggests, is surely enough to ask of anyone. The patriarchs should leave him to be ruled by these finer laws of his own and not try to impose their law upon him.

'The Law and the Grace' is a very intense, cerebral, poem but one which can hardly be ignored by anyone intent on understanding one of the major themes in Crichton Smith's writing.

Another poem which is specifically on the theme of the law and the grace is 'Contrasts' (CP: 138). In this poem images drawn from the free, spontaneous world of nature are set against objects which define the life of the person who is locked into the kind of law Crichton Smith identifies with the churches he knew. So, in this stylish little poem written in triplets with rhyme and half-rhyme echoing all the way, we find the dainty deer stepping out in a wide open world of mosses and moorlands set against the black clothes of the churchgoer. Then we find the changing, moving seas set in contrast to the churchgoer's psalms and to the salty rows of mussels which are fixed in place. In this image of the mussels there is, it seems, a suggestion of a similarity between the mussels and churchgoers, both being fixed in place, both being salty. And that suggestion is reinforced by the reference to the

mussels as slums. Psalms and slums are linked in terms of sound. After this, in the third stanza, we have a high plateau set against the Bible and the poet himself viewing from that plateau all the people down below moving about in 'kingdoms' which to him seem random, there for no particular reason, just there in all their variety. In all these stanzas the poet himself sets the images of grace and freedom – the deer, the sea, the random kingdoms – against the images of law. He counters the images of law with those of grace. He continues to do the same in the last two stanzas. Against the law-enforcing will of the churchgoer he sets the sound of water rushing over 'lucid stones'. The stones here are not grey and heavy. They are clear, clean, washed by the water and in this there is the suggestion that the stones are clear minded, lucid, in contrast to the thinking of the churchgoer. The sound of the salmon bubbling in the sunlight is another image of freedom and joy. Finally, against his antagonist's preoccupation with death, the poet sets the huge might of the incoming tide which knows nothing of sin and which is full instead of rich sea-life which flourishes under the moon, the mover of tides. The final contrast can now be seen. The poem has moved from the 'black' of the opening line to the light of the 'rising moon' in the last line. All the way through the poem the images of 'law' have been countered by images of 'grace' and, at the end, we have been moved firmly from the dark into the light, from the 'law' into the 'grace'.

This movement from 'law' to 'grace' occurs again and again in Crichton Smith's work. Probably the most obvious and substantial instance of it is in *Consider the Lilies*. In that novel, Mrs Scott is forced to leave her home during the Sutherland Clearances. This causes her great distress, but it also results in her meeting with experiences which lead her to question her own black ways. By the end of the novel the terrible memory of her mother shrieking madly in the moonlight by the lochside for fear of Hell has lost its power over her and she has begun to change from being a cramped and cramping creature of the 'law' into a woman who notices and responds to simple, beautiful things in human life – children and fairy stories, delicate wallpaper, the quiet light of evening. She has found too the friendship of Donald Macleod and his family and in MacLeod himself she has found a man who understands and sympathises with people rather than judges them. MacLeod is implacable in his resistance to Patrick Sellar and to his superiors, the people who drove the Highlanders out of their glens to make way for sheep. And he drives off the pompous and self-centred minister who wishes to claim Mrs Scott as one of



his flock. But to ordinary, misguided and imperfect people he is kind and thoughtful. He does not rage when he finds that Mrs Scott has been prying into his letters. He understands why she would wish to do so. So, Mrs Scott has moved, or at least begun to move, away from the symbolic North and its 'law' into the South and into 'grace', both 'aesthetic grace' in her appreciation of the small beauties around her and 'human grace' in her newly found feelings for Donald MacLeod and his children. She has begun to consider the lilies.

A woman very like Mrs Scott is to be found in the poem 'Old Woman' (Your thorned back... SP: 18; CP: 47). This woman is not, however, shown as growing towards grace. In the first four stanzas of the poem she is set in various contexts. First, as she carried a creel on her back. The creel may be thought of as full of peats, the common cargo for the women to carry. The heavy creel would drive its rough basketwork into her back, her 'thorned back'. As she walked she had no regard at all for the spring daffodils. If they were in her way, she stamped them down. Then, in the second stanza,* we may picture her in church, another of the limited range of contexts she will experience during her cramped life. Here, she feels no sense of forgiveness for anyone. Indeed, she resents the fact that God forgives. God has no business to encompass people in His grace and so to forgive them. He ought to keep to the laws He has made and punish those who break them. Here, the woman's obsession with law rather than grace is leading her into confrontation with God Himself. She is, as it were, presuming to tell Him how He should behave. Next, we see her as she was at home watching her drunken husband returning from drinking, presumably in a bar. She thought of the bar as being utterly evil, a place where men are evil and she classed it with Sodom, the city said to be destroyed by God because of the evil, the homosexuality, of the men therein. She made, notice, no distinction here between degrees of evil. To a mind like hers, drinking in a bar is evil and there is no point in

* It is interesting to notice that this stanza is in the present tense whereas all the others in this part of the poem are in the past tense. As the writer addresses the woman, he places the daffodil and the husband and the cradles all in the past, but the set mouth seems still to be there before his gaze. It is as if he gave up recalling her past for a moment and looked at her with that mouth in the present as he makes the poem. He will return to looking at her in the last four stanzas of the poem.

trying to decide how evil it is. That is why she could recklessly associate the bar with the infamous Sodom. Finally, the cradles. Her hands, grained and roughened by work, rocked the cradles in which her children lay. But there is no suggestion in the poem that the children, her own babies, were loved by her. Instead the word 'sinful' brings a sense of dread to this part of the poem. What she saw in the cradle was a baby full of sin, original sin. It was bad like the rest of us. It would, unless it happened to be one of the few elect, go to Hell when its life was over and burn there for eternity. As the children from these cradles grew, she surrounded them with 'stone walls', laws to be obeyed, not to save them from perdition but just because she thought laws, God's laws, should be obeyed. We are not here to bargain with God, she would reason, only to obey and hope.

After these four opening stanzas, comes the pivotal fifth stanza. The woman has had a hard life – her back thorned, her hands grained. But the poet does not pity her. Instead, in this stanza, he follows rather the implications of the set mouth and the cold eyes by employing a strange image to signify the sickness of her mind. She is pictured as a woman with yellow hair (the colour, remember, which Crichton Smith uses to suggest sickness of the mind) and that hair is enclosed in a scarf of grey, the colour of dull lifelessness. Within that scarf, the hair burns slowly. Hair which burns slowly suggests not vitality but a head which is unhealthily heated. Is there a hint here of brimstone in her mind? Then, to complete the image, the hair is said to fall wildly 'like the mountain spray'. The wildness implies that the hair is unkempt, the mind distraught. So, this stanza amounts to a comment on the unhealthy nature of the life the old woman has lived. And yet, the reader may sense some sympathy for the woman in it. The yellow might have been fair and the burning might have been shining and the mountain spray might have been dancing, not falling. All might have been, but the fact is the woman's life has gone wrong; what might have been never was, not for her. Crichton Smith himself, however, intended no hint of sympathy. He said, when queried about this verse, 'No, I had no sympathy for this woman at all. She is all law and no grace' (1977 Conversations).

And so to the last stanzas of the poem. In these the woman is pictured, now in the present tense, in her home 'among the unforgiving brass', the brass ornaments which relentlessly demand attention, which never excuse the one who has to polish them and which, therefore, subject her to the same kind of uncompromising demands as she imposes on others. Beside her too, is the 'sinful glass', the mirror which reflects vanity. In her room she lives, silent and lonely, never having acquired the grace to forgive mankind on its way to the grave. Outside, the 'daffodils', symbols of Spring and the 'deer', symbols of grace and passion, flourish and the sound of the sea in which her brothers drowned now drowns the squawking of the 'peevish crow'. The image of the crow returns, this time not to be enveloped in the peace of the evening but to be drowned by the music of the sea, *ceol na mara*.

'Old Woman' is one of Crichton Smith's best known poems. It is also one which has in it some of the most frequently recurring characteristics of his manner of writing poetry. So, before moving on to discuss other poems and other themes, I want to take a moment or two to draw attention to the stylistic features to be seen in the poem.

*Recording of detail* The poem is a reflection on the nature of the old woman and the kind of life she has led and still leads. Item by item details of the woman's past are recorded and then item by item details of the world outside of her room are recorded. Crichton Smith is following here in one of the traditions of Gaelic poetry – the recording in precise detail of the salient features of the object in view.

*Tone* The tone, however, is cooler, more calmly reflective than is to be found in many of the descriptive poems in traditional Gaelic literature and the tightness of the control over the language is exceptional. The language is not exuberant or passionate; there are no casual adjectives or intrusive conjunctions. Every word and every phrase, one feels, is scrutinised, trimmed to fit exactly into place. There is a puritanical quality in this writing: we are in search of the truth about the woman; there is no place, therefore, for slackness or for anything that is merely decorative. This is in accord with what Crichton Smith writes in a poem collected for the first time in the Carcanet *Collected Poems*. In 'Art' (CP: 353) are these lines.

> Those who don't know what they do
> embroider most brightly
>
> the constant invisible churches
> where the music's most sweet.

*Imagery* Lack of embroidery, however, is not to be confused with lack of imagery. Indeed it is precisely the combination of the

sparse, 'puritanical' tone with a profusion of images that seems to me to be one of the most obvious features of Crichton Smith's style. These images often move through the poetry in opposing clusters. In 'Old Woman', for example, we find on one hand the 'thorned back', 'set mouth', 'cold eyes', 'grained hands', 'sinful cradles', 'stone walls', 'yellow hair', 'scarf of grey', 'unforgiving brass', 'sinful glass', the 'grave' and 'the peevish crow', all images of the North. On the other hand we have the 'rising daffodil', 'the free daffodils' waving in the valleys, 'the deer', and 'the huge sea' (SP has 'seas') which sings over the headland, all images of the South.

*Structure.* The poem is arranged in triplets, stanzas of three lines. The overall structure, however, is not simply a matter of triplet after triplet from first to last. There is a difference between the first part of the poem and the latter part. The first five stanzas spell out, in a straight-up, rather static way the various aspects of the woman's life and appearance and then, after the word 'Finally', the poem flows on with the effect of one sentence right to the end. It is as if, once the woman has been described, judgement is passed on her in one steady, continuous movement of the mind. (The presence of the full stop, in all editions, after the word glass is puzzling; there is no grammatical reason for a full stop there, though the stop does create an impression of the poet pausing to set the woman clearly in view before he proceeds to make the final comment about her.)

Within this overall structure other structures can be seen. The first line in each of the stanzas is short. It consists essentially of a noun preceded by an adjective (or adverb), except in the case of the sixth stanza which introduces the final flow of the poem. The effect of this is to set before the reader a stark catalogue of the woman's physical attributes and their implications and then, at the end, to set against these, equally obviously, the images of the free world beyond her. If these first lines are abstracted from the poem, then the movement and direction of the poem becomes clear: 'Your thorned back', 'Your set mouth', 'Your cold eyes', 'Your grained hands', 'Your yellow hair' and then 'Finally you're alone', 'who never learned', 'the free daffodils', 'the huge sea'...

*Rhyme and Rhythm* The second and third lines of each stanza rhyme, or half rhyme and, in several of the last lines in the stanzas, predominantly iambic rhythms are to be found. Most of the first lines, those short ones just remarked on, consist, rhythmically, of an unstressed syllable followed by two stressed syllables.



What we have then in 'Old Woman' is a piece of verse which lies somewhere between free verse and traditionally structured verse. It is arranged in triplets, but these are not identically structured; the second and third lines of each stanza do rhyme, but the rhyme is not always full rhyme; there are patterns of rhythm in the first and last lines, but these are not quite regular and generally the poem feels more like fluent free verse than like structured verse. Many of Crichton Smith's poems are written in this way.

This said, there are still two other features common to Crichton Smith's poetry which it seems best to remark on here.

*Allusion* The poetry can at times be quite highly allusive. The allusions may be to English literature – incidents in *Robinson Crusoe* or in Shakespearian plays for example. Often they are to Gaelic literature or to parts of the Bible. In 'Old Woman' there are two allusions, one to the Biblical story about the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah and the other, in the last stanza of the poem, to the Gaelic expression *ceol na mara,* the music of the sea.

*Apostrophe* In 'Old Woman' the poet apostrophises the woman, that is he addresses her in her absence, or at least without her knowing that she is being addressed. One might say that he is virtually soliloquising about her as he observes her and recalls her past life.

The discussion of 'Old Woman' has been a lengthy one, but one which, I hope, will have left the reader not only with a fairly clear understanding of what the poem is about but also with some appreciation of the manner in which Crichton Smith writes his poetry. I want to end this section now with a much shorter discussion of another poem, this time one which exemplifies not 'law' but 'grace'. The poem is 'Two Girls Singing' (SP: 19; CP: 48).

In this short, fluent poem, we are told how two girls sang together for miles and miles of a bus journey through one dark November night. The song they sang was of no particular interest to the writer of the poem and they were not singing it to please him, or anyone else. They were singing like nightingales up in the rocks or a child when it awakes or like larks in the sky, singing that is only to please themselves. Yet in the dark bus with its unpleasant yellow lighting, their singing greatly moved the poet because it conveyed to him, suddenly, a feeling of human warmth and happiness, an unpredictable moment of grace.

The reader can feel in this poem some of the features we discussed when dealing with the previous poem. We see the same precise, economical style and the familiar images of light and darkness, health and sickness. This poem, too, is managed in triplets which have no regular metre. There is no rhyme in the strict sense of the word, but the use at the ends of lines of words terminating in 'ing' gives some effect of rhyme. There is some alliteration, but it is the repetition of full words rather than their alliterated beginning which chiefly creates the echo in this poem.

'Two Girls Singing' is a short poem, yet it is one of Crichton Smith's best known, perhaps just because it is short and easily comprehended. There is, however, a danger that its shortness and relative simplicity may lead a reader to miss the force of what is being said. To counter that let me offer a little background to the poem.

There was a time when Crichton Smith travelled regularly from Oban to Dumbarton to visit his mother. He travelled in a bus which left Oban in the late afternoon and which had virtually no heating in it, only an old blower fan at the front of the bus. The lighting was drab, chilling, and the atmosphere full of smoke. From Crianlarich to Tarbert, the bus lurched from side to side down the road by Loch Lomond. Then, it crossed to Arrochar and added to its swaying a wretched up and down movement as it went along 'the switchback' down the side of Loch Long to Helensburgh. That was where the trouble usually came. People went to the door at the front of the bus for air and sometimes vomit spattered the side windows. This is how Crichton Smith remembered it.

> One night I was on the bus. It was a very dreary journey and it was very cold and it was very dark. Then suddenly, at the back of the bus two girls started singing a song. It was sort of unpredictable: I hadn't expected that anyone would sing on that bus – and, it was so moving, and human. And this yellow. I always associate yellow with the yellow street lights in cities, these harsh yellow street lights shining down on the streets. The yellow to me seems to be something mechanical and hostile – and then there was the harmony of these girls and the fact that suddenly out of the bus, for no reason at all, almost like birds. It doesn't matter what they were singing in that bus... the unpredicted voices of our kind (*A Writer's Journey*, Part 1, Section 3, 'Grace').



This is a poem not about 'aesthetic grace'; it did not matter what the girls were singing. (It was, in fact, some pop song of the time, the late fifties.) The poem is about the other kind of grace mentioned earlier in this section, human grace. These girls, without knowing it, greatly moved him simply because they sang in that wretched bus and he felt within himself a sudden sense of harmony and of good-will, or blessing, towards them, these 'voices of our kind.'

> and it wasn't the words or the tune. It was the
>     singing.
> It was the human sweetness in that yellow,
> the unpredicted voices of our kind.

## ISOLATION

So far this discussion has been conducted within the framework of the opposition which is found in Crichton Smith's poetry between the North and the South, the Law and the Grace. That opposition is most obvious in the earlier poetry, but it permeates the later poetry too as images of light and life clash with those of darkness and death. Now, however, it is time to turn to two other main themes in the poetry. Both are themes which belong to the metaphorical North, both dark themes – isolation and death.

The most pervasive theme in Crichton Smith's poetry is that of isolation. It appears in many forms and it is to be found throughout the collections. Isolation is, too, implied in the titles of some of his best-known collections: *Hamlet in Autumn*, *Orpheus and Other Poems*, *The Notebooks of Robinson Crusoe and Other Poems*, *The Permanent Island*, *The Exiles*.

The earliest and simplest poems which embody this theme are those about lonely women, spinsters, widows, and old women. Sometimes these women are presented as decent, 'ordinary' people for whom life has been difficult. Sometimes, more often, they are shown as women whose loneliness is essentially a sexual loneliness and who have within themselves a turmoil of repressed feelings. One of the most outstanding examples of this repressed type of woman is to be found in the short story 'The Blot' which was first published in *The Village*.[6] Another is in the poem about Miss Twiss in 'Transparencies' (CP: 100). Old women who are lonely are, unlike Miss Twiss and the angry schoolmistress of 'The Blot', usually viewed with compassion but since more will be said of these old women later we will pass them by meantime.

In these poems loneliness is largely seen as something external to the poet himself. He views other people's loneliness and reflects on it. There is, however, a much deeper sense of loneliness, perhaps better called a sense of isolation, to be found in other poems about exile, intellectual isolation and guilt.

*Exile*

In *Towards the Human*, Crichton Smith reflects in 'Real People in a Real Place' on the subject of exile. The gist of what he says seems to me to be that separation from one's native land, whether by choice or by compulsion, is a deep and disturbing experience. But more important than the isolation from the land is the isolation from the community which lives in that land.



> It was because of the community that the fact of exile became so desolating and so frightening. For to become an exile is to become an individual on one's own in a world in which there is no community. It is not leaving the island or the village that is the terrible thing, it is leaving the community (*Towards the Human*, 23).

Once separated, there is no way back, for he who returns will find that the community he left behind has changed in his absence. The same point is made in the poem 'No Return' (SP: 110; CP: 232).

> No, really you can't go back to
> that island any more. The people
> are growing more and more unlike you ...
>
> No, you cannot return to an island
> expecting that the dances will be unchanged,
> that the currency won't have altered,
> that the mountains blue in the evening
> will always remain so.

The exile, at least the exile from tight-knit communities like those on the Isle of Lewis, carries with him a sense of guilt, for he feels that he has deserted his people, the people of whom he was an integral part. The exile is, too, a 'double' man. Part of him will remain in the land he left and part of him will be seeking to be a new man in a new landscape.

In all this there is a deep sense of isolation. Even if the exile leaves his community in the company of others from that community, he is still alone, in a kind of collective loneliness. Moreover, since he cannot return, the loneliness is very final. He is alone in his guilt; guilt is by its very nature a lonely thing. And he is alone in his new country, divided within himself and having to find a way in a new country.

This, it seems to me, is what Crichton Smith says about exile when he reflects on it, in 'Real People in a Real Place'. In the poetry, as one might expect, the matter is not reflected on in such a systematic way. Instead the mind moves round and round the subject, weaving poems on the way. So, in 'No Return' the exile is told there is no way back for him but in 'Returning Exile' (You who come home do not tell me, CP: 226) he does return, in a strange light, and is asked to say nothing of his travels but just to return quietly, knowing he is loved.

Do not tell me where you have come from, beloved
stranger.
It is enough that there is light still in your eyes,
that the dog rising on his pillar of black knows you.

In another poem, 'There is no Sorrow' (CP: 226), the exile wakes up one morning to find that he is truly at home in his new country.

There are some memorable lines in these poems but the most frequently anthologised of the exile poems is 'The Exiles' (SP: 108; CP: 228), a poem which has been translated into English from the poet's own Gaelic poem *Na H-Eilthirich*.

The poem begins by recalling the many ships that left 'our country', the Highlands of Scotland. This opening is reminiscent of the poignant moments in *Consider the Lilies* when Mrs Scott sees her son board the ship for Canada and when she begins the singing of the 'Old Hundredth' psalm which is taken up by those on board the ship and links those departing from the community to those left behind. In the poem, however, the ship has 'white wings'. Perhaps these express, not without irony, the hope felt by the emigrants for a better life in Canada. But in the memories of those left behind, the sails are not like white wings but rather like the handkerchiefs waved tearfully in farewell. The sailors, though, were like 'birds on branches'; they felt no grief. So the emigrants, it seems, were hopeful and the sailors happy. Only those left on the shore wept salt tears.

Once the ship is out at sea, there is a change. In the month of May, that happy, hopeful month, the blue sea runs past the ship. The sun of the day is, nevertheless, only mentioned in passing. It is the moon of night which grows big in the poem. It is that moon, and not the sun of daytime, which brings into the minds of the emigrants the homeland which is being left further and further behind. In the daytime, there would be the sights of life aboard ship to occupy the minds of the travellers and the sight of the wide open sea to remind them of the strange new world they were in, but at night a sense of familiarity would surround them. The deep of the night and the moon and stars would seem strangely like home to them, the same moon and the same stars as over Lewis or Strathnaver or Strath Halladale. So at the halfway point in the poem, the daylight has gone and the focus of attention is on the emigrants themselves, encapsulated in the night at sea. Their feelings are conveyed in the imagery which follows.

First, they feel the moon as if it were something homely,



something comfortingly familiar like a yellow fruit, a grapefruit perhaps or a lemon, because it is 'like a plate on a wall', a round, near-circular thing. The plate also creates an impression of the homely, the familiar. But then the plate is in turn likened to a silver magnet, a beautiful, magic thing, high up in the sky. The emigrants reach up towards it; they lift their hands to it, as if to pray to it and to grasp it. They are reaching for this moon which sends its beautiful piercing rays 'streaming into the heart', rays which bring to the exiles both the beauty of the moon and a sense of the familiar homeland they are leaving.

Yet, if we remember that the homeland they have left will already have begun to change in their absence, then we realise that the exiles are reaching out here for something which is already an illusion. And does the cold silver moon have any notion at all of its own beauty? What are the exiles reaching for? Nothing which can respond to them; neither moon nor homeland is what they think it to be. One begins to notice that sinister word, yellow. The last two lines of the poem would seem to invite us to sympathise with the intense human feeling of the exiles and yet what is the object of all that intense feeling – an illusion?

'The Exiles' is a very intense and, I think, complex poem. As so often in Crichton Smith's writing, there is a sense of contradiction and ambivalence. The word 'nevertheless' repeatedly comes to mind. This is so and that is so, nevertheless .... The opposite, the contradictory, is waiting in the wings.

The exiles we have considered so far have been exiles in the normally accepted sense of the word, what might be called geographical exiles. But there are other exiles in Crichton Smith's work, people who, though remaining in or close to their native land and community, have detached themselves from the values of that community. These might be referred to as cultural exiles.

One of the clearest presentations of the cultural exile is in the short story 'The Wedding' in *The Black and the Red*.[7] There the emptiness and uneasiness of young Highland people who have adopted the culture of the Ford motor car and the Barclaycard and the lounge suit is contrasted with the easy, masterful singing of the father when he leads them back to their roots with his performance of Gaelic songs known to them all. The culture represented by the father here is not exhibited as an ideal one. He was embarrassingly inept in making his wedding speech, speaking of the sea-worthiness of the boat that brought them from the island to the wedding and telling bluntly and factually what his daughter was good at and what she was not good at on the croft.

And, when he had seen the young people dancing, he said what in civilised society today would be regarded as intolerable: 'The people in there aren't like human beings at all. They're like Africans'. The father's cultural roots were not without their limitations. And the culture of the Ford and the Barclaycard is not, for that matter, condemned in this story. What is said is that people who detach themselves wholly from their roots will become hollow, shallow people, trying to be at ease in a world which is not really theirs. They have isolated themselves from their community and its culture.

The same theme of cultural exile runs through the long satire 'The White Air of March' (SP: 58; CP: 154). In this poem, which is full of ironies and of half-comic/half-serious echoes of T.S. Eliot's poem 'The Waste Land', the exiles are depicted as people who have not only detached themselves from their culture but who have committed themselves to false culture. In section four of 'The White Air of March', for example, a lady who has written 'little songs' and a small book on the viola, wishes to be introduced to the 'light's centre' where the 'real people are'. The tone of the poem reveals that there is no light in the centre and that the people are anything but real and that the lady is trivial and unrealistic.

A shorter poem on this matter of cultural exile is 'The TV' (SP: 63; CP: 199). Like 'The White Air of March', it is a highly allusive poem and, for that reason, one which may not be easily accessible to all readers. The nature of the exile is too, in this case, more complicated because there are at least three discernible cultures from which the TV addict is shown to be exiled: Gaelic culture, the culture of everyday intelligent people in 'modern society' and the high culture of literature.

The poem moves in short, three line stanzas, in nearly all of which the expression 'the TV' is prominent. The person or persons in each stanza vary – sometimes an undefined 'he', sometimes a 'we', sometimes apparently the writer himself. All are, however, in some way subject to 'the TV'. In the first, second and seventh stanzas, the person concerned is distanced, isolated, from a real and important thing – the sun, Ireland, Tolstoy's famous novel *War and Peace* – because that thing is known only through 'the TV'. Stanzas six, eight and nine go further: without 'the TV' the real world is not merely distanced from us but altogether lost to us, since we know it only on 'the TV'. The 'Berkeley' of stanza six, it may be remarked in passing, was an eighteenth-century philosopher who said the world was to be understood as just an idea in the mind of God. In the poem, he is imagined as saying it was nothing more than a picture on 'the TV'. This is to make the point, in a wild and absurd way, that 'the TV' has become a kind of God, has, indeed, usurped the place of God in the mind of man. Following, then, the idea in these stanzas that 'the TV' has caused us to lose our contact with the real world, there come stanzas ten and eleven. In ten, a contrast is made between what is in the world, the rose in the bowl, and what is not, the images seen on 'the TV'. There are echoes here of the language of the Bible and the pulpit – 'the things that are in the world, / the things that are not.' Again the implication is that 'the TV' is usurping the place of things holy: 'things that are not' in this world are usually, when spoken of in such language, taken to be the things of God and Heaven. In stanza eleven the clear contrast made in the previous stanza is at once unmade. The 'he' of this stanza does not know where he is, in the story on TV or in his own room.



So far, then, we have been able to trace a kind of progression through this poem. First there were the stanzas saying that 'the TV' distances people from the real world. Then emerging through these were the stanzas saying that 'the TV' causes us to lose the world altogether. Then a distinction between the world of 'the TV' and the real world was made, and then it was destroyed in confusion. But what of all the other stanzas which have not yet been mentioned? How do they fit into the poem?

The answer is, I think, that they occur in a more or less random way, making various 'points' along the route. 'The TV' is not in the form of a developed argument; it is more of an off-the-cuff series of observations, about the effects of 'the TV' on us, the dwellers in twentieth-century western culture. Throughout, the tone is predominantly sarcastic and absurdity abounds and 'the TV' is presented as something of a false god with whom 'we' are obsessed and in whose grasp we are hopelessly imprisoned.

What then are the various points made in these remaining stanzas? The Plato of stanza four was a philosopher in ancient Greece who wrote of how people could not bear to know, or could not be trusted with the knowledge of, the true nature of things and so had to be shown only shadows of reality on the walls of a cave. Here the cave and 'the TV' are seen by Crichton Smith as being the same in that both imprison people and convey illusions to them. The girl in stanza five is an image on 'the TV' and so lacks real life; she has neither any scent nor any truly human look on her face. Then in stanza three, someone, presumably in a Gaelic community, knows more about Humphrey Bogart than he knows about 'Big Norman'. 'Big Norman' would be a man well-

known locally. The word *mòr*, big, is often applied to people in Gaelic communities and it carries with it a sense of familiarity and possibly affection. The fact that the 'he' knows more about Bogart than about 'Big Norman' may be taken to indicate that 'the TV' has disrupted the well-established and properly human values of the community.

This same theme of the disruption, and destruction, of that which is good within a culture, appears again in the last two stanzas, only in these it is more powerfully expressed, so that these last stanzas do have the effect of a climax to the poem. 'You my love are dearer to me' is a line from the well-known Gaelic song ('A Ribhinn Og Bheil Cuimhn' Agad?' / 'Young Maid Do You Remember?') which deals with a sailor separated from his love.

> You my love are dearer to me
> than my mother who reared me when I was young.
>
> 'S tu a ghràidh as fheàrr leam
> Na mo mhàthair dh'àraich òg mi.

Crichton Smith, in the 1977 conversations, declared this to be one of the most intense expressions of love which a man could possibly make. To replace the mother figure, implied in the allusion by a TV crime serial and a sports programme suggests, therefore, a terrible loss of values. And the fact that the loss is expressed by means of the allusion to the powerful Gaelic song implies also a loss of the sense of depth and beauty which was felt in the Gaelic world to which that song belonged. Absurdity, sarcasm, and a deep sense of a double loss are all present in this small triplet.

It is, however, in the last stanza that the most forceful blow is struck. The line 'In locked rooms with iron gates' comes from a beautiful love song often associated with and sometimes attributed to the eighteenth-century Gaelic poet William Ross. It is a very powerful expression of love and one greatly admired by Crichton Smith.

In it, the rejected suitor wishes that he could be alone for many years with his love

> In locked rooms with iron gates
> And the keys lost and a blind man looking for them.
>
> An seòmraichean glaiste is geataichean iarainn,
> Na h-iuchraichean air chall agus dall bhith 'gan iarraidh.



To ask in the heart of this passion if there will be a TV set in the room would be to destroy utterly the passion and the asker would be someone lost, wholly isolated from the depth of feeling of which Ross and those who know the power of the song are capable.

'The TV', then, far from being the simple little series of quips that it might at first appear to be, is a complex satire about the condition of ourselves and the society within which we live, the society of 'the TV'. To Crichton Smith, community and culture matter a great deal and to be without them is to be truly lost, isolated in the bewildering and often tawdry world of the present.

A much more lyrical poem on the same theme is 'Gaelic Songs' (SP: 79; CP: 124). This poem is not about a person who has been detached from, or detached himself from, his culture; it is about the isolation felt by one who sees his culture being translated into something other than itself and so lost. Gaelic songs sound right and feel right in the world in which they were made, the world of heather and stone, steady sailors, milkmaids, dogs, stars and 'the sea's terrible force'. They do not sound right in a city studio, a radio or television studio. And if they are changed in that studio from their original forms (in which they were true mirrors of the life of the people) into more sophisticated forms (in which they are like polished crystal) then they are indeed lost. And they are lost, the last image in the poem suggests, in a fierce world quite unlike the world of the original songs. In this new world, the songs, the crystal songs, are not allowed time to be appreciated in the way the original songs were allowed time in, for example, the ceilidh house. The new songs are crowded out by the programmes on either side of them.

Exile, then, whether geographical or cultural, is one of the most prominent themes in Crichton Smith's poetry. Along with it goes another theme about which only a little can be said here – the part played by language in a culture or community.

In his essay 'Real People in a Real Place', Crichton Smith makes a very important statement about language and its place in a culture.

> '... we are born inside a language and see everything from within its parameters: it is not we who make language, it is language that makes us' (*Towards the Human*, 20).

The view Crichton Smith takes of language may be summarised thus. While a word in one language may refer to the same object as a word in another language, the connotations of the two words will not be the same, and sometimes even the core meanings will not be the same. Take the word primrose. It brings to mind a small, quite delicate, pale yellow flower and it carries connotations of pretty gardens and pretty poetry. But the word *sobhrach*, which is the Gaelic equivalent of the English primrose, directs the mind not only to a pretty yellow flower but also to the rough green leaves of the plant. The word *sobhrach* both sounds rougher and means a rougher thing. And, of course, for the Roman the word was *prima rosa*, meaning the first rose of Spring. Let Crichton Smith himself put the point as he does in 'Shall Gaelic Die?'.

> I came with a 'sobhrach' in my mouth. He came with
> a 'primrose'.
> 'A primrose by the river's brim'. Between the two
> languages,
> the word 'sobhrach' turned to 'primrose'.
> Behind the two words, a Roman said 'prima rosa'.
> The 'sobhrach' or the 'primrose' was in our hands.
> Its reasons belonged to us.
> (SP: 66; CP: 103)

Crichton Smith's view of language as being a medium into which we are born and through which we view the world and in terms of which we form our values, is not an eccentric one. It is a view which, refined and elaborated on, has taken its place in modern philosophy. What interests Crichton Smith is, as one would expect, not so much the view itself as the implications of it. If our native language plays a large part in making us what we are, then if that language is lost, as Gaelic has been to some extent lost, we would cease to be what we are. Without Gaelic, there could be no fully Gaelic experience for anyone, no truly Gaelic communities, no Gaelic songs and poetry.

> He who loses his language loses his world.
> (SP: 66; CP: 103)

This for Crichton Smith would be, I suppose, almost the ultimate isolation. Without his Gaelic world, he would have to live in English alone, and so living he would feel rather like a spaceman who had gained great praise from space dwellers for his exploits in space yet felt lost without his own world which had vanished in his absence. The complete loss of Gaelic seems totally unlikely in Crichton Smith's lifetime, but its fragile state never seems to have been far from his mind.



*Intellectual Isolation*

For Crichton Smith the most disturbing and difficult of all isolations is that of the human mind from the world it seeks to know. If we accept what has been said above about a language being like a medium in which we live, then it follows that it is extremely difficult to think through it to whatever 'real' world lies beyond. We may perceive through the language, that is we may see, feel, smell, hear the world around us, but when we try to *think* about that world, to understand it, then we are at once back within the medium of our language. Much of modern philosophy has consisted of trying to see through languages, English or German for example, to raw experience and then to frame new language, new words, structures, even new systems of language which will better reflect the experience encountered.

This difficulty of knowing the 'world' beyond language is the subject of the poem 'Deer on the High Hills' (SP: 23; CP: 35). This is a long and difficult poem, a discussion of which would take more space than is available here. Suffice it to say that sometimes it seems that the poet is raising sharp and important questions and sometimes it seems that he is unnecessarily concerned about finding a way to make contact with the world beyond him and his language. Whatever, the poem does have in it some beautiful and haunting lines like those at the end when the poet accepts 'the distance' between him and the deer and the fact that he, isolated from them by that distance, can find nothing meaningful to say about them – just as he can only say of the 'stars' that they are 'starry' and of the 'rain' that it is 'rainy', of the 'stones' that they are 'stony' and of the 'sun' that it is 'sunny'.

> The deer step out in isolated air.
> Forgive the distance, let the transient journey
> on delicate ice not tragical appear
>
> for stars are starry and the rain is rainy,
> the stone is stony, and the sun is sunny,
> the deer step out in isolated air.

While referring to this theme of intellectual isolation, there is one other related theme to be mentioned, that of change. As we saw earlier, the exile could not hope to return to his community because it would, in his absence, have changed. Now, in the lines just quoted, we see that the journey of the deer is said to be 'transient', that is fleeting, here today and gone tomorrow. Change Crichton Smith sees as happening all the time in everything. What he is, for example, when he finishes writing a poem is not quite the same as what he was when he began to write it. His thoughts have altered, his feelings have altered, his body has aged just that little bit ... This is no new idea. Through mediaeval times, and before, through the time of Shakespeare, and for some time after too, men believed that everything above the moon was incorruptible and unchanging whereas everything beneath the moon was subject to corruption and continuous change because it was part of a fallen world, fallen that is from God's grace because of the sin of Adam and Eve. Mutability was the name given to the process. But, Adam and Eve apart, the significant thing about Crichton Smith's view of change is not just that it happens but that it adds to the difficulty of being able to say anything certain and meaningful about 'the world out there'. The world is so hard to see out to, beyond our language, and it is, moreover, changing, changing all the time, so how can we hope to make any kind of real contact with it?

The poem which best expresses this constant change and the mood of isolation associated with it is, I think, 'None is the Same as Another' (SP: 102; CP: 219) in which attention is focused both on the uniqueness of each of the pilgrims and on the fact that all are changing: 'never again will you see / that one, once gone'. The 'that one' here refers not just to a particular pilgrim but to a particular and unrepeatable moment in the existence of that pilgrim. It will be seen, however, that in this poem, as in 'Deer on the High Hills', the sharp awareness of this kind of isolation is not presented as being a cause for utter despair and depression. The isolated journeying of the deer was seen as something to be accepted, not mourned over: 'let the transient journey/on delicate ice not tragical appear'. Similarly, the transient nature of the pilgrims is seen as being 'not / a matter for crying' but rather something one simply has to accept and learn to live with. Besides, even in the heart of all this change, it is still possible, the last lines say, to make human and comforting contact.

Isolation is, then, a major, almost all-enveloping, theme in Crichton Smith's work. It appears in all the ways mentioned



above. It also appears in one more way, in the feeling of guilt which is expressed or implicit in many of the poems.

*Guilt*

The most powerful expressions of *guilt* come in the poems in his collection of translations of his Gaelic poetry, *The Permanent Island.*[8] In, for example, 'Going Home' (SP: 37; CP: 176) he thinks of the pleasant island he will return to, but at the same time cannot rid his mind of the memory of 'the great fire that is behind our thoughts, Nagasaki and Hiroshima' He goes on

> I will hear in a room by myself a ghost or two constantly moving, the ghost of every error, the ghost of every guilt, the ghost of each time I walked past the wounded man on the stony road... .

The same sense of guilt is to be found in the English poetry. It creeps in at the door in 'I Build an Orange Church' (SP: 45) and it appears in some of the earlier poems about the poet's mother. The poem in which it seems to be most subtly handled is 'You'll Take a Bath' (SP: 114; CP: 235). The account which I offer of this poem is based on my knowledge of the circumstances which gave rise to it. I trust that by giving this poem a 'local habitation and a name', I will help the reader by providing a concrete situation which can be paralleled with one from his or her own experience.

In the late fifties Crichton Smith, who was working in Oban at the time, would visit his mother in Dumbarton, every two weeks or so, at weekends. She was living alone in a modern council flat in a scheme at the edge of the town. The scheme was full of graffiti and radio noise. The noise was chiefly of the pop music of the time, a type of music which was foreign to the poet's mother whose music was that of Gaelic songs or of the psalms sung unaccompanied in the Gaelic language. In the scheme, too, the gardens were 'grudging'; they hardly grew. And they were often trampled into mud. In this environment, though not without friends, Mrs Smith lived in anticipation of her son's visits and felt loath to part with him come three o'clock on a Sunday afternoon. He, seeing himself as her bringer of comfort, found it hard to leave her, who to him was like a 'ghost' of the mother he had known, locked in a council tower.

Years after, when his mother had moved to Oban and had died there, he finds himself standing by her headstone in the 'city of bell-less doors', Oban. He is suddenly assailed by a feeling of the futility of his own life. Somewhere along the line, he feels, he has

lost the road and become 'a bad bet'. The gravelly paths of the graveyard seem to mock him; they are all to him symbolic of roads lost. Then once again he remembers the call to have a bath, but this time he is not thinking back to Dumbarton days; he is thinking further back than that, to Lewis and the croft house in the township of Bayble where he lived with his mother when he was young. This can be deduced from the reference to the water being hot enough. In the croft house there was no modern water heating system providing plenty of ready hot water. Water had to be heated slowly by more primitive means.

The memory of these baths makes him feel clean again, despite the shirt made sweaty by the awful sense of his own shortcomings – clean, that is, except for the feeling of guilt as he confronts the headstone, that door into the afterlife to which she has now most irrevocably gone. That stone reminds him also of the other door in the scheme in Dumbarton and he wishes he had done more to comfort her loneliness. At this point, the irony of the word scheme strikes him. There was no clear scheme in what happened at Dumbarton. Schemes are complete, tidy affairs; his care of his mother was not, he feels, complete. It was too random, too half-hearted. He feels guilty and ashamed. There is an ambiguity in the word shame – his shame for his imperfect attention to his mother and the shame, more colloquially intended, that things should have been so. The force of the shame occasioned by the word scheme is added to by the surroundings of the graveyard. There, 'each vase has its flower', its appropriate graceful companion, and the graceful arching willows bend caringly over the graves, like mothers bending over those for whom they care. At this point, at the end of the poem, the word ghost, met with earlier in the poem, takes on more meaning. He could, in these Dumbarton days, bear to abandon her in her tower, but the ghost of that old woman has haunted him ever since.

'You'll Take a Bath' is written in a manner close to blank verse, a form of poetry which is suitable for discursive writing. The metre is, as in all blank verse, iambic pentameter. If the writer of blank verse wishes to make it sound not too much like 'poetry' and quite like ordinary, everyday speech, then he has to break from the basic iambic rhythm occasionally. This is done here, particularly in the second stanza. Then there is the rhyme. Blank verse has no rhyme. This poem does have rhyme, but the rhyme here is scarcely regular; no detailed rhyme scheme has been used. Yet the rhymes do ring their way into the reader's consciousness – particularly the words 'say', 'away', 'day' and 'clay'



which rhyme with some regularity in the first stanza and the words 'tower' and 'flower' which are set in opposition to each other, though the flowers in the awful scheme were poor ones and soon trampled.

Blank verse may seem to be a relaxed and easy kind of poetry, one not too difficult to write. Not so. To make it run well, the metre has to be well-judged between being regular and being 'naturally' irregular. The echoing effects, so necessary in all poetry, have to be subtly worked in by means of alliteration and assonance and the occasional rhyme. Then the breaks in the lines, the caesuras, have to be placed not always at the same point in the line; they have to be managed to make the movement of the poem feel natural. And some lines have to be run on, enjambed, to prevent the forward movement of the verse always coming to a stop at the end of lines. Then, too, there has to be some variation in the speech, diction, of the verse. If it is all the same, then the verse can become monotonous, sleep-inducing. Sometimes a writer creates this variation by having characters who speak and interrupt the narrative or reflective flow of the verse. To write good blank verse a poet needs a good ear for the language of prose! – as well as a reflective cast of mind and a sharp pair of eyes. If 'You'll Take a Bath' is closely examined, I think it will be found that its writer had all of these qualities.

In Crichton Smith's poetry, then, many kinds of isolation are to be found: the loneliness of women and men, the women being drawn from everyday life, the men from literature and history; the isolation of the exile and of the cultural exile; the remoteness of the thinker from the world he seeks to know; the solitary inwardness of the guilty. Isolation as I have thus presented it is an umbrella theme; it covers many other themes, each of which is itself a large element in Crichton Smith's work.

## DEATH

Images of death appear in Crichton Smith's poetry frequently and a number of his best-known poems are about death, or dying. In most of these poems the poet confronts some object or situation which causes him to reflect on death. In this section I want to consider some of these poems and to comment on the different ways in which death is presented in them.

Among Crichton Smith's poems which go by the title 'Old Woman' is one which appeared as the first poem in his early collection *Thistles and Roses*. Before this Crichton Smith had written poems in which death played a part, poems such as 'In Luss Churchyard' (CP: 4), 'The Widow' (CP: 9) and 'For the Unknown Seamen of the 1939-45 War Buried in Iona Churchyard' (SP: 12; CP: 16), but 'Old Woman' (And she, being old, SP: 13; CP: 19) is the first of his poems in which death, or, more precisely dying, can be said to be the subject of the poem.

What is being said in the poem? An old woman, close to death, was being fed mashed potatoes by her husband who had to hold her upright. She showed little interest in the food, drooping above the plate as an old mare might droop across a fence to the pastures beyond in which it had little interest. The husband prayed to God to help them. He prayed for God to send down 'some angel somewhere who might land perhaps' among the crops which were slowly, quietly, growing in the fields outside. In his prayer one can see his ambivalence. The angel he asked for can only be the angel of death, but he could not bring himself to name it. Outside, the grass was raging, in contrast to the 'gradual crops' in which a gentle angel may land. This can be taken to mean that the grass was raging at the near presence of such a death, as Dylan Thomas urged his dying father to rage against the coming of death, 'the dying of the light'. The same idea occurs in a poem which is to be found in an earlier collection, *The White Noon*.[9] There in 'In Luss Churchyard', the greenness of the grass 'raging' around the gravestones astonishes the casual visitor to the churchyard.

At this point, the writer brings himself into the poem, saying that he sat, watching this scene, wrapped round with feelings of pity and shame. Pity one can understand, but why 'shame'? Again, as in the poem 'You'll Take a Bath', the writer seems to be using the word 'shame' ambiguously, partly to suggest that it is a shame that men and women, having lived long lives and suffered in the course of them, should find themselves at the end of life in



such dire circumstances. Also he partly wants to express his own feelings of shame, or guilt, that he wished to be away, far from the event. Where he wished to be was back with the superbly fit athletes and heroes of Greece and Rome, men in whose lives there was no room for decay and decrepitude, men who lived with great physical force and who killed quickly.

The poem then returns to focus on the old couple. The husband prayed again to God, asking for no specific thing, only for God to help, somehow. This done, there was a moment of silence as he paused with back bowed, waiting. His wife, lightly clenching her teeth, died, a 'delicate death'. The poem ends with the writer's reflection that, after all, this death was only one among all the countless deaths which have taken place – and the veins which still moved on the woman's head looked to him to have as little care or desire left in them as one sees in 'wishless' seaweed which floats on salty waters. The veins here are likened to seaweed because of their knotted, tangled appearance and the salty water seems to be used as an image of life, tangy, bitter life, the life through which men and women suffer on their ways to the grave.

The poem is arranged in four-line stanzas. This might cause the reader to anticipate a poem which is going to move in a fairly smooth, patterned and metrical way. The poem, however, does not consistently do that. Instead, it ebbs and flows, sometimes moving like metrical poetry and sometimes moving more like fluent and well-balanced prose. A look at the characteristics of the poem will reveal why this is so. First, it is written in four-line stanzas but the meaning, or 'sense', of the poem is not held within the stanzas; it flows across the divisions between one stanza and another. Also, within the stanzas the meaning runs on from line to line, not pausing at the end of lines. So, the meaning is, as it were, refusing to stay within the formal patterns of the poem; it is being rather unruly and prose-like in its behaviour. The same can be said of the metre. There are twenty-four lines in the poem. Of these only about fifteen are in iambic pentameter, the metre often used in discursive poetry. The other lines are irregular, without a settled metre. So, again, the writing is not allowed to settle down into being rhythmical and obviously 'poetic'. Then, although the echoing effects of rhyme and alliteration occur frequently, they are not prominent.

What, one may ask, is the outcome of this curious mixture of quiet echoes and metrical irregularities? It is, I think, a poem in which the tone is almost shockingly serious. The 'music' of rhyme and rhythm and alliteration is there but it is never allowed to

carry the reader away from the ugly realities of the situation and the cold-sober reflection which it sets in motion. Crichton Smith, at the time he wrote this poem, was very conscious that he did not want to allow art and grace (in this case the 'music' in the poem) to carry him away from the most important part of the job in hand – describing truly and unflinchingly whatever he saw. We are reminded here of 'Love Songs of a Puritan (B)', 10, where we were told that the poet's task was to 'hold quite steady' and record all that he sees, however sickening and terrifying it might be.

The same purpose may be seen in another poem of the same period, 'Sunday Morning Walk' (SP: 14; CP: 24). In that poem, the poet, while out on a Sunday morning walk through a wood, suddenly encounters a dead sheep rotting beside a fence. The contrast between the blaze of the sunlit day and the mess of wool and flesh and bone that was the sheep is sharply drawn and then the poet turns his back on the scene, leaving the crows and the flies to their business with the sheep. Again, as in 'Old Woman', the scene of death has to be left, turned from, but this time there is less of pity and shame. This scene of life and death and the peaceful stillness of the sheep now done with living is seen as one 'of no weeping or mourning'. In this poem as in 'Old Woman', the 'grace' of poetry is held in check. The rhymes are more obvious than in 'Old Woman' but there is no regular metre at all. Once more, a balance is being struck between truth and poetic grace.

In 'Old Woman' and 'Sunday Morning Walk' the writer, having viewed death, turns away, or wishes to turn away, from it, not in horror or disgust, but with an air of reluctant acceptance – death has been seen; it has been turned from; there is nothing more to be said. In some poems written later there is a rather more positive acceptance of death. The poet regards it with a certain fascination as something which occurs in the midst of all the life around it.

One of the most striking of these poems is 'Breughel' (SP: 114; CP: 171). In this poem Crichton Smith selects items from paintings by Breughel. Some of the items are clearly images of death: the bony horse with the drooping head, the cart of skulls, the ships sinking in a black-framed sea, Death in a hood, the black birds which fly over the countryside and the hunters in the snow. Contrasting with these are images of life. But these images are, with the exception of the aprons which break the storm and the red plates and jugs, all tainted with suggestions of death. The storm of monsters, obscene monsters, does not simply convey an impression of life and vigour. It has something destructive about it. The obscene monsters are not creatures one would trust with anything living and precious. The neat snow scene is cold – white is a colour Crichton Smith uses to suggest sterility and death. The large peasants dance under a 'leaden' sky. The faces of the blind are 'tortured'. The people in Cockayne eat and drink themselves to sleep. The moon, that symbol of beauty and magic, is pissed at by a peasant. The children all are on their way quickly past childhood to death; they have already acquired 'adult faces', and they play 'gravely'. As just said, the only images free of this taint are those of the aprons, plates and jugs (red is a colour used by Crichton Smith to symbolise life). But these images do not create a sense of life successfully asserting itself against death. Rather, they suggest chaos. When Crichton Smith throws crockery around the skies he means chaos, confusion, wild absurdity, a mind at the end of its tether, not life.



In 'Breughel' death thoroughly invades and taints the life in the poem. In 'Owl and Mouse' (SP: 115; CP: 236) something of the same happens, though in a very different context. In 'Breughel' the scene is vulgar and earthy; in 'Owl and Mouse' it is entirely different.

What we are presented with is a scene of great harmony and beauty. It is not, however, a warm, human beauty. The moon is 'stunningly bright' and the gold stone has 'a brilliant hard light' and the harmony of the night is that of a 'jewelled' orchestra. Nevertheless, hard and cold though the beauty of the night may be, it is beautiful, and harmonious and seemingly 'immortal' – except for the intrusion of the mouse dangling from the beak of the owl as it wafts its way homeward quietly through the silence of the night.

But this mouse is not, I think, to be taken simply as an image of death among life. The 'life' in this poem is itself almost deathlike; it is a sort of sterile, mineral life. Even the eyes of the owl are 'round', circular with a kind of inhuman, unreal perfection. It is, in fact, the mouse which is the truly warm and living thing in the scene. We are not told that it is dead; we are told only that it is 'an old hurt string among the harmony' and the use of the word 'old' conveys a sense of affection for the mouse and what it represents. It is not the mouse which is old in years; it is the oldness of the old familiar story of living things being hurt as the great integrated, harmonious and 'dead' world rolls inexorably on its way.

'Owl and Mouse' is surely one of Crichton Smith's most masterly poems, small, compact, beautifully balanced and saying

much more than at first appears. What, for example, of the second stanza with its echoes of the 'Little Red Riding Hood' story? And what of the echoes back into the poem of that last line on the orchestra 'which shows no waste soundlessly playing on'?

'Hallowe'en' (SP: 118; CP: 240) is a very different kind of poem from 'Owl and Mouse': the tone is more conversational and the images of death more macabre. Here we meet with the life of a party, a Hallowe'en party as seen through the eyes of one of the guests. It appears that it was a sophisticated party: the guests were in evening dress. Suddenly masked figures entered the room, guisers. These guisers, however, would not offer a song or a recitation. They would not even tell their names. They were mysterious, inscrutable, skull-faced. They surveyed the guests at the party, silently, 'implacably'. The guests, for their part, made disparaging remarks, suggesting that the incomers were country bumpkins and making fun of them by likening them to literary figures associated with tragedy and death – Macbeth and Hamlet. These literary references, and the one to the eighteenth-century poem 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard', perhaps show the guests as trying to impress each other with their knowledge and their cleverness but, more significantly, they show the guests as being uneasy in the presence of the strange figures. And uneasy is indeed what they should be. Though the guests, whose knowledge was apparently confined to English literature, did not seem to know it, Hallowe'en had its origins in the ancient festival of the dead, Samhain, which was celebrated by the Celtic peoples and their druid priests. The strange guisers, it would appear, were neither mere 'yokels' nor 'rustics' but grim figures of death bringing from out of the elemental rain a reminder of the old, barbaric festival and of the graveyard which awaits everyone. By the end of the poem, the sense of uneasiness has grown. The guests, who have seen the strange figures go out 'past cowering doors', look at each other, in silence, a silence broken only by the narrator's own parting witticism about what black ties on white shirts might signify. It seems that he at least has not been able fully to absorb the awful message in the visitation.

In 'Hallowe'en' as in 'Breughel' and 'Owl and Mouse', death intrudes into life. None of the intrusions is, however, an altogether simple one. In 'Breughel', the life is itself grotesque and tainted by death. In 'Owl and Mouse', it is the mouse which is the image of life and not, as one might think, the harmonious world around it. In 'Hallowe'en' the writer is presumably aware of the significance of the 'skull faces' but his narrator is only partly aware of it.



In the longer poem, 'Iolaire' (SP: 103; CP: 237), there is again a narrator but this time one whose bewilderment is far greater than that of the narrator in 'Hallowe'en'. An elder on Lewis surveys the scene of the shipwreck and tries to come to terms with what has happened. He belongs, it seems, to one of the churches called Free Churches: 'I have known you, God, / not as the playful one but as the black / thunderer from hills'. Not surprisingly, the man is perplexed, to the point of giddiness. He cannot understand why such an immense disaster should have happened.

He begins, in this blank verse, by telling how he saw the bodies in the green water, brought home at the start of the New Year. What a beginning to the year! Everything he speaks of he 'seemed' to see. He is sure of nothing. It was all too fantastic, too nightmarish to be believed. He seemed to see masts, men like flies buzzing in the water, fire in the water as its quiet waves unravelled at the shore. He seemed to touch his hat, as if in respect, but that hat seemed to be floating somehow and then the sun shone on what seemed to be fish in the water, but the 'fish' were in fact drowned men, floating in the oily water. He thinks of how a terrible event like this can happen simply because of a small error. He wonders why a seagull can so easily ride on the water, when man drowns. In all of this there is a sense of confusion, dreamlike disbelief.

His mind then moves to imagine what it would be like on the ship on New Year's Eve. The men would have been filled with eagerness to reach home. (They were, one has to remember, the survivors of the First World War, the lucky ones almost on the point of returning to their homes, and on a New Year's Day too.)

He next comes back to himself, asking if the disaster was some kind of punishment from God for some sins the islanders had committed. At this point, he seems to be viewing the scene for a second time. As he does he feels his body begin to sway again like the awful scene he remembers with its swaying plants in the water and the ship keeling over and exploding and the bodies floating spread-eagled in the water. He seems to say to God that he has seen 'his' church look solid, immovable and very different from this swaying scene and his swaying feelings. This event is something which challenges what he was taught to believe. It goes beyond comprehension in terms of the solid church and the dry churchyards. They seem somehow small, immobile, fixed and irrelevant in the face of this huge moving scene of disaster. He cannot even reason that God might be playing some immense joke on them which they, the people, would have to accept. He thinks

his God, 'the black thunderer from hills', must surely act with justice.*

Finally, he, this elder, kneels and touches the blonde head of a drowned sailor. The feel of it startles him. It is so human. He had never, in his elder's existence or, it seems, before it, felt anything as human and as precious. The eyes look like real human eyes. Suddenly he knows what it is to be human in touch with another human being, even if only a poor body on the shore. He kneels back, away from the body, shocked and bewildered, and he lets the water take possession of him. In his black, elder's clothes, he floats in it, calmly, as if committing his spirit to the green waters, perhaps in a new and strange baptism.** The waters are ignorant waters; they are natural living waters with nothing to say to him from out of their 'ignorance', their mindless, natural being, but still he is content to be with them.

This poem, it seems to me, follows the pattern of the novel *Consider the Lilies*. In it a person who has lived within the beliefs of a Calvinistic church is suddenly confronted with a huge 'mind-breaking' happening. The elder is faced with the unbelievable disaster of the wreck of the *Iolaire* just as Mrs Scott was faced with the unbelievable disaster of the Clearances. She, at the end of the novel, was beginning to emerge from her cramping beliefs and to appreciate what was beautiful and human; he at the end of the poem is committing himself to the green waters. His state of

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* Given the arbitrariness of God's will in Free Church theology, this reasoning is difficult to follow. But the man is in a state of confusion and trying desperately to make sense of what has happened. He is, in effect, having to rethink all in which he has hitherto believed.

** It is tempting to think of the water here and the water into which Mrs Scott fell near to MacLeod's house in *Consider the Lilies* as symbolising what might be called a reverse baptism, a baptism not into but out of Christianity. It is, however, interesting to note that, as regards Mrs Scott, Crichton Smith has remarked on several occasions that he had no symbolic intentions at all. He simply realised that his character, Mrs Scott, would never of her own free-will walk into the house of MacLeod (an atheist and in some important ways a deviant from the established attitudes and practices in the life of the community) and so he had her fall into a burn, lose consciousness and be rescued and carried into the house.



mind is not as clear as hers. She knew that she had come to recognise the error of some of her former ways and that she would live a cautiously different life in her future. He only knows that, in his state of bewilderment and giddiness, he is ready to trust to the waters even though they seem, being ignorant, to have nothing to tell him.

There is another poem which, I think, merits mention in this section. It is 'At the Sale' (SP: 54; CP: 70). This poem is not about some specific death or deaths, nor is it full of obvious images of death, but it is haunted by two death-like notions and it ends with the same kind of giddiness which we saw in 'Iolaire'.

The first notion or hint of death is in the first four stanzas of the poem. There the poet makes his way through the multifarious objects in a second-hand saleroom. They are all jumbled together and they all speak of times past, and of lives past.

> And who was it that loved
> to see her own reflection in the gloom
> of that webbed mirror? And who was it that prayed
>
> holding that Bible in her fading hands?

Then comes a change. In the next part of the poem it is not the transience of human life which is in mind but the futility and absurdity of it in the face of death and eternity. Attention is focused on one particular machine. The writer cannot make out what the machine was used for and the thought of someone toiling for years pumping and turning the mechanism of this seemingly useless and absurd gadget while others clapped their hands in approval causes him to feel the same sort of disembodied giddiness as did the elder in 'Iolaire'. 'O hold me, love,' he cries, 'in this appalling place'.

So, 'At the Sale', although not about death in the sense in which the other poems in this section are about death, is in fact full of an almost climactic feeling of life-defeating despair. People live, people soon die, and in their brief lives they pursue ends which are utterly pointless and absurd. The mind reels to think of it and in its reeling, the poem seems to say, comes close to death itself.

Death, then, is one of the most obvious of Crichton Smith's themes in that it appears in one form or another in a considerable number of his poems such as those discussed above. It is, however, not just in poems like these which are about, or which are associated with,

death that one becomes aware of the theme; one becomes aware of it also because there are to be found throughout the poetry recurring images of death, these usually appearing alongside and tending to overcome images of life. Common among the death images are those of the graveyard: graves, tombstones, bones, skulls, coffins. Then there are those one might think of as just preceding the grave: ageing, sickness, dying, drowning. Images of mourning are also not uncommon. Dead creatures too (sheep, seagulls, salmon, deer) and the creatures which prey upon them (weasels, crows, buzzards, cats) make frequent appearances. Less obvious, perhaps, are the images of a barren, dead, nature: stones, rocks, iron, marble. The colour black is, too, used to create or reinforce images of death: black crows, black hats, coats, gowns, black bibles and black graves. Death itself is quite often personified. And then there is the less stark, more mellow imagery of autumn with its dampness and decay, its warm but fading colours and its quiet twilights.

Autumn, however, as one might expect, is seen not just as a time of nearing death, but as a season of fruitfulness and maturity and even of some hope that life will persist despite death.

> autumn that will return
>
> and will return and will return, however
> the different delicate vase revolves
> in the brown mortal foliage, in the woods
> of egos white as flowers.
>
> ('For Keats' SP: 78; CP: 119)

The affinity between Crichton Smith and Keats is not hard to see.

> But the vase beckons –
> continually the vase beckons –
> the imperfect bird sings
> in the brown mortal leaves.

## THE DARK THEMES AND THE OLD WOMAN

Up to this point, we have seen Crichton Smith writing of 'law', of loneliness, of exile, of intellectual isolation and of death. What, one may ask, has caused him to become involved in such large, dark themes? Now questions like this are the concern of the psychologist rather than of the literary critic or commentator. Moreover, until a writer is gone from this world, it hardly seems right to be publicly probing into his life and mind. Nevertheless, asking such questions, even if only tentatively and with due respect, can help us to appreciate better the depth and significance of a writer's preoccupations. So, at this point, before moving on to consider the last published collection of poems, I want to inquire, briefly, into what seem to be the origins of the steady and intense involvement with the dark themes so far discussed.

A ready answer might be Calvinism. Calvinism does lay heavy emphasis on observance of law, on evil and guilt, on the need to seek and face the truth. Calvinism does, too, make plain the ultimate loneliness of the human soul and the inevitability and awesomeness of death. But Calvinism does not reach people, certainly not young boys, in the form of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536) or in any other weighty works. It reaches them through what they are told by those around them. In Crichton Smith's case, those around him were the people of the Lewis and, in particular, the 'black gowns' already referred to – and his mother. The part played by his strong-willed and caring mother seems to have been paramount. So, it may be said that what influenced Crichton Smith and made him deeply aware of what we have called these dark themes was not Calvinism but his mother who was a Calvinist. The Calvinistic themes and the mother figure seem inextricably linked.

This so, it is not surprising to find the figure of the old woman appearing time and time again in the poetry. We see her as a figure of the law in the poem 'Old Woman' (Your thorned back, SP: 18; CP: 47). We see her dying, or close to death, in many poems – 'Old Woman' (And she, being old, SP: 13; CP: 19), 'Old Highland Lady Reading Newspaper' (CP: 49), 'Old Woman' (Overwhelmed with kindnesses, SP: 56; CP: 60), 'Old Woman with Flowers' (SP: 56; CP: 92). We see her strong and admired in 'To My Mother' (SP: 45; CP: 196) as she is pictured in her youth, gutting herring on a quay far from home – the herring girls had to follow the fishing fleets which themselves followed the herring round the coasts of

Britain. We see her being praised, too, for her strength and courage in old age ('For My Mother', CP: 33).

In nearly all these poems the old woman is viewed with affection or compassion. She may appear momentarily as a black and life-chilling figure, but in poems where she is made the subject of the poem, the writer's attitude to her is, almost without exception, kindly. This is not so in the fiction. In short stories such as 'The Blot' and 'The Old Woman and the Rat', both in *The Village*, the old woman is presented unfavourably. So, too, is Mrs Scott in *Consider the Lilies* until she is weaned back into life by Donald MacLeod the atheist. But in the poetry the old woman is viewed affectionately, and sometimes admiringly. Consider, for example, the lines which end an English version (published in Number 21 of *Lines Review*) of the herring-girl poem, 'To My Mother'. After comparing the hard life his mother had as a girl in the gutting squads with his own much more comfortable young life at university, he leaves us with the image of

> the lonely figure in the doubtful light
> with the bloody knife beside the murmuring sea
> waiting for the morning to come right.

Then in the 'For My Mother' poem which praises her courage in old age he writes

> Not riches do I wish me
> nor successful power.
> This only I admire
>
> to roll the seventieth sea
> as if her voyage were
> to truthful Lewis rising
> most loved though most bare
> at the end of a rich season.

In a later poem, 'When Day is Done' (SP: 99; CP: 214), the old woman is identified with sorrow, or, more precisely, sorrow is personified as an old woman sitting in her chair at the end of day, telling stories – but in the end, only to herself. 'When Day is Done' is, I think, one of the most beautiful of the old woman poems.

There is one haunting poem, however, which lies outwith the range of this discussion till now. It is a poem in which the figure of the old woman becomes huge and elemental, something older, more primitive, more enduring than all the 'art and dance' of



Europe, greater than the Renaissance and than Christianity itself.

**Face of an Old Highland Woman**

> This face is not the Mona Lisa's
> staring from a submarine
> greenness of water. There's no grace
> of any Renaissance on the skin
>
> but rocks slowly thrust through earth
> a map with the wind going over stone
> beyond the mercies of Nazareth.
> Here is the God of fist and bone
>
> a complex twisted Testament
> two eyes like lochs staring up
> from heather gnarled by a bare wind
> beyond the art and dance of Europe.

(CP: 52)

In the opening lines here, the Mona Lisa is pictured as staring up from below the surface of water in a green world. The green depths of the sea are, in Crichton Smith's poetry, strange, mysterious, beautiful and disquieting – and cold, without human emotion. He writes in a translation of one of his Gaelic poems ('Tha Thu air Aigeann m'Inntinn', 'You Are at the Bottom of My Mind' CP: 175) these beautiful lines:

> You went astray among the mysterious foliage of the
> sea-bottom
> in the green half-light without love.

So the Mona Lisa, with her enigmatic smile, can, using these lines as a guide to interpretation, be seen as belonging to a world both mysterious and beautiful. The face of the old woman does not belong in such a world. It is pictured in terms of 'rocks slowly thrust through earth'. The implication is that this face has emerged, not from any aesthetic sea, but from the rough earth and that it has done so slowly, determinedly, forcefully, through time. A parallel implication is that the bones of the face are like firm, hard rocks. The face is also likened to a map of the hard, stone surface over which the wind blows. The metaphor of the

map implies that the old woman's face, with its lines and contours, shows a record of her life and that it may act as a guide to others. The stone suggests the hard, cold nature of the woman.

At this point, a new dimension is added to the poem. The face has been said to be much more elemental and rugged than that of the Mona Lisa. Now it is said to be something which lies 'beyond the mercies of Nazareth', beyond, that is, the mercies of Christianity. It is something deeper, more primitive, more real than such Christian mercies. It is, the poem goes on, a 'complex twisted' piece of evidence of the life the woman has lived, like a God, a 'God of fist and bone'. By this point in the poem the woman has grown to immense stature; she has emerged, as it were, from the earth itself like a great earth-God. The masculine God rather than Goddess is in keeping with the strength of the image. (We are imagining here a peasant woman, not mannish and ugly but with a strong, handsome, gnarled face rather than with a beautiful one.) The poem then returns to picture the face again in terms of rough nature – the eyes, like lochs, look out of a face which has been twisted and hardened by wind, by a bare wind, by indeed the wind we found in the poet's North.

The poem ends by extending what it said at its beginning. This face, which has gone 'beyond the mercies of Nazareth', is also 'beyond' all the art and dance ever to be found in Europe with its Renaissance and all else thereafter. The face which stares from the heather is far more powerful than the face which stares from the green water. It is, one suspects, the face of the widowed Calvinist who lived for years in a 'bare wind' close to the earth in Lewis and whose presence, it would seem, enveloped the young Crichton Smith and gave rise in him to those large, dark themes.

## THE ROSE - AND *THE VILLAGE AND OTHER POEMS*

It is some time now since we watched our mapless navigator setting out on the long river, hoping to find the South and in it the unscented rose. At this point it might seem that the journey has been something of a disaster. Instead of any rose what he has found is that, though the journey has largely freed him from the North and the Law and the black figure of the old woman with her thorned back, it has immersed him in meditations about isolation and about death.

But to think this way is to misunderstand the whereabouts of the rose and the part it plays in such a journey. The rose is not something which is to be found and grasped somewhere at the end of any metaphorical journey. The rose is rather an object of beauty and desire which is always somewhere nearby on the journey, just out of reach. It is the lure which keeps the traveller moving and if he ever caught hold of it, then the journey would be over, the whole process of living and yearning would come to an end. So, whatever rose or roses there are have to be thought of as being found and cherished only briefly along the route and never grasped entirely and finally. Whether or not our navigator knew this at the start of the journey is of no great consequence; all that really matters is that the journey and the yearning should continue and that despair should not overcome the traveller.

So, what might be taken to be the roses which flit in and out of this particular journey? This takes us back to what Crichton Smith himself had to say about grace. Grace, the reader may recall, he said was of two kinds – 'aesthetic' grace which had to do with beauty and a feeling of inner harmony, and 'theological' grace (called in this study simply 'human' grace). Both these forms of grace are what make the roses on this journey, for the writer and for his reader. The aesthetic grace is to be found in the poems themselves, in their images and in their music and the human grace is to be found in the understanding and sympathy which the writer shows for the people about whom he writes. Of course not all the poems have in them one or other of these forms of grace. There are poems like 'At the Sale' (SP: 54; CP: 70) which are depressing and even distressing and there are poems like those in 'The White Air of March' (SP: 58; CP: 154) which are satirical. But *en route* there are many poems which express human grace and many more which, even when on dark subjects, have in their images and music an aesthetic power which soothes and delights

the reader – though never so much, Crichton Smith would hope, that the harsh truth at the heart of the poem would be lost.

This said, it remains to draw the reader's attention to the poet's latest collection, *The Village and Other Poems.*[10] This is a surprising collection, for although the familiar images of isolation and death appear in it, they are handled much more lightly and casually than before. There is a new, easy vitality in the poetry. Images of life abound beside the darker, fiercer images and at the end of 'The Village' art, painting in particular, is presented as being a marvellous bringer of life. Suddenly our poet, the maker of so many fine and intense poems, seems to have relaxed and is strolling through life, through the life of his new village, talking to us easily and at times colloquially in a way he seldom did before, as, for example, in Number 42 of 'The Village' (CP: 306).

> Cat, today you caught a bird,
> I found its feathers in the lobby,
> and that, I must admit, disturbs me.
>
> I don't mind you impaling mice
> on the sharp protruding vice
> of your claws.
>
> But that you should have chewed the lark.
> That you should have sent to the dark
> the quick linnet...

It is true that some of the 'other' poems in this collection are closer to the poetry of the previous years, but even they have a lightness of touch that was not characteristic of the earlier poetry – see, for example, the poem 'Cat and Mouse' (CP: 331).

Closely following 'Cat and Mouse' is a poem of particular interest, for in it the poet questions, lightheartedly, the value of pursuing roses!

**In the Garden**

> I am bitten by the thorns of the roses.
> They hang about my jacket in a fierce
> clutch of claws, invisible and catlike.
> My knuckles are a red astronomy
> Such stars, such stars, such a new galaxy!
> Prudence, my friend, does the rose mean so much,
> and is perfection worth the sour thorns?



> Somewhere I can hear a dog barking
> at the invisible cat high in the rosetree.
>
> (CP: 332)

In this poem, the writer does not deny the beauty of the roses, their perfection – in the very next poem in the collection ('Rose' CP: 332) he writes in praise of that perfection – but he does question their value in relation to the hurt suffered in their pursuit. And he ends with a twinge of humour: somewhere he can hear a dog pursuing its 'rose', in the form of a cat high up in a rosetree. Be careful, dog! We are a long way here from the intensity of the 'mapless navigator' when he first set out in search of the rose.

The last poem in this collection is perhaps the most significant of all. In it the poet says quite clearly that he has changed, that he has emerged from the darkness and escaped from the stones and the thorns and

> the ancient roots
> which insanely fight with each other
> in a grave which creates a treasure house
> of light upward-springing leaves.

The ancient roots we can take to be the influences which surrounded his upbringing, the grave his own mind and the treasure house of leaves the body of poetry which he has created. The poem is worth quoting in full. It is difficult to imagine anything more apt with which to end.

**Listen**

> Listen, I have flown through darkness towards joy,
> I have put the mossy stones away from me,
> and the thorns, the thistles, the brambles.
> I have swum upward like a fish
>
> through the black wet earth, the ancient roots
> which insanely fight with each other
> in a grave which creates a treasure house
> of light upward-springing leaves.

Such joy, such joy! Such airy drama
the clouds compose in the heavens,
such interchange of comedies,
disguises, rhymes, denouements.

I had not believed that the stony heads
would change to actors and actresses,
and that the grooved armour of statues
would rise and walk away

into a resurrection of villages,
townspeople, citizens, dead exiles,
who sing with the salt in their mouths,
winged nightingales of brine.

(CP: 339)

## NOTES

1 Iain Crichton Smith, *Thistles and Roses* (London, 1961) p.32.
2 Recorded conversations held between Iain Crichton Smith and the author in the summer of 1977. Recordings later edited and used for the compilation of *A Writer's Journey*.
3 John Blackburn, *A Writer's Journey*: a study on cassettes of the poetry of Iain Crichton Smith (Glasgow, 1981), Part 1, Section 1, 'The Divided Ground'.
4 Iain Crichton Smith, 'Real People in a Real Place' in *Towards the Human* (Edinburgh, 1986), pp.19–25.
5 Iain Crichton Smith, *Consider the Lilies* (Edinburgh, 1987), pp.29–30. This is in the Canongate Classics series.
6 Iain Crichton Smith, *The Village* (Inverness, 1976), pp.39–41.
7 Iain Crichton Smith, *The Black and the Red and Other Stories* (London, 1973). pp.78–86
8 Iain Crichton Smith, *The Permanent Island* (Edinburgh, 1975), p.11.
9 Iain Crichton Smith, *The White Noon* in *New Poets 1959*, ed. Edwin Muir (London, 1959), p.16.
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