

Mark E. Smith, 1957–2018

Timothy Bewes

A girl who wishes for the interesting becomes a trap in which she herself is caught. A girl who does not wish for the interesting believes in repetition.

Constantin Constantius

Like everyone else, I found out about the death of Mark E. Smith, singer and dominant force of the Manchester post-punk group The Fall, on a personal computer, a technology that didn't exist when Smith started making music, and to which Smith never accommodated himself. My first response was to type a hasty reply to my informant: 'What a tragic individual. The great mistake everyone makes is thinking The Fall was Mark E. Smith. Not at all: The Fall was Smith, Craig Scanlon, Karl Burns, Steve Hanley, etc. Same goes for [John] Peel's famous comment: "Always different, always the same." What nonsense. Once he kicked the others out of the band, that was it, they were never the same again. Nothing Smith did since the 1980s was any good at all – but prior to that, a brilliant, gifted figure.' As I said, it was a hasty email, a product itself of internet culture, in which we respond quickly to every bit of news that comes our way, hoping to dispatch it from our lives, and through which we revert perpetually to the comforting solidity of ego and reduce the world to a caricature.

To privilege The Fall's early work over the later is a default position amongst commentators in what Smith once called the 'pink press' (this journal surely counts in that category). There has been a strange lack of embarrassment, especially since his death, in admitting that one has not purchased a Fall record in 30 years, or listened to anything recorded in the present century. Such responses, perhaps, are a way of fending off the shock of Smith's demise. I had no idea Smith was ill, had not seen the uploaded footage of his recent stage appearances, his body slumped in

a wheelchair, his swollen features unrecognisable and – travesty of travesties – hirsute. Like other punk generation romantics, I mostly abandoned The Fall after they began including their (increasingly rollicking) singles on their albums and leavening the repetition in their songs with choruses, failing to understand that, as Søren Kierkegaard put it, repetition is a matter of will, not imitation; that it works forwards, not backwards. An early review in *Sounds* described the group as 'bugger[ing] the 'swamp blues men' – Elvis Presley, Freda Payne and Johnny Rotten – 'for insight'.¹ But it was difficult to see much bugging of the Kinks in their dutiful 1988 cover of 'Victoria'. Shaken by the news of Smith's death in January, I thus sought solace in nostalgia, in what Nietzsche called historical thinking, and in a belligerence reminiscent – as my correspondent quickly noted – of Smith himself.

The artistic and physical 'decline' of Mark E. Smith must, of course, be part of the present reckoning; as must the question of Smith's autocratic control over the group; as must the 'reactionary' character of many of Smith's political comments over the years. Nevertheless, the tale of the early and late Fall grasps only so much of what made Smith's work important; and it completely fails to comprehend the refusal, indeed the sabotage, of virtuosity that defined the group's sound from its earliest recordings and drove its many radical line-up changes.

It has not been possible to identify the date or the occasion when John Peel, asked about which records potential Fall listeners should buy, delivered the line: 'I never have any hesitation in telling them: you must get them all.' The internet has rendered every expressed opinion timeless and absolute, stapled to the image of its speaker, and stripped of its moment of address. (Peel's remarks show up on a Danish doc-



umentary from 2015 entitled *It's Not Repetition, It's Discipline.*) As Peel elaborates: 'It's impossible to pick one. You have to have them all. You do. ... And I'd go further: anyone who can tell you the five best Fall LPs, or the five best Fall tracks, has missed the point. It's the whole body of the work that's to be applauded.' To debate the truth or otherwise of this remark is to further miss the point; for Peel is not speaking in an empirical or aesthetic register but a philosophical one. Narratives of peak and decline are inappropriate to The Fall, not because we are not drawn to construct them, but because they are self-gratifying, subjective in their essence. Every piece of The Fall's output, including the lurch towards pop during the 'Brix' phase (when Smith's then wife Brix Smith was guitarist and main songwriting collaborator in the band), and certainly the music of Smith's 'declining years', is tied to its moment, the social and technical circumstances of its production. This is what differentiates The Fall from, say, the Rolling Stones, who in 2018 sound no different from the Rolling Stones in 1978. Artistic

(and even bodily) decline is an idealist category that presumes a starting point, a set of formal and aesthetic norms, and an end that must be deferred for as long as possible, if not forever. But who doesn't deteriorate? Shocking as it is to register this fact, we have almost no music that documents physical and mental deterioration; nothing, certainly, that compares in pathos to the song 'Blindness' – produced after Smith broke his hip in 2004 – or 'Auto Chip 2014-2016' (from the penultimate album *Sub-Lingual Tablet*) with its chilling refrain 'Suffering away'.

To look to Smith's own writing for confirmation of this proposition would be a self-defeating exercise. For Smith's work contains no statements – artistic, political, autobiographical – that can be extracted from his person and installed as a defining principle of his project. His lyrics are rarely if ever lyrical. He wrote songs based around apparently overheard phrases ('I didn't eat the weekend / But I put the weight back on again'), street sounds such as ice cream vans ('English Scheme'), and fictional charac-

ters, including writers ('How I Wrote Elastic Man') and gracelessly aging Manchester hard men ('Fiery Jack'). Many of these characters are enlarged and mythologised versions of Smith himself, but this speaks not in favour of biographical reading, but against it. Smith wrote about advertising slogans ('Eat Y'Self Fitter'); about witnessing a decapitation on a ride at Disneyland ('Disney's Dream Debased'); about watching intellectuals attempt to enhance their celebrity credentials on television ('Solicitor in Studio'); and about reading facile magazine articles to erase the tormenting memory of a previous day's conversation with a friend ('Dr Bucks' Letter'). He wrote caustically about computers in the years before and after the arrival of the internet, but never in terms of simple denunciation. His songs deal in personal experience, but even when they seem to offer advice to his listeners, or to lay down codes of living – as in, say, 'Just Step S'Ways', a song about what to do 'when what used to excite you does not / Like you've used up all your allowance of experiences / Head filled with a mass of too-well-known people' – they resist interpretation. How seriously should we take the view put forward in 'Solicitor in Studio' that 'Young and old dicks make TV'? The title song on the same album, 'Room to Live', offers an answer: 'There's no hate in the point I give / I just want room to live.' But that too is the sentiment of a particular moment. Its generalisability to Mark E. Smith – or to anyone other than the song's narrative persona – is highly questionable, even if in this or that case, in this or that moment, we might find ourselves agreeing with it. Smith's supposed force of personality is primarily a lifelong expression of contempt for conceptions of the self that are so limited. Factory Records' Tony Wilson – who is perhaps the prototype of the 'business friend' and 'opportunist' whom the narrator 'threw ... to the ground' in 'The N.W.R.A.' (*Grotesque*, 1980) – liked to talk of Smith's 'attitude': 'Mark E. Smith ... is attitude personified. The Fall was always more about attitude than music.' No utterance better illustrates the opacity of an artist like Smith to an entrepreneur of the self such as Wilson.²

Here, theorists of dialogicality such as Mikhail Bakhtin or Kierkegaard are better guides for understanding The Fall than any number of commentators, or even Smith himself. 'The discourse of the Under-

ground Man,' says Bakhtin, writing about Dostoevsky, 'is entirely a discourse-address. To speak, for him, means to address someone; to speak about himself means to address his own self with his own discourse; to speak about another person means to address that other person; to speak about the world means to address the world.'³ Smith's use of personas in his songs has the same effect as the pluralisation of perspective in Dostoevsky's works, or, for that matter, the refusal of 'standard' third person narration in a contemporary writer such as James Kelman. Mark Fisher, blogging about The Fall as k-punk in 2007, captured well this 'anti-lyrical' dimension of The Fall's work: 'The words [on *Grotesque*] are fragmentary, as if they have come to us via an unreliable transmission that keeps cutting out. Viewpoints are garbled; ontological distinctions (between author, text and character) are confused, fractured. It is impossible to definitively sort out the narrator's words from direct speech.'⁴

Repetition was the group's first watchword; it became a declaration of intent in the song of that name, which was widely taken as a manifesto. But the lyrics of 'Repetition', released as the B-side of The Fall's debut single 'Bingo Master's Break-out' (1978), make no case for repetition – 'the three Rs' – other than the fact that 'we dig' it. The explanation Smith offers for the song in his (ghost-written) autobiography, *Renegade* (2009) – that it is about the 'hell' of living in a flat in Kingswood Road, Prestwich, with his first bandmates – is wholly unconvincing. The Fall's hymn to repetition was no satire but a profoundly ambiguous statement: both a petition to 'all you daughters and sons who are sick of fancy music' and – in the same breath – a refusal to be their spokesperson. The song ends with a sudden shift from the four-note musical motif and accompanying verbal incantation into punk rock chords and direct mockery of lesser artists, such as Richard Hell, who would channel the discontent into some egoistic chant ('I belong to the blank generation'). The paradox – in which it is impossible to distinguish the inflections of irony from those of earnestness within the same phrase – would come to define Smith's most characteristic writing.

The same relation to paradox was pioneered in the pseudonymous works of a writer whom Smith never mentions: Kierkegaard, the first great thinker

of repetition. Kierkegaard begins his philosophical novella *Repetition* (1843) with an enigmatic line: 'Repetition and recollection are the same movement, except in opposite directions, for what is recollected has been, is repeated backward, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forward.'⁵ Repetition does not mean mimesis or representation. Such words are its antitheses, because they imply the self-identity of everything that has taken place, the finished-with nature of the past. Repetition is possible for precisely opposite reasons: nothing that happens is over; everything, including ourselves, is always other than it is. Thus 'the individual has a variety of shadows, all of which resemble him and which momentarily have equal status as being himself.'⁶ While 'Greek philosophy', says Kierkegaard (meaning Plato), taught that all knowing is recollection, modern philosophy 'will teach that all life is a repetition'.⁷

When Fall songs address fascism or nationalism, as they do often in the early years ('Who Makes the Nazis', 'Marquis Cha Cha'), the dissent is formal rather than rhetorical; no subjective denunciation, therefore, but a refusal to indulge in theories of origin. 'The evil is not in extremes / It's in the aftermath,' says Smith at the beginning of 'Middle Mass'. When they document the effects of drugs, whether positive ('Totally Wired') or negative ('Like to Blow', 'Rowche Rumble'), the exuberance and the deflation have the same status. Sometimes Smith's songs tell the story of their own self-conception. At the beginning of 'Stephen Song' – appropriately a duet with Gavin Friday, on *The Wonderful and Frightening World of The Fall* (1984) – Smith reveals the dialogical principle behind the song's composition, and by implication that of every Fall song: 'I always have to state to myself / It has nothing to do with me / He has nothing / He is not me.'

Smith's own bandmates, for the most part, failed to understand these principles. The first representative and casualty of this failure was the guitarist and keyboardist Marc Riley. At its best, Riley's commitment to musicianship could produce such signature moments from the band's early years as the gorgeous closing guitar duet of 'In My Area' (the B-side of The Fall's second 7" 'Rowche Rumble'), 'worked out together' (according to Riley) with fellow guitarist Craig

Scanlon. But Riley's worst instincts are on display in live performances such as the disastrous recording of 'Room to Live' on the New Zealand concert album *Fall In a Hole* (1982), where his contributions include, as soon as the track opens, a succession of 'fancy' guitar licks plastered all over the tune. Smith can be heard attempting to rein in these tendencies two years earlier on the live album *Totale's Turns*, haranguing the band, for example, to 'fucking get it together instead of showing off' during a performance of 'No Xmas for John Quays'; the rebuke is delivered at the very moment bassist Steve Hanley, apparently wearying of the stolid two-note bass riff that anchors the track, begins a third improvisation up the neck of his instrument.

For seasoned Fall listeners, it is often the aleatory details and imperfections, traces of the moment of recording, that are the most appealing details of particular tracks: the stifled sob (or possibly giggle) that Smith utters during the final chorus of 'Pay Your Rates' (on *Grotesque*); the bass note held a fraction too long by Hanley fourteen bars into *Room to Live*'s 'Detective Instinct'; or the laughter Smith cannot quite contain as he enumerates the items that DJ Pete Tong does not leave home without on 'Dr Bucks' Letter' (*The Unutterable*). These, too, are gestures of repetition (as opposed to recollection), evincing a belief not in getting as close as possible to the song's Platonic ideal but in making something happen.

This is also what is behind Smith's tendency, which became an obsession in later years, to interfere with his band members' equipment and settings during live performances. After leaving the group in 2006, guitarist Ben Pritchard gave an interview that was subsequently obsessed over by Smith in the opening pages of *Renegade*: 'You learn', said Pritchard, 'that he is only doing it ... for entertainment value. He's not doing it to add anything to the song, he doesn't seriously think that I'm playing badly or [bass player] Steve [Trafford]'s playing badly. He's just doing it 'cos he can.' Of course, Pritchard will have experienced it like this – as a power play. But we might read it differently: as a sign that in the tighter, more predictable twenty-first-century incarnation of the group, as the musicians in each successive line-up became more conventionally competent, Smith's quest for the 'ma-

gic' of the first take, as Brix Smith put it,⁸ took ever more desperate and obnoxious forms.

Smith gave many interviews; but only in the first year or two was he unguarded enough to reveal details of his compositional methods or ambitions for the group. One of the most illuminating was a 1979 article by Tony Fletcher in the magazine *Jamming!*, in which Smith articulates a long-term objective that, for obvious reasons, has been much cited since his death: 'That's my fucking aim in life, to keep it going as long as I can.' More typical was the public conversation at the London Literature Festival held at the South Bank Centre in 2008 to mark the publication of *Renegade*, at which the interviewer (Ian Harrison, Associate Editor of *Mojo*) attempted to pin successive categories or images from Smith's writing onto Smith himself: 'Are you not appreciated, do you feel that?' Smith is riled by the line of questioning and brings the interview to a halt.⁹ But this reluctance to talk about his personal life is not only a desire for privacy but a principled refusal of the autobiographical gesture. As he says in *Renegade*, 'People think of themselves too much as one person – they don't know what to do with the other people that enter their heads. Instead of going with it, gambling on an idea or a feeling, they check themselves and play it safe or consult their old university buddies.' This observation, tucked into a paragraph on his hatred of nostalgia, is as close to an explanation of Smith's worldview as we get anywhere. The extraordinary implication – although so far behind Smith's vision are we that the idea is barely thinkable – is that the personality of Mark E. Smith was precisely as necessary,

or dispensable, to the success of The Fall as that of any one of the sixty-six members who passed through the group's ranks during its 40-year existence.

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Notes

1. Dave McCullough, 'Music for the Man Who Has Everything (and Wants It All on One Album)' (review of *Live at the Witch Trials*), *Sounds*, 24 March 1979, 32.
2. One of the most incongruous but captivating studio performances of 'Solicitor in Studio' took place during the closing credits of an episode of Granada Television's *Granada Reports* in 1982, with the programme's hosts Richard Madeley, Judy Finnigan and – a special irony – Tony Wilson, glimpsable in the recesses of the studio.
3. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 236.
4. And yet, even Fisher sidelines all of The Fall's work since 1982's *Hex Enduction Hour*. Mark Fisher, 'Memorex for the Krakens: The Fall's Pulp Modernism (Part II)', 4 February 2007, accessed 7 April 2018, k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/008993.html
5. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 131.
6. *Ibid.*, 154.
7. *Ibid.*, 131.
8. Brix Smith Start, *The Rise, The Fall and the Rise* (London: Faber and Faber, 2016), 14.
9. Angus Kennedy, who reports the exchange, comments acutely: 'It is not always completely clear just what role he is playing in public or that it could ever be determined and written down in terms of his private life.' Angus Kennedy, 'Being Frank', accessed 1 May 2018, http://www.culturewars.org.uk/index.php/article/being_frank/.