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Sensual Music

by [Jeffrey Meyers](#)

On *Dancing in the Garden: A Bittersweet Love Affair with France* and *Words by the Water* by William Jay Smith

Few poets go on writing well into old age, but the Louisiana-born William Jay Smith is one of them. Still going strong, he celebrated his ninetieth birthday last year with two impressive new books. He was a Rhodes Scholar and served as a Democratic representative in the Vermont legislature, was poet laureate of the U.S. and poet-in-evidence at Columbia and Williams. His poetry, marked by great technical skill, is witty and satiric, poignant and humane. A complete man of letters, he's also published memoirs, children's stories, literary essays, an account of the amusing Spectra Hoax, and translations from French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Swedish, and Hungarian.

Smith's *Dancing in the Garden* continues the story of his life after *Army Brat* and leaps from American barracks to French bistros. The memoir focuses on the summer of 1938 in Tours, in the Loire valley, when he was twenty years old and a student at Washington University in St. Louis. (It also sketches his wartime service in Hawaii, on a coral atoll, and as liaison officer with the French navy in North Africa and the South Pacific—which could well be the subject of another book.) This vivid and charming memoir describes his first love during one of the transforming experiences of his life. In the poet's recollection of his first trip to France—a figure in one painting he sees wears “neck-ruffs so wide that spoons had to be made with longer handles”—everything seems rich and strange, and confirms in reality what he'd only read in books.

In the twentieth century, high spirits and high culture often peaked just before historical disasters: in Vienna before World War I, in Russia before the Revolution, in Berlin in the 1920s. The young Smith is similarly exalted by the “carefree spirit and triumphant joy that nothing, however terrible it seemed, could ever dispel.” The historical events of March to June 1938, just before that summer and at the end of what Auden called “a low dishonest decade,” were certainly menacing: the Soviet Purge Trials, the German invasion and annexation of Austria, Japan's puppet government in Nanking, Franco's victories in the Spanish Civil War, Hitler's claims to the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia. But Smith—in one of the dominant themes of the book—is so infatuated with French culture, with the poetry of Ronsard and the châteaux on the Loire, that he manages to ignore or suppress the fascist menace and impending war. Not until he sails home at the end of that summer does he mention Neville Chamberlain's abject submission to Hitler in Munich and the harsh treatment of the Americans of the Lincoln Brigade who returned after fighting for the Loyalists in Spain.

Smith sketches some memorable portraits. Jacqueline Dumont, his charming dinner companion on the voyage out, suddenly changes character and viciously condemns him as an idiot and imbecile for

over-tipping the porter in Le Havre. Emilia Morandini, the pedantic and irritating inmate of his pension in Tours, carries an “old handbag of cracked, black leather, the size of a doctor’s kit,” which suggests her pathetic personality and unfulfilled life. Smith portrays himself as an innocent, insecure, and rather bumbling hero—hesitant about wine, shy with girls, a timid observer in a Parisian brothel.

Smith falls for a French girl, Diane Davril, whose rounded body (he warns us) hides her great fragility. Their intense caresses do not, in those more restrained times, lead to bed. He’s enchanted by her company, but cannot wait for their encounters to end so he can have her wholly in his memory. He’s puzzled when she says “you look like a seal,” but then realizes that in his jet-black hair, slightly Oriental eyes, smooth skin, and light beard she’s divined his Chocktaw blood. Her sudden revelation that she’s leaving Tours before what she calls their “final cruel separation,” foreshadows the *débâcle* when he follows her to La Baule, near St. Nazaire, on the Atlantic coast.

When Diane treats him coldly on that beautiful beach, then brutally casts him off as a meaningless flirtation, he’s too shocked to understand what has happened. He finds grim consolation in the desolate salt marshes that surround the town and reflect his bitter tears. He thought his lover was exactly as she seemed to be and feels foolish and humiliated after exposing his deepest emotions. Moreover—and this is a fine touch—their long conversations kept repeating the same words and did not even improve his French vocabulary! After he returns, sick, to Tours, his psychological wounds are compounded by physical torments when he submits to barbaric cupping with hot glasses.

A year later, Diane writes to apologize for making him suffer, reaffirms her love for him, and envisions their marriage after the war. But Smith does not explain (perhaps never knew) what caused her to reject him at La Baule and to change her mind after he returned to America. She may have had, in between, another flirtation that failed and that renewed her passionate feelings for him. Smith suggests, in an epilogue, that his long, happy second marriage to a French wife symbolically consummated his love affair with Diane and with France.

Words by the Water includes reprinted, uncollected, and new poems, wedding songs, light verse, and translations. Smith is at ease in many cultures and his poems are enriched by the subtle transformation of numerous (and often covert) allusions and quotations: Blake’s lamb, Thompson’s hound of heaven, and Machado de Assis’ *Epitaph of a Small Winner*; Seneca’s “*vita brevis est, ars longa*,” Descartes’ “*cogito ergo sum*,” Baudelaire’s “*Mon coeur mis à nu*,” and Rimbaud’s “Vowels”; the “checkered shade” from Milton’s *L’Allegro*, “wring the neck of Rhetoric” from Pound’s argument for Imagism, and “softer still the rain” from Edith Sitwell’s “Still falls the Rain.”

Smith’s subjects include the forcible dispossession of the Cherokee nation, his nearly disastrous flight in a monoplane, conspirators plotting devastation, a woman killed on September 11, and a soldier who lost both legs in Iraq, as well as several works on the power of art: a woman playing the piano, the poet as aerialist—risking all in his performance and (in verse that nicely rhymes “fleece” and “Matisse”) poetry’s ability to “justify” life. His sensitive response to landscapes and seascapes inspires the music of these poems and confirms his high claims for redemptive art. As he writes in “The Greatest Wealth”:

I would have instruments that could express
The captive music of clear mountain streams,
The shafted sunlight and the moon’s cold beams.

The coral atoll of Palmyra, where Smith was stationed for five months between service in Honolulu and Morocco, is (he notes) “a thousand miles southwest of Hawaii and 350 miles north of the equator, at almost the exact center of the Pacific Ocean.” The remote island seems to be on the very

edge of the earth and affords a unique vantage point from which to view the world. In “The Garden” (a title from Marvell) and one of the suite of seven poems on Palmyra, he describes “the coral-encrusted rim of an extinct volcano/ resting on the ocean floor” as a watery paradise and Persian garden:

The water on all sides was also in the air
and rain that fell each day was clear and cool,
refreshing all it touched and making greener

But threatening darkness always lies beneath the sparkling surface: “This is the island which our lives defend/ Where life must end, and death put forth its green.”

Pomegranates, a symbol of the Resurrection in Christian art, appear in two poems. In “A Green Oasis,” the fruit is brought to the speaker when his train stops at a desert oasis. When “water comes to work its spell,” the pomegranate, “risen from the yellow sand,/ returns to it a thousand blood-red seeds.” Smith’s delicious translation of Valéry’s “Pomegranates” (“*Grenades*” in French) also contrasts dryness with the flow that irrigates the poet’s imagination:

Pomegranates, fruit whose hard
Rind to rioting seed must yield—
One would think that he beheld
The sundered forehead of a god!

If the heat that you have borne,
O pomegranates opened wide,
Has with the irritant of pride,
Made you crack your ruby walls,

And if your dessicate, golden shell,
From pressure of some hidden force,
Breaks in brilliant gems of juice,

I, at this luminous rupture, turn
My dry thought inward and discern
The architecture of the soul.

In *Dancing in the Garden*, Smith observes that ever since completing this translation, “I have kept a pomegranate perched beside me on my desk to remind me that what I am seeking in my work is to explore, as Valéry did, the ‘architecture of the soul.’”

“Words by the Water,” the title poem and last in this thin but substantial volume, circles back to the Palmyra poems at the beginning. Repeating “sleep” and “love” five times, it combines the simplicity of a ballad with the boldness of a Metaphysical conceit. Its theme is the fragility of life, and the power of love to heal and protect us—at least for a time—from separation and from death:

Beneath the dimming gardens of the sky
That ship, my heart, now rides its anchor chain;

A room is harbor when the world's awry
And life's direction anything but plain.
Still is the wind, and softer still the rain.
Sleep in my arms, my love. O sleep, my love.

Time hangs suspended: with its floating farms,
Its peacock-green and terraced atmosphere,
Now sleep awaits us, love. Lie in my arms;
It is not death but distance that I fear,
Dark is the day, and dangerous the year.
Sleep in my arms, my love. O sleep, my love.

I wish Smith had included his masterpiece, "The World below the Window," which synthesizes many of the themes in this volume:

The geraniums I left last night on the windowsill,
To the best of my knowledge now, are out there still,
And will be there as long as I think they will.

And will be there as long as I think that I
Can throw the window open on the sky,
A touch of geranium pink in the tail of my eye;

As long as I think I see, past leaves green-growing,
Barges moving down a river, water flowing,
Fulfillment in the thought of thought outgoing,

Fulfillment in the sight of sight replying,
Of sound in the sound of small birds southward flying,
In life life-giving, and in death undying.

This poem displays Smith's craftsmanship, lyrical response to the natural world, and belief in the power of the imagination. It investigates human knowledge, the way external reality is perceived by the human mind. In the first two stanzas the poet describes the world of day-to-day reality; in the last two stanzas he glances at and then looks beyond this reality. The leaves in the trees, the water in the river, the birds in the sky, all represent "life-giving life," yet the cycle of life suggests that everything must die. There is a poignant suggestion of loss, of mutability and mortality, and the end of conscious thought in death that will shut out this living world forever. But the poet, thrilled by the sensations of thought, sight, and sound, intensifies and transcends the reality outside his window. As in the poetry of Wallace Stevens, the imagination defies death, preserves life and makes it eternal. This poem celebrates writing poetry, the creative process, and the imagination at work.

Smith's poetry offers sensuous pleasure and intellectual delight. We could praise him as he praised a friend in his elegy:

You who, living, said
So many things so well,
Things proper, clear, and plain,
Your presence haunts us here.

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