DUNCAN CAMPBELL SCOTT
A RECONSIDERATION

A. J. M. Smith

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DUNCAN CAMPBELL SCOTT'S first poems were published in 1893 in a volume entitled *The Magic House and Other Poems,* and they took their place at once in the main stream of what was clearly a great new movement in Canadian poetry. In that year appeared also Bliss Carman's first collection, *Low Tide on Grand Pré,* Archibald Lampman's second, *Lyrics of Earth,* Charles G. D. Roberts's third, *Songs of the Common Day,* and Wilfred Campbell's third, *The Dread Voyage and Other Poems.* At a first glance or after a casual reading all these books appear to have much in common. They all have a high literary polish; they all show the influence in varying degree of some of the English Romantic poets, of Tennyson, of Arnold or of the pre-Raphaelites; and all deal with nature, realistically, passionately, or mystically; but there the resemblance ends. Each of these poets, indeed, is remarkably individual, and even when, as all of them more or less consciously did, they submit to literary influences, they choose eclectically and respond to influences each in his own way. Duncan Campbell Scott is closer to his comrade and, in poetic matters, his encourager and inspirer, Lampman, than to any of the others, though, as we shall see, he has at times a passionate intensity and a troubled emotionalism that is matched only by Carman.

What strikes one immediately about *The Magic House* is the sureness

with which it takes its place in the tradition of English poetry and at the same time how responsive it is to all the new winds that were blowing in the nineties. Some of the poems, as E. K. Brown has noted, are definitely *fin de siècle*. The two sonnets "In the House of Dreams" cry out for illustration by Aubrey Beardsley and are filled with symbols that modern Jungian critics would recognize as Archetypal images and relate perhaps to those of Spenser or Coleridge. The title poem itself catches perfectly the languid note of William Morris and is filled with images and phrases that recall now the Blessed Damozel and now the Lady of Shalott or Mariana in the moated grange. The first two or three lyrics in the book suggest the early Tennyson of Airy Fairy Lillian, but there are other poems that have taken severer models — Matthew Arnold and Robert Bridges — and the result, in such poems as "Off Rivière du Loup" and "In the Country Churchyard," is much more permanently satisfying.

All this sounds a little discouraging, I fear. Yet the impression that the book lacks originality, that it shows promise only, or that it makes no positive contribution to Canadian poetry would be a hasty and superficial one. Let us begin to read it more closely. Can we discover from it the nature of the peculiar sensibility — and of the technical accomplishment that enables this sensibility to express and communicate itself; and then beyond that can we trace a line of development running through the whole body of Duncan Campbell Scott's work, and thus define and evaluate his contribution to our literature?

I have spoken of the dreamy lawn Tennysonianism of some of the less successful of the lyrics in *The Magic House*. In the first poem, for instance, where we find such puerilities as "rosy west," "dreamy lawn," and poppies that begin to yawn, we suddenly come upon an intense and accurate image: "A shore-lark fell like a stone." And on the second page in the midst of a flowery and insipid pastoral we are startled to find a hard, clear, sharply-etched picture that shows in its most concentrated form the union of intensity and clarity that distinguishes genuine poetry from pretty verses. It is only a moment, but it is a fine one — just the picture of "the little sharp-lipped pools, Shrunken with the summer sun," but not even Lampman has excelled that.

As we read further into the book, the vividness and intensity increase. The literary clichés drop away, and more and more poems appear that are almost completely satisfying or that at least can stand as homogeneous

and individual works. The nature, at least of their originality, can be discerned in their imagery, and this in turn is a reflection of the poet's individual sensibility. Let me illustrate by quoting some of these images, and before long you will begin to feel for yourselves the quality of the man and the nature of the poetry we are concerned with.

In a lyric called "The Voice and the Dusk" we have this:

> The king-bird rushes up and out,
> He screams and whirls and screams again . . .
>
> A thrush . . .
> . . . . throws his rapid flexile phrase,
> A flash of emeralds in the gloom.
>
> The rapture from the amber height
> Floats tremblingly along the plain . . .
>
> The swooning of the golden throat
> Drops in the mellow dusk and dies.

There is a mingling here of sounds and colours; the verbs are intensive and dynamic; the fusion of the senses takes place in a flash, and the resulting disturbance of equilibrium trembles and subsides slowly. The reaction is psychological, a fusion of sense impressions that stimulates an emotional response — here a rapture that slowly dies away. The whole poem is like the striking of a gong that glitters and fades slowly away.

This strangely beautiful poem is full of qualities we meet over and over again in Scott's poetry; its dynamism, the juxtaposition of light and shade, of colours and sounds, of sense impressions and emotional responses, all are characteristic of what is most original in Scott. His is the poetry of a musician and of a man enraptured and enthralled by the song and the sight of birds and by the flash of colours in nature. In another poem, "The Fifteenth of April", appropriately dedicated to A. L., we have an amazing (and accurate) richness of colour discerned in the commonest of places — the muddy soil itself:

> Pallid saffron glows the broken stubble,
> Brimmed with silver lie the ruts,
> Purple the ploughed hill . . .
>
> Down a path of rosy gold
> Floats the slender moon . . .

So far, colours; but soon we hear the bird-song, "the vesper sparrow", and

> Ringing from the rounded barrow
> Rolls the robin's tune.

and presently, "a hidden shore-lark Shakes his sparkling song"; and then the night deepens, the dewy sounds dwindle, and in the violet vault of the sky "twinkling tapers touched with steady gold" bring us back again to the "saffron" of the opening earthy lines.

Scott was fascinated by dusk, evening, and night. Of the forty-seven poems in *The Magic House,* sixteen, or more than a third, are nocturnes —evocations of the world after sunset. And nearly all of them illustrate the peculiar power of his sensibility. Darkness is filled with tension and suspense, and the poet chooses those scenes and situations that allow him to deal with nature dramatically and sensuously. In "A Night in June" there is a wonderful evocation of the coming of a nocturnal storm when the oppressive heat of summer seems about to break, and a sudden flash of lightning shows the hidden animal life that suffers also in the darkness.

> There is no stir of air at all,
> Only at times an inward breeze
> Turns back a pale leaf in the trees . . .
>
> A hawk lies panting on the grass,
> Or plunges upward through the air,
> The lightning shows him whirling there . . .

All is movement in the intense warm blackness, and all is hushed and breathless, so that the slightest sounds have an almost unnatural and shattering force: "The beetles *clattered* at the blind"; "The hawks fell *twanging* from the sky" — and when at last the rain comes, it is with a roar like fire, and after the lightning, thunder *rips* the shattered gloom.

In "Night and the Pines", which I think is the finest of all Scott's nocturnes, the darkness is intensified by the darkness of the pine woods. The poem is actually an ode, and it recalls Longfellow's fine "Hymn to the Night" with its magnificent opening chord, "I heard the trailing garments of the Night," but the décor is not classic and literary but unmistakably northern. Yet the feeling itself is classic, and after the half-heard thunder of a lonely fall and the eerie cry of the loon — "that cry of light despair, As if a demon laughed upon the air," the croak of a raven, and

the sound of a pine cone dropping in the dark, we come at the end to the invocation of a Sibyl and the reminder that we

> . . . cannot come within this grove
> But all the quiet dusk remembrance brings
> Of ancient sorrow and of hapless love,
> Fate, and the dream of power, and piercing things,
> Traces of mystery and might,
> The passion-sadness of the soul of night.

The association here of love with sorrow, night, dream, mystery, and power may lead us into a consideration of a group of poems even more remarkable than those that deal with the nocturnal aspects of nature—the divided and often ambiguous love poems that bulk large in the body of Scott's collected poetry.

DUNCAN CAMPBELL SCOTT'S love poems are the product of the clash between a fervid and indeed passionate sensibility and a courtly, gentle, and rather nobly archaic — but very firmly held — conviction about the nature of love as a school of ideals. According to this conviction, love is an act of adoration and the Beloved is the object of a truly religious worship, of a service which paradoxically involves an act of desecration, both real and symbolic, as its central mystery and its culminating hope. As a result, many of the love poems express, or betray, an ambivalence that gives them a curious intensity and interest. It is hard to describe, but they seem to have a mercurial and doubtful sensitivity. They are tremulous and a little feverish. They hang in the balance, as it were, and we don't quite know which way they are going to fall. What contributes to this effect is the simultaneous presence of two opposing forces. T. S. Eliot has named them rightly in a famous passage describing the quality of sensibility in one of the lesser known Elizabethan dramatists as *fascination* and *repulsion.*

Let me, however, replace the Elizabethan example with a poem of Duncan Campbell Scott's, and then continue with Mr. Eliot's comment. I think you will find it applies perfectly. The poem is a small one, a little

serenade or night-piece from the poet's first volume; hardly more, it seems, than a goodnight kiss. It is called "At the Lattice".

Good-night, Marie, I kiss thine eyes,
A tender touch on either lid;
They cover, as a cloud, the skies
Where like a star your soul lies hid.

My love is like a fire that flows,
This touch will leave a tiny scar,
I'll claim you by it for my rose,
My rose, my own, where'er you are.

And when you bind your hair, and when
You lie within your silken nest,
This kiss will visit you again,
You will not rest, my love, you will not rest.

It *seems* hardly more than a good-night kiss, I said. But consider the nature of this kiss. Physically, it is gentle — only a tender touch; but the emotion that prompts it is "like a fire" and like fire it leaves a scar. The kiss is a magic one and its spell is powerful and dangerous. What are we to make of the tone of triumph in the exultant and somehow almost sinister last line, "You will not rest, my love, you will not rest"? Here indeed is love as an act of adoration paradoxically involving as its central sacrificial climax an act of desecration, and at the same time the emotional accompaniment that generates the poem, and is generated by it, is a fusion of tenderness and cruelty; or, as Mr. Eliot has described it, "there is a combination of positive and negative emotions: an intensely strong attraction toward beauty and an equally intense fascination by the ugliness which is contrasted with it and which destroys it." The intensity of the conflict, and therefore of the implied drama, is greater also when, as here, the "ugliness" is in the subconsciousness of the protagonist. To drag it forcibly out from there into the realm of consciousness is the real object of the poem, however deceptively it may pretend to be only a pretty compliment. It is an acknowledgment of what in a poem I shall come to later the poet calls "The little evil thoughts that trouble beauty".

The scar left by the kiss is invisible: what we have is not an image but a symbol. Much later, in *The Green Cloister* of 1936, the symbol appears again. It occurs in a dramatic poem called "By the Seashore" that might

have been written by Hardy or Lawrence. At dusk on the sands a man lights a fire of driftwood "as the tide and the sunlight are ebbing away." He is a lover, and he is burning old letters (he promised to burn them); the image of faith and a sacrificial ritual is clear, and again we have the touch of fire and the symbol of a scar — "The desire of the heart leaves sorrow that lives in a scar". The most powerful moment in this rather subdued and elegiac drama grows out of the restraint with which the poet pictures the ironic destruction by fire of the love-words of the letters:

> The flame flutters and vanishes.
> Here and there the word 'love' shines and expires in gold.
> The word 'forever' lives a moment in grey on the cinder,
> A shrinking of all the char in a brittle heap —
> It is done, nothing remains but the scar of a sorrow.

This, because of the restraint, the irony, and the controlled passion, is a much more mature and satisfying poem than the strange little serenade. It is a song of experience, not of innocence; and if it lacks the tremulous nervous excitement of the divided poems in which there is a clash between pleasure and pain, or between duty and desire, or between the dream and the reality, it has something better — a more universal humanity.

Yet it is the tremulous excitement that provides even some of the less successful of Scott's love poems with a glamour which, if a little fortuitous, is nevertheless significant, for it lights up an important aspect of the poet's metaphysic of love — his chivalric and courtly worship of maidenhood, at the worst destroyed and at the best transfigured by desire and passion. We can examine this theme in a curious and not very well known lyric, "The Water Lily".

"The Water Lily" is placed in Scott's *Selected Poems* next to the allegorical dream poems, "The Magic House" and "Avis", and it impresses itself on the mind as a symbolist poem akin to Mallarmé's evocation of the snowy swan or Yeats's of the rose upon the rood of time. There is an exotic, almost oriental luxury about the imagery and atmosphere of the poem that recalls Coleridge and again the early Tennyson. There is a strange and very powerful fusion of whiteness and coldness on the one hand with passionate, almost tropical, ardours and odours that serves to dramatise what I feel is the hidden theme of the poem — the presenta-

tion of an ambivalent attitude towards virginity. "In the granite-margined pool," the poem starts —

> Hot to its shallow depths,
> The water-lily sleeps
> And wakes in light . . .

All is rich and luxurious, and everything is tremulous, almost over-sensitive, soft, and responsive.

> Like moonstones frail, the waterdrops
> Invade her red-rimmed pads,
> Tremble mercurial there.

Each of the senses attends and pays court to "the starry-pointed wonder, Lolling so languidly by the lotus leaves."

But now there is a change. All the virginal and languid lily had been created for is about to happen:

> The intense heaven of her cold white
> Is troubled with colour;
> The shadow cast by light
> Of its own substance lies;
> The clear etherealities
> Are tremoured with fire;
> Conscious and still unconscious of the sun,
> The petals swoon amourously;
> The gold-tipped sceptres of desire
> Shine in the warm cradle cup
> Of the luxurious pure lily
> Trembling in ecstacy by the lotus leaves.

And then in the beautiful climactic final section we have the creative act itself, presented as a descent into the dark waters of generation:

> Maturity broods in water and air;
> The starry-pointed wonder
> From the root tangled lair
> Feels ripeness lure her under;
> She sinks reluctant from sunlight . . .
>
> Down the dark pool of silence;
> The world lost, —
> All lost but memory
> And the germ of beauty.

O banishment to cloistral water,
The pause in the limpid hush,
There to recreate . . .

The end of the poem is ecstatic joy, consummation, release, and rest. Nothing in D. H. Lawrence is deeper, more accurate, or more unmistakeable than this.

FROM THE BEGINNING, of course, there had been present in Duncan Campbell Scott's work another and very different strain from the tremulous and feverish one that pulses through the love poems. From love and from certain aspects of nature, particularly from those associated with night and storm and the hours and seasons of change, come the impulses that kindle. But there were also the impulses that restrain. These are derived from the poet's traditions — partly artistic and partly social and religious. An education in the classics, the enthusiastic reading of Wordsworth and Arnold as well as Keats and Tennyson and Rossetti, and the example perhaps of Archibald Lampman, equipped Scott for the writing of perfectly chiselled lyrics and descriptive pieces that for clarity of expression and delicate precision of observation are worthy of any of his masters. In the first book are "Off Rivière du Loup" with its fine opening lines:

O ship incoming from the sea
With all your cloudy tower of sail . . .

the haunting lyric, "Memory", the deeply-felt elegy written for his father, "In the Country Churchyard", and a number of calm and exact nature poems — the two sonnets called "First Snow", for instance, or the sonnet "September" which are very close to the spirit of Lampman.

Let us consider for a moment how Lampman and how Scott see nature. Lampman is an impressionist. Sensation rather than idea is what he derives from landscape. Details of shape and colour, seen in the light of a precise minute and valued for their own sake are what give a special significance to Lampman's portrayal of nature. I think this is true of Scott also; but while it serves to define almost the whole of Lampman's originality, it is only a part of Scott's. And in Scott, nature is usually less

exclusively presented as a picture: more often it is a picture *and* an idea.

In Lampman's famous poem "Heat", there is not a single concept until we come to the end of the poem: everything is perception, impression — sounds and sights, colours, shapes, tactile impressions and sensations of movement, and above all a pervasive feeling of heat. There are what might be called *conceits* in the poem, but they are *physical* conceits, not *metaphysical* ones. For example:

> Into the pale depth of noon
> A wandering thrush slides leisurely
> His thin revolving tune

or,

> The grasshoppers spin into my ear
> A small innumerable sound.

At the beginning of Scott's comparable poem, the double sonnet "First Snow", we have this:

> The field-pools gathered into frosty lace;
> An icy glitter lined the iron ruts . . .

And these lines are pure Lampman; but soon we come upon a touch that is rare indeed in Lampman but frequently met with in Scott — the metaphysical expression of a physical phenomenon:

> Between the dusky alders' woven ranks
> A stream *thought* yet about his summer banks,
> And made an autumn music in the place.

or,

> The shadow cast by light
> On its own substance . . .

This is a device that serves a twofold function. It intensifies the expression and gives it an intellectual as well as a sensational significance. Passages like these — and some quoted earlier in this essay — suggest that the characteristic virtue of Duncan Campbell Scott as an interpreter of nature and the real mark of his originality is the glowing fusion in his poetry of keenness of observation with clarity of thought so that the thing and the idea seem to be struck out together.

When we have the happy combination of this kind of sensibility with a classical precision and conciseness of style, we have work of a major excellence. This excellence can be illustrated in all of his books, and in the

latest more effectively than in the first. To cite one fine passage from *Green Cloister,* the collection of later poems published in 1936, here is the way the poet re-creates a moment of mist and silence in the heart of the mountains. In the intense stillness the attentive ear detects a sound so delicate that we can hardly say whether it speaks to the senses or directly to the heart and mind. It is from the beautiful third lyric in the series called "In the Rocky Mountains":

> For the mist had cloaked the range
> Hiding the vista and the flowing sky-line;
> Almost a silence there, but strange —
> Came a water-sound, a far off crying;
> All the ferns and firs
> Held the mist till they could bear no more,
> Then shed their store
> Of tears with sudden sighing . . .

It is the intimate interplay of light and shade and the delicate half-states of twilight and mist together with the magnification and slight distortions of sound that seem to appeal most intensely to Scott and set him apart from the other poets of his generation in Canada. He is as sensitive and intense as Carman, and far more accurate; as accurate as Lampman or Roberts, and more truly passionate than either. It is this love of the intermediate stage, the moment of change, when things and qualities are intermingled and partake of one another's characteristics that contributes much of the movement and drama to Scott's nature poetry. His most vivid and characteristic scenes are pictures of change, flow, and conflict. The times that fascinate him are times of change — sunset, dawn, or spring — and it is movement and change that make even his descriptive pieces dramatic; they are filled with images of storm, of melting, of thawing, of burgeoning or dying; colours are intermingled; sounds, sights and odours are fused with the emotional overtones that generate or accompany them. Sometimes a subtle perception of such a fusing is simply stated, its perceptiveness being its own sufficient recommendation, as in this almost casual sentence from "Compline":

> An odour arises from the earth
> From dead grass cooling in the dew,
> From the fragrance of pine needles
> That smoldered all day in the heat.

Or as in the description of what one sees from the window of a train stopping "for no apparent reason" by the edge of frozen lake in the wilderness:

> The sun is burning in the South; the season
> Is winter *trembling* at a touch of Spring.
> A little hill with birches and a ring
> Of cedars — all so still, so pure with snow —
> It seems a tiny landscape in the moon.
> Long wisps of shadow from the naked birches
> Lie on the white in lines of cobweb-grey;
> From the cedar roots the snow has shrunk away,
> *One almost hears it tinkle as it thaws.*

I do not want to give the impression that these descriptions, sensitive, accurate, and intense as they often are, are placed before us as being self-sufficient — though they might well have been, for they *are* valuable in themselves. But Duncan Campbell Scott is not an Imagist poet, and all his observations, impressions, and experiences are put to use. And I do not mean in an obvious or didactic way. The question arises: What use does the poet make of his perceptions and impressions? To answer it, let me continue the description of what the poet saw from the train window. He looks at the foreground now:

> Traces there are of wild things in the snow —
> Partridge at play, tracks of the foxes' paws
> That broke a path to sun them in the trees.
> They're going fast where all impressions go
> On a frail substance — images like these,
> Vagaries the unconscious mind receives
> From nowhere, and lets go to nothingness
> With the lost flush of last year's autumn leaves.

The theme of the poem, we see, is psychological — the way fleeting impressions fasten on the mind; and it is traditional as well—the great classical commonplace of the impermanence of all things. But the triumph of the poem depends not so much upon the subtlety and precision of the observation as upon the casualness and informality of the occasion. The homeliest and most ordinary experience can be made both unique and universally significant — when it happens to a true poet.

And when we read it and take it in we ourselves become true poets, and our eyes are opened to the possibilities of enrichment in the sensuous world of phenomena. That is why poems like this have a value—I needn't hesitate to call it a usefulness—that is incalculable. But quite apart from this, I would cite these lines as characteristic of a new clarity and simplicity that Scott attains to in the poetry of his last years. It is a poetry that one might well call modern, if it were not timeless. It owes nothing to Tennyson or Morris or Matthew Arnold, but it can take its place beside the best nature poetry ever written, beside that of Clare, or Edward Thomas, or Robert Frost — and that without being directly indebted to any of them. It is both traditional and original. This is high praise indeed, but not unjust praise.