

James Smetham: Wesleyan Pre-Raphaelite

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In 1844, at the age of 23, James Smetham painted a haunting self-portrait, 'Thoughts too deep for tears'.¹ His teenage years, in the puritanical environment of a Wesleyan Methodist boarding school in Yorkshire, had already been marked by 'melancholia', but it was the death of his elder brother in 1842, whom he idolised, which triggered a major mental crisis. Illness of the mind would dog him all his days.

If that was the pivot on which much of his life swung, it came between his art and his religion. Born of a Methodist family, his father was a Wesleyan minister who was posted to appointments ('circuits') around the country at two or three yearly intervals, while 'two uncles, three cousins, two brothers-in-law and a nephew were also ministers or lay preachers.'² But at a young age, when his father was stationed at Addingham, in the Yorkshire dales, he had a moving experience of the beauty of landscape. By the age of 8 he was already drawing and copying art and had 'formed the design and desire of becoming a painter.'³

The Wesleyan church's boarding schools afforded ministers' children some sort of educational stability. However, Woodhouse Grove was strict and austere, not the best place to foster an artistic nature like Smetham's. He ran away at least once, and left aged 16 for an apprenticeship with the Lincoln architect Edward Willson. A friend of Auguste Pugin, and then of his more famous son, Willson, a Catholic, was a foundational influence on the British Gothic Revival from the 1830s – exactly when Smetham was with him. Willson soon recognised that Smetham was an artist, not an architect, so set him to draw the statues in Lincoln Cathedral. Three years later he was

¹ Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford A738a; oil on panel, mounted as a drawing; 20.3 x 14.9 cm. *Prov.*: by descent from the artist. Presented by S.W. Hutton, 1947; WA1947.314

² Susan Casteras, *James Smetham: artist, author, pre-Raphaelite associate*, [Aldershot: Scolar, 1995], p.8. See *Wesleyan Minutes of Conference* for details of Rev. James Smetham's appointments and obituary.

³ Quoted *ibid.*, p. 9.

released from his indentures: for a further three years or so he earned a living painting portraits in Shropshire.

His reaction to his brother's death in 1842 disrupted his artistic career. He lasted a few months in the R.A. Schools then returned to painting small portraits to sustain a livelihood. His father's death in 1847 dealt another blow which seems to have triggered his habit of 'monumentalism' (jotting down ideas) and 'venitlators' or 'squarings', minute visual sketches. Yet gradually his artistic work built up, having several works accepted for exhibition, including the R.A.. Then in 1851 he was appointed as drawing master to the newly opened 'Wesleyan Normal Institution' in London for training teachers – more generally known as Westminster College.

At the College he met another teacher, Sarah Goble: they were married in 1854, a union which brought stability and happiness into his life – shown in his portrait of her with their first child.⁴ She shared many of his cultural interests and had artistic gifts, being the only woman among seven from an art school course in South Kensington to gain certification. Quietly exercising her competence in domestic and professional spheres gave Smetham a secure personal base – moreover she was at times the main breadwinner. Casteras notes she 'must have been an exceptional person in strength of character as well as emotional fortitude'.⁵ His teaching also gave him a sense of purpose – as well as some, albeit limited, financial certainty.

After the birth of John, their first child in 1856 they moved to Stoke Newington, where their further 5 children were born.⁶ Here was a haven of rural peace where he could paint in a conducive setting, away from 'dreadful London, vast and dim.'⁷ He only seems to have taught at Westminster one day per week, although it provided some sort of purpose and stability to his life. In his

⁴ 'Sarah Smetham and baby John', James Smetham Collection, Oxford Brookes University (hereafter '*Smetham Collection*').

⁵ Casteras, *James Smetham*, p. 16.

⁶ 1, Park Lane (now Yoakley Road).

⁷ Quoted Casteras, *James Smetham*, p. 54.

personal 'orrery' he showed the 13,000 or so students who had passed through his drawing class.⁸

Known as 'Scott's folly' by some in its early years, after the first Principal, the college was a contentious development in the church. It was planted in Westminster, not in a quieter setting, to engage desperate educational needs in the area, then almost a slum. Thus it brought the educational and social mission of the church as expression of its spiritual life.

Methodism has gained a reputation as culturally philistine. Yet it also has an outstanding collection of modern art, (also in the care of Oxford Brookes University) which includes works by Eric Gill, William Roberts, Elisabeth Frink and Graham Sutherland down to Maggi Hambling: there is recurrent disbelief that the Methodist Church might own such works. In the earlier nineteenth century at least, Smetham was far from being a lone Methodist in the art world. John Jackson R.A. had been a well-known portraitist; Henry Perlee ('Smuggler') Parker painted marine scenes around Newcastle including Grace Darling and her father rescuing the crew of the S.S. Forfarshire, so formative for the lifeboat movement; Marshall Claxton, scene and portrait painter, went to Australia to found a school of art – unsuccessfully as it turned out. Grandson of Adam Clarke, a leading Wesleyan minister, James Clarke Hook was a successful shorescapes artist, and Smetham's contemporary. Clarke's protégé James Everett had an extensive collection of mostly Dutch old masters; the artist G.J. Everett-Green was named after him.⁹

Mid nineteenth-century evangelicalism may have been vehemently opposed to the high-church, yet shared many of its characteristics – social work and education in poor areas being one. Wesleyan Methodism had an ambiguous relationship with the Oxford movement and with pre-Raphaelites. One leading minister, Frederick Jobson, also trained as an architect under Edward Willson: his 'Chapel and School Architecture' (1850) steered Methodism towards

⁸ A medieval diagram of the universe. *Journal*, in *Smetham Collection*.

⁹ See articles in John A. Vickers, (ed.) *A Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland*, [London: Epworth, 2000], also *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (online at oxforddnb.com).

Gothic buildings: Westminster college buildings in Horseferry Road, were a key exemplar.¹⁰ Jobson also collaborated with Smetham on a number of portraits.

But Wesleyan Methodism around 1850 was in turmoil. In the six decades since John Wesley's death there had been a series of secessions but in 1849, following repeated criticism of the autocratic leadership of the denomination, a number of ministers, headed by James Everett, were expelled. Over the following two years the Wesleyans haemorrhaged a third of their membership. So in the 1850s the denomination was in an uneasy mood.

However, for Smetham the next quarter-century was relatively stable. At home his young family was growing, Stoke Newington was a quieter place to be than the increasingly busy city and he was involved with the local church, teaching in his 'class' (a weekly fellowship meeting) and Sunday School – for which he prepared pictures of bible scenes. He was painting and managing to sell some works while teaching at the college. Then in 1854 he met Ruskin and became friendly with members of the Pre-Raphaelites, especially Rossetti. He began to frequent the artists' studios and on occasion stayed over with Rossetti.

As the years went by, though, a growing recognition that his artistic career was falling far short of its potential, while those of his friends blossomed, loomed more and more in his mind. In 1877, following three years of intense work trying to recover lost ground, he had a sudden collapse from which he never recovered. The final twelve years of his life were spent as a recluse, mentally ill. Various remedies were tried – Rossetti suggested mesmerism – all to no avail.

How much did Smetham blame his religion for this? It was the mainstay of his life, yet also the dead weight which dragged him down. Was God judging and

¹⁰ Frederick Jobson, *Chapel and School Architecture as Appropriate to the Buildings of Nonconformists Particularly to Those of the Wesleyan Methodists: With Practical Directions for the Erection of Chapels and School-Houses* [London: Wesleyan Publishing House, 1850].

condemning him? Was it compatible to be an evangelical Christian and an artist? A generation earlier, the sons of the sculptor John Bacon and pastellist John Russell, both evangelicals, renounced their art for the church.¹¹

Casteras dealt with this in her chapter 'Artist and Methodist'. However, she did not 'attempt an expert or lengthy investigation of nineteenth-century Methodism': the religion which she outlines is something of a pastiche, strict and negative, the popular image of Methodists as 'thin-lipped, laughterless spoil-sports who drink vinegar and disapprove of fun'.¹² But the religion which attracted and held so many was at heart not one of doom and damnation, but a faith which offered love and assurance.

If art, and specifically the Pre-Raphaelites, provided the Oxford movement with its visual identity, poetry set to music infused Methodism. The sheer ebullience of Charles Wesley's hymns, which formed the backbone of its dogma as well as its services, might be its chief characteristic. Often acknowledged as his finest hymn, in 'Wrestling Jacob', Charles Wesley married an Old Testament story of Jacob's night-long ordeal against an unknown being with the Christian experience of personal encounter and release.

Come, O Thou Traveller unknown,
Whom still I hold, but cannot see,
My company before is gone,
And I am left alone with Thee;
With Thee all night I mean to stay,
And wrestle till the break of day...

'Tis Love! 'tis Love! Thou diedst for me!
I hear Thy whisper in my heart;
The morning breaks, the shadows flee,
Pure, universal love Thou art;
To me, to all, Thy mercies move;
Thy nature and Thy Name is Love...

¹¹ See Antje Steinhofel/Matthews *John Russell, (1745-1806) and the Impact of Evangelicalism and Natural Theology on Artistic Practice*, (unpubl. Ph.D. thesis, University of Leicester, 2005).

¹² Casteras, *James Smetham*, p. 46. Leslie Weatherhead, quoted F.H. Everson, *This is Methodism* [London: Epworth, 1957], p. 11.

Lame as I am, I take the prey,
Hell, earth, and sin, with ease o'ercome;
I leap for joy, pursue my way,
And as a bounding hart fly home,
Through all eternity to prove
Thy nature and Thy Name is Love.¹³

So two of Smetham's smaller works from the early 1860s, 'Jacob Wrestling with the Angel' and 'Jacob Leaving Bethel', one of the more hopeful times of his life, must surely take account of a hymn with which he would have been familiar. This kind of religious life, more than the dry dogmas, shaped Smetham's work.

It was also reflected in the poetry Smetham wrote, mostly in the 1850s and '60s (some of it published in the Wesleyan *Quarterly Review*), which, like his art, straddles religion, myth and nature in its subject matter. While much is Wordsworthian in its romanticism, a persistent theme is the 'solitary man struggling against the volatile forces of nature'.¹⁴ Here the tensions of his personal pilgrimage encounter the themes of his religion. Compare, for instance, the assurance in Charles Wesley's:

Join us, in one spirit join,
Let us still receive of thine;
Still for more on thee we call,
Thou who fillest all in all.¹⁵

With the anxieties in Smetham's

Show me, Lord, that Thou art love
In confirmed tranquility,
Like the silent sky above,
Let my craving spirit be;

Dwell in life as vast and still,

¹³ J & C Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (London, 1742). cf. Genesis 32:24-31.

¹⁴ Casteras, *James Smetham*, p. 55.

¹⁵ J & C Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems* (London, 1740).

In the sunlight of Thy will
Thou who fillest all in all,
Knowing that I wander here,

Thou wilt hearken when I call,
I will wait till Thou appear.
Angels in Thy smile are blest;
Smile, and Thou wilt give me rest.¹⁶

As Smetham's artistic career continued to stall he tried various strategies to re-start it. One was to paint smaller works, which he reasoned he could do quicker, and which might sell more readily than larger works. Moreover he could also produce etchings of these which could sell to a subscription list. Neither succeeded. Nor did his larger works fare much better.

'Caedmon', depicting the Anglo-Saxon monk playing to Abbess Hilda, was rejected by the R.A. in 1862 but eventually sold four years later to a sympathetic Methodist, of the wealthy business Vanner family, but for '1/3 of its proper price.'¹⁷ Moreover it found disfavour in Vanner family circles, was put out of sight and then in 1877 (the year of Smetham's collapse) was cut in half, leaving only Caedmon. A small study was bought by the artist's brother, and in 1977, a century later, sold through Christies.¹⁸

The 'Women of the Crucifixion' was conceived in the late 1850s, also rejected by the R.A. but bought by his patron, another Methodist businessman, James S. Budgett, who purchased a number of his works.¹⁹ One of Smetham's largest works, it also shows clear Pre-Raphaelite style. But it too was neglected, although even in its present state hints at its past glory, to which a small sketch also bears tribute.

¹⁶ Ms. of poems p.32, quoted Casteras, *James Smetham*, p. 57.

¹⁷ Sarah Smetham, quoted Casteras, *James Smetham*, p. 141. John (1831-1906); James (1834-1906); William(?-?) in 'Budgett, Samuel' in (ed.) John Vickers, *A Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland*, (London: Epworth, 2000).

¹⁸ Christie's, London, 28 January 1977, Lot 58, £280.00. [oil on panel, 7" x 9"].

¹⁹ James Smith Budgett (1823-1906), in Vickers, *Dictionary of Methodism*.

Smetham considered the 'Hymn of the Lord's Supper' to be his finest work – it took over 20 years from first 'squared' idea to completion. That was hung 'on the line' at the 1869 R.A., after Rossetti had displayed it in his studio, where it was admired. Initially reviewed well it was then savaged in the *Art Journal*, an onslaught which went beyond criticising the picture and attacked the artist as insincere and unsuited to his profession. Although the 'Hymn of the Lord's Supper' was also bought by Budgett, this kind of experience was destructive for a sensitive soul such as James Smetham.

Right at the end of his artistic career, Smetham painted a work which brings together his art, his poetry and his religion. 'The Rose of Dawn' is the final line of Tennyson's poem 'The Vision of Sin'. After the intoxicating thrills of youth comes the heavy emptiness of human folly. At last, bereft of hope, the dreamer stands exposed to eternal judgement:

At last I heard a voice upon the slope
Cry to the summit, 'Is there any hope?'
To which an answer peal'd from that high land,
But in a tongue no man could understand
And on the glimmering limit far withdrawn
God made Himself an awful rose of dawn.

Maybe this summarises Smetham's relationship with his art and his religion, on the edge of the precipice. Alone, with a mature faith which had confidence in a God who was both judgmental but also forgiving, he looks up with surprise and expectation. It is these kinds of inward experiences which need to be read more closely into any account of his life and work.

Over against these larger works are his 'squareds': his journal, bible studies and 'Index Rerum' – many thousands of minute (and sometimes very detailed) pictures varying from events from daily life, old master paintings or biblical scenes.²⁰ These were, in effect, his personal notebooks: a form of recording and reflecting on passing incident or reflection. From early 1848

²⁰ *Journal and Bible Studies* in *Smetham Collection*; *Index Rerum* in John Rylands Library, Manchester (Methodist archives), MA 1977/69.

well into the 1870s this became his habit: both a coping mechanism for the demands of life but also an artistic expression.

Yet besides this, it is difficult not to recognise in this visual miniaturisation an obsessive element, a reluctance to allow the least thought or scene to escape from memory. This he termed 'monumentalism', a recording of each passing moment or thought which was central to both his art as well as his life. At one point he attempted to involve Rossetti in this, but unsuccessfully. It made Rossetti uncomfortable, particularly as he felt that Smetham's reflections were overly religious, while Davies went further, suggesting that the intensity of this habit deflected Smetham from engaging with the realities of life.

Nonetheless, the perspectives of everyday happenings, art and religion which were embodied in the 'squarings' serve to triangulate the topography of Smetham's world, so offering important insights into what made him tick. His religious belief was absolutely fundamental to everything he was: in early works about him this may have been over-emphasised, latterly it has been understated. As ongoing studies also re-evaluate the Methodism of the time, so the picture of Smetham's context may become clearer.

It is hardly possible in a short paper to do more than outline these themes, and to raise some of the key issues. Continuing research needs to consider not only the kind of art world he knew, but the realities of the church he embraced. It also reaches wider than Smetham: as a Wesleyan Methodist he may have been unusual, if not unique, in Pre-Raphaelite circles, but religious belief and life was woven into their work. How much is there still to explore of the interactions between the painters and poets and the religion of mid-Victorian Britain?

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