

When Words Fail, Try Shadows and Superfluous Sonnetina

by [Norman Simms](#) (April 2018)



Mahogany Lament, Kimberly Brooks, 2014

When Words Fail, Try Shadows

The child and her grandfather . . . passed through a dirty lane into a crowded street, and stood, amid its din and tumult, and in the pouring rain, as strange, bewildered and confused as if they had lived a thousand years before, and were raised from the dead and placed there by a miracle.

—Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*

All things considered, in the course of time, dreams
whenever collected in the museum of memories,
such as clichés and storage speech, whole reams
of evidence that lies can be like trees,
leaf up, root down, bark round and round, what seems
absurd is only what has been heard too often
and misunderstood, old tears and broken screams,
once strong enough to hold back fate and soften
lava flows from deep within the soul;
yet now, alas, and woe betide, the gleams
grow dim, the candles flicker, so awful ghoul
and turgid ghost can only vanish into silence,
unsuspected remnant of the nameless science:
afterthought and passion's form, thus and hence.



Superfluous Sonnetina for Serena Celestina Constantina, My Erstwhile Muse

Should a poem surprise us, like a riddle given away in its
title,
Or a truism almost twisted enough to come as a shock,
It would be something worth thinking about, as spittle
On my shoe or bird plop on the shoulder: mock
Me if you will, versifier, call yourself troubadour,
And me crusty old critic. Summon me to the dock,
If you will, and make me walk the plank, or bore
Me to death with your pseudo rhymes. What a stock
Of commonplaces you have in your brain, what a store
Of lumber pretending to be toys and tittle-tattle,
That is, nonsense gossip and unfounded rumour,
Recollected and collected out of classical cattle,
Museums become barns and putti bairns of no account,
Metaphorical monstrosities, cud-chewing chattel,
Europa ravished, Persephone trapped on Mount
Erebus, and a Nymph drowned in the Fount,
And all for what, to flatter the feathers off someone's whore
And reap the whirlwind at ancient Poësie's core?

Norman Simms taught in New Zealand for more than forty years at the University of Waikato, with stints at the Nouvelle Sorbonne in Paris and Ben-Gurion University in Israel. He founded the interdisciplinary journal *Mentalities/Mentalités* in the early 1970s and saw it through nearly thirty years. Since retirement, he has published three books on Alfred and Lucie Dreyfus and a two-volume study of Jewish intellectuals and artists in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Western Europe, [*Jews in an Illusion of Paradise; Dust and Ashes, Comedians and Catastrophes, Volume I*](#), and his newest book, [*Jews in an Illusion of Paradise: Dust and Ashes, Falling Out of Place and*](#)

[Into History, Volume II](#). Several further manuscripts in the same vein are currently being completed. Along with Nancy Hartvelt Kobrin, he is preparing a psychohistorical examination of why children terrorists kill other children.

More by Norman Simms [here](#).

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