

Mouth

ALSO BY JAMES SUTHERLAND-SMITH

BOOKS AND PAMPHLETS

- Four Poetry and Audience Poets* P&A, Leeds 1971
A Poetry Quintet Gollancz, London 1976
The Death of Orpheus Words Etc., London 1976
Trapped Water Earthgrip, London 1977
Death of a Vixen Many Press, London 1978
A Singer from Sabiya Many Press, London 1979
Naming of the Arrow Salamander Imprint, London 1981
The Country of Rumour Many Press, London 1985
At the Skin Resort Arc Publications, Todmorden 1999
In the Country of Birds Carcanet, Manchester 2003
Popeye in Belgrade Carcanet, Manchester 2008

TRANSLATIONS (*with Viera Sutherland-Smith except where stated*)

- Not Waiting for Miracles* Modrý Peter, Levoca 1993
(with Štefánia Allen and V S-S)
Slovensky balady Pavian Records, Bratislava 1995
(with Zuzanna Homolová)
Swallowing a Hair: Poems by Ján Ondruš, Studna, Bratislava 1998
(with Martin Solotruk)
An Album of Slovak Writers, Bratislava 2000
100 Years of Slovak Literature, Bratislava / Vilenica, Slovenia 2000
Cranberries in Ice: Selected Poems of Ivan Laučík
Modrý Peter, Canada 2001
The Melancholy Hunter: Selected Poems of Ján Buzassy
Modrý Peter, Canada 2001
Scent of the Unseen. Selected Poems of Mila Haugová
Arc Publications, Todmorden 2002
And That's the Truth: Selected Poems of Milan Rúfus
Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, Mundelein, IL. 2005
Dinner with Fish and Mirrors: Selected Poems of Ivana Milankov
Arc Publications, Todmorden, 2013
Selected Poems of Miodrag Pavlovic, Salt Publications, Cromer, 2014

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Shearsman Books

First published in the United Kingdom in 2014 by
Shearsman Books
50 Westons Hill Drive
Emersons Green
BRISTOL
BS16 7DF

Shearsman Books Ltd Registered Office
30-31 St. James Place, Mangotsfield, Bristol BS16 9JB
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www.shearsman.com

ISBN 978-1-84861-353-9

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Acknowledgements

Some of these poems have appeared on-line in these ezines and blogs:
The Bow-Wow Shop, Ink, Sweat and Tears, Peony Moon,
Qualm and Norm Sibum's blog.

Introduction

Randall Jarrell, since his death a poet of fluctuating reputation, but to me a master of line and the expression of feeling, prefaced his *Selected Poems* with an introduction as opposed to the orthodox practice of appending notes at the end of the collection. He justified this by writing that when giving readings he always said something about a poem before he read it and that in Wordsworth's and Tennyson's collected poems there were "hundreds of pages of notes and prefaces and reminiscences." It seems eminently sensible to me to write something by way of an introduction especially as it is a poem that draws on a variety of sources. The difficulty is, of course, to write enough to intrigue readers, but not so much that their readings are channelled into a narrow, author-made ditch of response. A second difficulty is to avoid making the poem sound so daunting that the reader replaces it back on the shelf in a bookshop with the feeling of having had a narrow escape. With these pitfalls in mind I've tried to indicate themes, motifs and sources in a coherent fashion. More detailed acknowledgment is given at the end of the poem.

The poem's central image is the human mouth and its relationship to human utterances whether in speech or song and poetry. It begins at my cabin in Eastern Slovakia drawing on nature and human love. By section 26 the poem sets off on its travels by way of Egypt, Arabia, Persia, Afghanistan into Classical China where there is a slight failure to communicate. In 43 Sophia withdraws from direct communication. Back at the cabin the poem worries over a mouth's relation to poetry and gets itself into such a fix that by 51 there is an attempt to communicate with a stone. The stone's reply in 52 is very simple and the moon's in 53 is even simpler.

The second part of the poem attempts to identify the absent Sophia and then moves away to a number of unsatisfactory mouthings; religion, dysfunctional relationships, politics, diplomacy, the military and commerce. After confessing to a failure of nerve it travels to Venice by way of Budapest before returning

to rest among a monastic community, a possible reunion with Sophia and then towards last things. The old poet in the last section is Ezra Pound.

My daughter, Katarina, appears early in the poem and then again towards the end. At the beginning she is succeeded by my wife, Viera. A coincidence in my life is that my first love was called Vera. She and my wife signify the beginning and culmination of my passionate affections. In 21 Viera changes into Sophia, the divine woman of the Gnostics. For the Orthodox Church Sophia is the personification of divine wisdom, but in Gnosticism she is a multiple personality, the mother of the divinity that some call Jehovah and a 'fallen' woman in both spiritual and social senses of the word. She retains her attributes of wisdom, but it is wisdom equivalent to the experience of Blake's songs. When the sequence moves into Asia she becomes identified with the Chinese goddess, the Queen of the West, who offered immortality to a number of Chinese emperors who subsequently failed to attain it.

A recurring motif in the poem is that of the bee and "bee-stung lips". The bee has a world-wide divine significance. Orphic teaching compares bees swarming from the hive to souls swarming from the divine unity. In Ancient Greece and Rome Sophocles and Virgil were supposed to have had their lips touched by honey in extreme infancy and in India and China eloquence was a gift conferred by honey. The Semitic root "dbr" is cognate with "word" and "honey". Bee-stung lips are not only an alluring feature of silent movie stars, but an attribute of Sophia in the poem and poets whose words wound them. The image has been with me ever since the second poem I wrote worth publishing at the age of twenty, which had the phrase "with bees still buzzing in my words."

The poem also includes ants, beetles, a toad or two, birds and flowers. Flowers are images for the mouth as are insects in a more indirect way. Insects don't use their mouthparts for communication, but for the most for eating. Ants communicate with their sense of smell and their antennae and bees have their dance. Birds use song, but not for artistic purposes, instead for attracting a mate, warning, and asserting territorial rights. I am also attracted by the notion that human speech may have

begun as song and by recent research into whether we have any element of Neanderthal man in our DNA. There's a wonderful novel by William Golding, *The Inheritors*, which imagines their passing in the face of competition from Homo sapiens sapiens.

A number of writers are tutelary presences in the poem. The phrase "What's that buzzing?" comes from Samuel Beckett's, *Not I*, whose first performance by Billie Whitelaw is the origin of section 64. Geoffrey Hill's trilogy of long poems published at the turn of the millennium impelled me to write eight of the sections in *Mouth* although these have been transformed as my initial reaction of bafflement has been replaced by wonder at his prescience at events in the conduct of British politics over the last ten years. Gottfried Benn provided me with some morbid imagery in 24 and 30. His "internal exile" in Germany during the Nazi years is a strategy, which troubles me. In 80 Viera and I counsel each other to cowardice when confronted with decisions whether to intervene or refrain from direct action.

Rimbaud's sonnet, 'Voyelles,' on the vowels is a counter-balance to the four tones used in Chinese classical poetry. Three of the sequence, 40, 41 and 42, contain poems composed from material in three poems by Ts'en Shen (715-770) a poet of the Tang dynasty who was stationed in the west of China. I have imagined him near the Tien Shan range. I have followed a poem by Jules Laforgue more closely in 50 as a light-headed way of getting the sequence out of the metaphysical fix that it was drifting towards almost halfway through.

The supreme image of a mouth in medieval literature, possibly unsurpassable in any literature, is the unveiling of Beatrice's mouth in Canto 31 in *Purgatorio*. This comes in for some profane treatment in 57 and 58.

Ezra Pound is an active ghost in the poem and manifests himself in 83 as a young man, a drone bee in 85 and then as an old poet climbing Tien Shan in the last section. The range of reference in the poem owes its arbitrary diversity to his example in *The Cantos* although I hope its temper is less offensive, if its theme is considerably narrower.

Brief appearances are made by John Ruskin, Sandro Botticelli, Francis Bacon the painter, and Giovanni Gabrieli (1553-1612) the measure of whose grave yet radiant music I've

sought to reflect in the poem. The practice of *Cori spezzati*, dividing musical forces over space to contrast, echo, and respond and, from time to time, to unite harmoniously informed the deployment of motifs in the poem.

The penultimate section is addressed to the late Edwin Morgan (1920–2010). The poem was written in 2008, but he died as I was putting the poem into its final order.

1.

A gap in the trees,
water accelerating through
two lumpy boulders
that narrow the brook,
the cabin door ajar:

swallows can nip through trees
taking midges on the wing,
a toad can hop
on to a rough surface
from the cool element

it swims in easily,
I can appear, hair spiky,
for my early morning piss,
all of us a word forming
the moment a mouth opens.

2.

Water drop round as the letter O,
a single contraction of my mouth,
therefore pure as a vowel can get
until gravity tugs a leaf to let
water run and me to eavesdrop

on conversation upon stone, tin and earth
whose meaning is hard to make out
though possibly I'm not meant to
as from darkness into a world unshaped,
loose, liquid that absorbs my footsteps,

I move, rubbing the sleep from my eyes
so as my vision clears discourse blurs.
The robin's throat quivers and gives forth
neither recognition nor a threat.
In the stream mineral on mineral scrapes.

3.

Or to go at the beginning of spring
when sound is not ghostly but mineral.
The creak in the brook is ice breaking.
Then I blink as the light slides down twigs
like an eagerness to do something novel;

a melting, my daughter has pointed out,
hanging on the tips of pine needles;
to describe the moment before their weight
causes them to fall as innocence
or ignorance is not simple.

I am blinded and cannot see
through a scattering of old snow crystals.
Is this rebirth or an opportunity
to repeat error? I can't measure
the moment when each drop of water tumbles.

4.

Only a mouth can tremble
shapelessness into a perfect circle.
Geometry, a gun's hard muzzle
are absolutes bringing forth
pure silences of co-ordinates and death.

We should prefer forms which are impure;
eyes, almond-shaped, marred with lids and tears,
nostrils like kidney beans, inefficient ears,
complexity within complexity
into which truth passes and becomes perplexity.

Below our meanings the navel is a knot
of withered origin, below that
division between an early chordate
erect ever since the palaeozoic seas
and a vertical primness which can piss or please.

5.

A mouth is like a flowerhead
in long section. I imagine
bees clustered on the lips to feed
on the nectar issued by the tongue
or lips pursed for a humming bird

whose version of a kiss dartles
past lips, teeth to the throat
of a flower from where gutturals
of sweetness are sounded outwards
becoming angels' trumpet calls

for their creation of Adam
according to the Secret Book of John,
the lips by Banen-Ephroum,
teeth by Amen, molars Ibikan,
tonsils by Basiliademe.

6.

The yellow trumpet flower
declares nothing except
that the lovely and mundane
return in equal measure.
Ugliness and evil are required for understanding.

A mouth sounding a high A,
lips trembling round the note
like the sun's edges giving off flames,
that heat passing outwards through us.
Silence and the cold shape understanding.

And the vertical smile gapes
so that a head appears from it
covered in blood and muck,
red as though from rage.
Birth and death overwhelm understanding.

7.

As we travel back and back
to the beginning of our very own time
there's always a black hole
out of which our stars emerge
or simply our mother's birth canal

a passage at the end of which
is a blinding light, thus our birth
our first near-death experience
causing our eyes to be shut tight
as we hear sound other than mother's heart beat.

Is this why us old folk, brought up not to swear,
are still troubled by religion,
the first words we hear, "Oh my God! Jesus!"
Not our children hearing our wives' godly wit,
"Oh fuck, oh fuck, it hurts like shit!"

8.

Pushed out from another
In a welter of blood
And complaining greatly
Girning toothless lacking sense
Utterance stopped with milk

a mouth opens wide
wailing in pain
completes great joy
it gives love sense
praise songs horns of mead

Mouth opening on mouth
For two whole lives long
Sighing sobbing greatly
Gasping at conclusion
Utterance wonderstruck

murmurs promise meaning
for two legs to open wide
suffer lovers to great joy
grinning like conquistadors
at new world upon new world

Heeded with little patience
Desire dwindling to memory
Into witless confusion
Girning toothless lacking sense
Utterance rattling to silence

a mouth repeats its tale
meaning melting away
whimpering like a child
lovelessly ignored
to rictus a hole in stone

9.

Mouth a sepulchre
stone uprights topped
by stone lintel
or doorway more compactly
constructed in brick

or vagina toothless mouth
whether maid woman crone
I rose from the tomb
emerged covered in blood
initiated as more than beast

less than a god
my own mouth frames
matters of knowledge and,
to preserve mystery,
matters of evasion