

INTRODUCTION

JEFF VANDERMEER

When Clark Ashton Smith was twenty, Marcel Proust published *Swann's Way* and D. H. Lawrence published *Sons and Lovers*. By the time Smith was twenty-five, James Joyce had written *Dubliners*, Virginia Woolf had written *The Voyage Out*, and Oswald Spengler had completed *The Decline of the West*. Throughout his thirties and forties, Smith could have encountered new works by Pirandello, Eliot, Mansfield, Hemingway, Kafka, Breton, Faulkner, and even Nabokov. He would have had the opportunity to read all of the twentieth century's modernists and the godfathers of postmodernism.

However, it doesn't appear that *any* of these writers, with the possible exception of Kafka, had any influence on Smith's own work. He focused instead on French Symbolists, already well in decline by the time Smith became an adult—although it is probably more honest to say that he focused on the French Decadents as well. (Many of the "Symbolists" were identified as "Decadents" before academia legitimized them.)

This identification with a literary group that influenced other important writers but that largely did not reflect the mainstream of American literature is one reason why Smith remained obscure during his lifetime. Another, of course, was his love of pulp fiction, in the form of H. P. Lovecraft's work, among others. Is it any surprise that aligning himself with two "outsider" groups led to his own obscurity? Smith's reputation may also have improved had he written novels rather than poetry and short stories, since it seems to be an unspoken rule of writing careers that novels usually lead to greater recognition.

We can find evidence of Smith's dual highbrow-lowbrow sensibility in his personal life as well. As August Derleth and Donald Wandrei pointed out in the original introduction to *Out of Space and Time*, Smith was

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the descendent of Norman-French counts and barons, of Lancashire baronets and Crusaders. One of his Ashton forebears was beheaded for his part in the famed Gunpowder Plot. His mother's family, the Gaylords, came to New England in 1630—Huguenot Gaillards who fled persecution in France after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. Smith's father, Timeus Smith, was a world-traveler in his early years, but settled at last in Auburn, where he died less than a decade ago.

But Smith's experiences as a “journalist, a fruit picker and packer, a woodchopper, a typist, a cement-mixer, a gardener, a hard-rock miner, mucker, and windlasser” can hardly be called aristocratic. Just because he used a diverse, archaic, and formidable vocabulary does not mean readers should assume that Smith was an erudite man of letters. It is precisely his overreaching for literary authenticity in some of his stories that shows us he was not.

And it is in a proletarian, pulp mode that Smith has been rescued from complete obscurity—through genre publications and publishers. This detail of his resurrection initially resulted in his work being discussed in terms of other pulp writers or with vague generalizations and nods to the Symbolists (who perhaps more specifically influenced his poetry). The pulp-genre comparison seems valid in terms of the purported “purple” quality of Smith's prose. At first glance, and sometimes second, Smith's writing does seem overwrought. It's easy to dismiss it as amateurish, in much the same way as others have dismissed Lovecraft's writing. I don't believe that this conclusion is false so much as incomplete.

Smith's prose is not always lush—it tends to *become* lush as he adds more and more descriptive passages to a particular story. In scenes dominated by dialog, however, the lushness recedes into the background, and the action tends to be better paced as a result. This is not always a good thing, given that we read Smith's prose precisely *for* a certain amount of escapism, for those flights of fancy that some critics condemn. (Is it odd to suggest that the French seem to like Smith because in translation a translator can flense those flights that are just a bit too fanciful?)