

Language as a Landscape: A Space/A Home in Martin Corless-Smith's *Swallows*

If you're familiar with the work of Martin Corless-Smith, author of *Nota, Of Piscator*, and *Complete Travels*, you know that to "review" him is to pass over much of the intricate and compelling details his work invites. That is to say, his work invites more than just a reading; it requires a conversation, as it is itself a conversation, a conversation between the contemporary and the traditional, or at times, between the lyric and the pastoral. It is the work of a mouth in a very particular way. It is indicative of language that is in flight like the swallow, and of words that are "swallowed" into the body, so that they are nested, or homed in that body.

The opening that Corless-Smith begins his conversation with in *Swallows* is a series of epigrams. These quotations, written by such luminaries as Donne, Pliny the Elder, Sir Thomas Browne, and Gilbert White, all contain some manifestation of the word "swallow" and often this word is in some way related to the act of dwelling. Something to note in this collection of epigrams is that the quotations are not simply written by other poets. Corless-Smith also consults natural history texts, the bible, field books, and autobiographies. Just as birds trace landscapes when they create their nests, picking up twigs from diverse locations and drawing them up into the nest, so Corless-Smith gathers language into the house of his book. His mediation is one of the body, or of being, and his consideration in the text is one that considers language as a landscape or a home. What we learn from him is that when we write poems we are also writing landscapes, creating terrains, structuring buildings, making architecture; we are mapping our exploration of being in the world. It is this articulation of being in the world that Corless-Smith aspires towards in particular in his fourth book, *Swallows*. What he seems to articulate above all is that the home is the world, is the body, is the self, is language, is the world. These relationships circle around one another; they possibly even inhale and exhale one another.

He writes, in the section entitled, "Field Notes,"

If soul exists anywhere it is during language
during the word soul during the word word for that matter
it is real I see it written

Our breathing in of the world, he suggests, is our language, first as an external landscape and then as a landscape altered by thinking, spoken back into the world as a reflection of the internal landscape of self. This is how we grow our garden, by building words and dwelling in their structures. We "live in the eye," and exit or cause recognition with our mouths. The nostalgia for home (home being the largest home—the earth) is a nostalgia for origin, of word and self, or of self as word. As Corless-Smith states it, "We collect ourselves by collecting the world. It is a visualized model of the / processes of the mind, as we wish to enter the forbidden

chamber of the self.” And as one of his chosen quotations asserts,

Writing is the ceaseless repetition of what cannot be grasped before which the I loses its ipseity (Levinas). The poet works before the inexhaustible language—a vast ocean, each word a movement in this direction or that—a narration of exile—the self annihilated and each word cast off indifferently... swallowed. There is no home—there is only searching.--William Williamson

Corless-Smith complicates this notion of a “house of language,” by considering the ways in which it fails, or remains in flux. He writes, “...but every utterance is an immediate divergence—and every telling is of something other than the self. / But it is of the body, it is of the body.” In the Oxford English Dictionary, the definition of the word “dwell” is especially compelling in light of this complication in the house of language. To dwell means both to reside or to linger and it also means to go astray, to become bewildered in the location from which one, in this case, speaks. As a poet this difficulty is important to Corless-Smith, and writing as a transference or recognition of self is also discussed in *Swallows*.

In the section entitled “House,” he asks,

Is the inscription by the subject (poet) of the subject (house) on the object (house) by the object (poet) indication of unity? Immanence? No---the act of poetry is acknowledgement of separation. The need to write is the due process of the distraught inhabitant within the house. Unacknowledged inhabitation is separation. Acknowledged inhabitation is separation challenged in the moment. The house has made him what he is, it is no matter that he has just arrived. you and your home are coeval.

The house and the person in question are the poet William Williamson and the cottage he lived in on the Hebridean Island. On the walls of this house were found “a series of poetic fragments and long prose pieces.” The image of Williamson’s house with the writing on the walls directly parallels the relationship of body to language to world in Corless-Smith’s book and it is nice to come across just before exiting *Swallows*.

In an earlier section, “The Sabine Ville,” Corless-Smith writes about Keats and his relationship to

language in terms of poetic location. Here we find the “indomitable cosmetic heart / has laid down in a field / A House, its torso in a field / the doves descend upon.” These lines bring to mind and complicate the notion that “the home is where the heart is.” The “House” is directly named a body, containing its torso and the heart, its other home, is exposed to language, to image, to world. What was once a fixed boundary between external and internal has collapsed and the world, or the outside, descends upon the self. What Corless-Smith is in part seeking in his exploration of person and place, through Keats and Williamson, is how the dimensions of the actual home (again home could mean world) reflects or is reflected in the body. He writes, “The mind is written (read) on the body. Our (real) house has no walls.” The person and the home, and perhaps the world, are coeval. What is inhabited is uncertain.

In his final section, “Journal (Home),” Corless-Smith reflects

I almost wish I could have hung about outside so as to be able to write about this place I was arriving at...I am able to do a bit of planning ahead before birth...to have whole days in front of one in which one can see how far one can reach into that unknown realm...but the perch that just oneself provided was not enough for other than retaining some sense of home & real being

Language becomes a place to arrive at, a landscape that creates a space upon which to perch oneself, to create “some sense of home & real being.” The journey or “journal” home of *Swallows* culminates in an attempt to view anew, to re-view the world, the self, the body, the home, language and the interaction between these locations.