



"WE USED TO PLAY WITH this Dutch group – I won't mention their name – we did a tour with them in Holland, an eight date tour, and the first night we played with them they were like The Jam. The second night, the singer's got the same type of shirt as me, the third night they were playing our licks in the sound-check, and the songs were getting more Fally, and he's singing more like us, y'know, and like, the fourth night, the singer's got his back to the audience, and the bass-player's playing exactly our songs. By the eighth date, they were The Fall, man. It was horrific. Perhaps they see it as a form of flattery. I find it revolting."

There is no group like The Fall, there's no sound like their sound. That others, weak of purpose, or mired in history and seeing no other way out, let themselves be swallowed up in The Fall's strength of identity, well, Mark E. Smith may wish we were all as strong as him. But we aren't.

We can pretend, I suppose, that it was the drabness of the times that disguised those first records for us: so that the appearance of *Live At The Witch Trials* seemed shabby and amateur and eccentric, in wake of amazed rumours drifting South. We mistook the intensity for just more punky boredom, oddly expressed. Smith snarled about "the three Rs: Repetition, Repetition, Repetition", and we laughed.

That's one option we don't have now. If he's still drawn to the bizarre in lyric formation, the obsessive recapitulation of certain shapes has given his argument another coherence. Not that we know what he's on about – the shapes in *This Nation's Saving Grace* are even more matted, even more deliberately self-obscuring, in more congested times – but we do now agree that he's onto something. Unease replaces too easy hilarity.

"This American journalist said to me, this old bloke on a mid-western paper said, Don't you think people are just pretending to like you because it's hip? Cos you think they're just kidding you along. I fucking luffed, I thought it was real funny. It's probably, well, it might be true . . . I don't know, you can't be objective about it."

IN THE OLD DAYS, HIS easy-going conversation was taken for diffidence, and his lack of interest in saying what was expected confused with waffle. Now it's clear he was one of the few from those heady days who had any idea of what he was after. The first four LPs, *Witch Trials*, *Dragnet*, *Totale's Turns*, and *Grotesque After The Gramme* wound together the strands: the maelstrom of surreal vignette, the collapse of the North into hag-ridden margins, the path broken along a rich ground of 60s punk rock runs and belches, taken to heaven and hell and round the regions: the grinding into the groove of a new kind of object vision, with its truth guaranteed not by God & King, and not

in the Sovereign Individual, and not in any imaginary class or nation fashioned to simulate these, but instead somewhere in the churning maw of the sound, in physical contact with its texture, the endlessly turning and returning and evolving hypnotic appeal of this unprecedented collection.

"The rush, yeah, I like to get that. Something you can't write down."

He tolerates no democratic dilutions in his group (the lads, he calls them, like a football manager – without them, there'd be no music . . . but without him, they wouldn't be The Fall), but his scrawny stage-voice isn't just a broadcast of his own opinions: in song, he's split into a clot of voices, a rendezvous of persons, a one-man Body Politic ("The Man Whose Head Expanded: KNEW . . . That Smith applied cut-up technique literally to brain" says a sleeve-note to *Perverved By Language*).

He opens *Dragnet* with a yell (Is there anybody there?) and leads the chorus reply (Yeah!): all rock's most important outcroppings represent medium and message both; but Smith and his mute companions seem to represent Medium and Spirit World both. Hideous figures dancing on the edge of vision, twisted ugly denizens of the Hobgoblin City, he celebrates them while he's warning against them, presents himself as informer on them, and worst among them:

"I've got some really horrible prose horror stories I've written from years back. I can't even read them now."

Because they're scary?

"Because in your mind at the time, they're actually happening. Well, I mean, they could have. They're set round where I live (Prestwich, near Manchester): I went through a period of seeing ghosts when I was about 18, 19."

The Fall have an uncanny ability to throw the Media Eye into an uncontrollable spin: seeking to illuminate

Smith's Social Real, writers get thrown off into the depths of their own fantasy, about the value of music, about shamanism, about powers of knowing. He doesn't expect anything else: the search for truth necessarily runs along traces scored by struggles to order things, and conflict between ways to order things.

"I make a point of not writing about anything." He laughs at the way that comes out. "Not anything that anyone could know

what it was about. Because – this is a secret I shouldn't really tell you – but I find if I just approach it without writing about anything, it usually comes true."

The Orphic Poets were adored because they could foretell the future. 'Pre-Cog' is a Smith word.

"I don't want to write about Unemployment. It's not that it's trivial, it's just . . . it's easy to write."

So he plunges into the Twilight World, and a political discourse framed in terms of witch-craft and demons. It's not hard to understand why, once you start considering it. The war that the Church and triumphant Reason waged on a scatter of wise-women and midwives, lingering practitioners of folk-knowledge, has provided a powerful popular image for a huge struggle for political and intellectual dominance, as first Catholics and later Puritans invoked a rise in devil-worship to rubbish their opponents. The ghost-writer and antiquarian M.R. James (one of the writers Smith appears to have lived on during his peculiar drugged adolescence) transformed the folk-memory into a bitter class-struggle between established science and law, and the erratic, vengeful, relentless undead world of wronged spirits, cheated of property or voice, or the simple dignity of being believed in.

Anyone who writes is charting border territory between Reality and Imagination, their trade patterns and mutual effect: James recognised a necessity to unmask the ancient and almost invisible structure of conflict that organised, even in his belated time, almost all daily choice – Smith knows that the structure, however bitterly real its effect, is purely imaginary in formation. James, an enlightened Victorian intellectual, dreamed of the spectre of the once crushed and newly rising Working

The Fall

WATCHING THE CITY HOBGOBLINS

Mark Smith, the man whose head dreamed up a new music out of rock, still has horror stories to tell. And they are still coming true.

INTERVIEW: MARK SINKER

PHOTOGRAPH: JAYNE HOUGHTON

Classes as a brutish and irrational Monster from the Id: Smith is working class, and is torn between adopting this image of himself and fighting violently against it. It's left him with a loathing of liberal humanist condescension.

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