

D. C. SCOTT'S "THE HEIGHT OF LAND" & THE GREATER ROMANTIC LYRIC

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That very day,
From a bare ridge we also first beheld
Unveiled the summit of Mont Blanc, and grieved
To have a soulless image on the eye
That had usurped upon a living thought
That never more could be.

— *The Prelude* (1850), vi, 523-28

Those lines of Wordsworth embody a common experience. By the force of imagination we form ideas of the great natural scenery of the earth, which are usually disappointed when we stand face to face with the wonder. . . . Man is anxious to be carried away and awed by something outside himself, . . . but when he confronts the fact he finds it perfectly natural, and that he was greater than it after all. . . . But I find that, as a matter of course and by some generic law, the imaginative idea resumes its place, and is if anything heightened by remembrance.

— Duncan Campbell Scott

EVEN THOSE SCOTT CRITICS who agree on almost nothing else agree on the importance, though not on the meaning, of "The Height of Land": for W. J. Keith, it is "surely a seminal poem for the study of D. C. Scott"; for Robin Mathews, it is "one of the great poems of the last hundred years"; for Catherine E. Kelly, it is Scott's "major poem."¹ Since Scott's place in the larger canon of Canadian literature is fairly secure, the paucity of criticism on the poem is surprising. Consider Stan Dragland's 1974 collection of Scott criticism: the longest discussions of "The Height of Land," by E. K. Brown and G. Ross Roy, are less than three pages long. When we notice that six of the eleven essays in this collection are simply entitled "Duncan Campbell Scott," and that two others bear the similarly unrevealing title "The Poetry of Duncan

Campbell Scott," we begin to wonder how closely Scott's poems have been read. We may be additionally disturbed by Dragland's statement that Gary Geddes' 1968 article was "the first to acknowledge any tradition of Scott criticism."² In this paper, I offer a close reading of "The Height of Land" in the belief that its peculiar complexities have sometimes been obscured by the distant perspectives from which it is viewed, and in the further belief that Canadian literary history is too often a good plot with few important incidents. As Desmond Pacey wrote thirty-five years ago, "close line-by-line analyses . . . have been far too rare in our critical history."³ Although there is little close analysis, there have been some suggestive comments on "The Height of Land," and these comments will also be examined in this paper; as Pacey reminds us, "the play of ideas between . . . critics concerned with the same author is mutually stimulating."

"The Height of Land" calls into question many aspects of the received view of Confederation poetry, particularly the tendency to perceive Wordsworth's influence as responsible for an overemphasis on the benignity of nature. Though Scott's poem bears a resemblance to "the greater Romantic lyric," it fails to achieve the reconciliation of subject and object, of thought and nature, that M. H. Abrams regards as integral to this genre. Now to read this poem as an instance of the diminution of idealism is not necessarily to adopt a Whiggish view of literary history, according to which, in Paul de Man's ironic summary, Romanticism "represents, so to speak, the point of maximum delusion in our recent past, whereas the nineteenth and twentieth centuries represent a gradual emerging from this aberration. . . ."⁴ In Canada, such a view is represented in Margaret Atwood's claim that in Lampman and Scott we see "the gradual emergence of a language appropriate to its objects," and that this development is fulfilled in A. J. M. Smith's "The Lonely Land."⁵ In "The Height of Land" and elsewhere, Scott takes pains to remind us that evolution and progress, like language and nature, are distinct entities. It could even be argued, with the aid of de Man and others, that Scott's poem bears the same relation to Abrams' concept of the greater Romantic lyric as the most authentic Romantic poems.

C ONFRONTED WITH A PROBLEM of nomenclature for what he regards as "a distinctive and widely practiced variety of the longer Romantic lyric," Abrams adopts the following solution: "I shall call this poetic type 'the greater Romantic lyric,' intending to suggest, not that it is a higher achievement than other Romantic lyrics, but that it displaced what neo-classical critics had called 'the greater ode' . . . as the favoured form for the long lyric poem."⁶ After stressing the importance of the tradition of topographical poetry in the lineage of the greater Romantic lyric, Abrams establishes William Bowles as a transitional

poet: instead of the public voice, “allegoric action,” and “Pindaric artifice” of previous topographical poems,

Bowles’s sonnets opened out to Coleridge the possibilities in the quite ordinary circumstances of a private person in a specific time and place whose meditation, credibly stimulated by the setting, is grounded in his particular character, follows the various and seemingly random flow of the living consciousness, and is conducted in the intimate yet adaptive voice of the interior monologue.

(Abrams, p. 543)

As the emphases on a “particular character” and a “living consciousness” indicate, Bowles increased the psychological element in topographical poetry. Abrams argues that Bowles’ brief influence on Coleridge helped the latter produce the poems of 1796-97, including “The Eolian Harp,” the poem that “established the persona, idiom, materials, and ordonnance of the greater Romantic lyric” (Abrams, p. 543). Coleridge, who was eventually to maintain that Bowles “has no native Passion, because he is not a Thinker” (cited in Abrams, p. 549), sought to combine the techniques of Bowles’ sonnets with his own philosophical interests. Coleridge achieved that combination in the poems of 1796-97, in which “we can observe him in the process of converting the conjunction of parts, in which nature stays on one side and thought on the other, into the Romantic interfusion of subject and object” (Abrams, p. 550). For Abrams, this “interfusion” or “coalescence” of subject and object is central to Romanticism: “The best Romantic meditations on a landscape, following Coleridge’s examples, all manifest a transaction between subject and object in which the thought incorporates and makes explicit what was already implicit in the outer scene” (Abrams, p. 551).

By way of defining the greater Romantic lyric, and of indicating its relevance to Confederation poetry, I shall briefly discuss Lampman’s “Among the Timothy.” According to Abrams, the speaker of the greater Romantic lyric “begins with a description of the landscape” (Abrams, p. 527). Lampman’s speaker begins by imagining the actions of a mower who had been there before him, and then by describing the landscape:

And here among the scented swathes that gleam,
Mixed with dead daisies, it is sweet to lie
And watch the grass and the few-clouded sky,
Nor think but only dream.⁷

Abrams notes that the initial description quickly and imperceptibly modulates into meditation: “an aspect or change of aspect in the landscape evokes a varied but integral process of memory, thought, anticipation, and feeling which remains closely interwoven with the outer scene” (Abrams, p. 527). The most significant aspect of the landscape in “Among the Timothy” is the effect of the breezes. As

D. M. R. Bentley argues, the fifth and central stanza of the poem provides the transition to insight from the “careless” and “potentially irresponsible” fancies of the previous stanza. For Bentley, the breezes, “blithe as they are blind” (Lampman, l. 42), are “purposeless, unobservant, annoying, . . . sensual and rambling.”⁸ The breezes “scarcely heed” the details of the landscape; the speaker does:

And scarcely heed the daisies that, endowed
 With stems so short they cannot see, up-bear
 Their innocent sweet eyes distressed, and stare
 Like children in a crowd. (Lampman, ll. 47-50)

The next stanza describes the enlivening effect of the breezes on a “pale poplar” (Lampman, l. 52), which, as Bentley also argues, “demands to be seen in a manner akin to Coleridge’s Aeolian harp as emblematic of a poetic imagination activated by the energies . . . of external nature.”⁹ At the imaginative height of the greater Romantic lyric, Abrams argues, the speaker “achieves an insight, faces up to a tragic loss, comes to a moral decision, or resolves an emotional problem” (Abrams, p. 528). The speaker in “Among the Timothy” purges his depression by coming to a sympathetic identification with nature. He is thus enabled to leave “The crossing pathways of unbounded thought” (Lampman, l. 34) and gain the “sweet unrest” (Lampman, l. 83) in his concluding epiphany. The poem ends with an account of how “flower and blade, and every cranny brown,” and the speaker are “soaked” with the illuminating and unifying sun (Lampman, ll. 89-90). Like other greater Romantic lyrics, “Among the Timothy” “rounds upon itself to end where it began, at the outer scene, but with an altered mood and deepened understanding which is the result of the intervening meditation” (Abrams, p. 528).

To read “Among the Timothy” as a greater Romantic lyric does not resolve all the issues that the poem raises. In the first place, one is taken aback by the presence of an allegorical mower and an “emblematic” poplar in a “symbolic” landscape. In the second place, one may doubt that all of the details of the speaker’s meditation are “already implicit in the outer scene” (Abrams, p. 551). Nonetheless, an awareness of genre provides a means of relating the poem to its Romantic antecedents. Furthermore, Abrams’ concept of nature poetry is close to that held by Duncan Campbell Scott. “There are but few of Lampman’s poems,” Scott argues in “A Decade of Canadian Poetry,” “that do not lead from nature by a very short path to human life.”¹⁰ Early in his career, in a letter to the anthologist J. E. Wetherell, he implies that in his own poetry the path between nature and human life is equally short: “It is inevitable that we should deal with nature and somewhat largely but I think that it will be found that much of this work rises from and returns again to man and does not exist from and by itself.”¹¹ Finally, in an often-cited passage from his long introduction to Lampman’s *Lyrics of Earth*, Scott argues that a “coalescence of subject and

object" is integral to all nature poetry: "Amiel said 'A landscape is a state of the soul,' and in the apprehension of some such truth lies the sole excuse for poetry in which nature is described; it is only tolerable if it brings with the vision of the world some harmony of the spirit."¹² It should not be surprising if such ideals attracted Scott to the greater Romantic lyric.

"THE HEIGHT OF LAND," written in 1915, is set in the region Scott visited in 1905 and 1906 as a Commissioner for the negotiation of Treaty 9. The poem begins calmly enough: after locating the setting between the Hudson Bay and Lake Superior watersheds, then describing the fading campfire sparks, the speaker gives the following account of his moment of apparent illumination: "Here there is peace in the lofty air, / And Something comes by flashes / Deeper than peace."¹³ As in Abrams' paradigmatic greater Romantic lyric, the speaker appears ready to move from description into a related meditation; in Geddes' precise account of the poem's opening, "nature becomes an incentive to reminiscence and reflection."¹⁴ There is even a general resemblance between Scott's sparks, which "play / At being moths, and flutter away / To fall in the dark and die as ashes" (Scott, ll. 13-15), and the "stranger" that "flutters" playfully on the grate in Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight." There are some important differences between that Romantic lyric and "The Height of Land," however, as the reader begins to realize when the speaker's peaceful intuition does not immediately lead into a meditation. Instead, he returns to description, this time of the stars, then turns to memory. For over half of the poem the speaker vacillates between the past (ll. 25-48) and the present (ll. 49-59), between description and meditation (ll. 60-92), finally moving from the present into an extended memory (ll. 93-113), which is followed by one more return to the present landscape (ll. 114-19), and then by the meditation that concludes the poem. In the first half of the poem, the use of rhyme is fitful, and the verse paragraphs and individual lines vary in length; in the last half, blank verse is used. "The Height of Land" does not conform to the "out-in-out" movement of Abrams' paradigm (Abrams, p. 528), and it does not conform to the "description-vision-evaluation" movement of George Bornstein's adaptation of that paradigm.¹⁵ The effect of the speaker's vacillations to and from the present is to foreground his hesitancy, and thus to heighten the uncertainty of his assertions.

The melancholy mood of "The Height of Land" indicates Scott's reluctance to accept the implications of his desultory meditation. This mood is well established in the opening section, when the speaker hears

the long Ojibwa cadence
In which Potàn the Wise

Declares the ills of life
 And Chees-que-ne-ne makes a mournful sound
 Of acquiescence. (Scott, ll. 7-11)

If this were not enough, the speaker finds the sound of the wind even "wearier" (Scott, l. 6) than the Indians' sounds. That the Indians then fall asleep and disappear from the poem implies that the guidance Scott sought from them was of a geographical rather than a philosophical nature.¹⁶ Later, the speaker relates his melancholia to his isolation: in one direction is the "lonely north . . . Glimmering all night / In the cold arctic light" (Scott, ll. 42-45); in the other is the "crowded southern land / With all the welter of the lives of men" (Scott, ll. 47-48). Although he insists that he has "peace" on the height of land (Scott, l. 49), such peace proves even more transient than his necessarily brief stay in this site in the wilderness. His situation reminds one of Arnold's Empedocles: "With men thou canst not live, / Their thoughts, their ways, their wishes, are not thine; / And being lonely thou art miserable. . . ."¹⁷

In his search for a way out of his plight, the speaker takes a number of tacks. At the end of the poem's first verse paragraph, he looks for an harmonious correspondence between the cosmic and the natural: "The spruces have retired a little space / And left a field of sky in violet shadow / With stars like marigolds in a water-meadow" (Scott, ll. 19-21). The flower-star analogy is a frequent component of the argument from design, as in Shelley's *The Sensitive Plant*, where, in Earl R. Wasserman's words, the analogy "takes on ontological meaning and establishes a relationship between earth and heaven."¹⁸ Scott's speaker, however, is unable to maintain the sense of a benevolent and ordered universe. As the poem develops, his Huxleyan sense of the divorce between the ethical and the cosmic becomes stronger. The beginning of "The Height of Land" seems to move in the direction of *The Sensitive Plant*, but by the ending the stars are no longer symbols of permanence:

How strange the stars have grown;
 The presage of extinction glows on their crests
 And they are beautied with impermanence;
 They shall be after the race of men
 And mourn for them who snared their fiery pinions,
 Entangled in the meshes of bright words. (Scott, ll. 114-19)

Both human life and the evolving universe are mutable, though in varying degrees. The stars may survive "the race of men," but not their own inevitable "extinction." The speaker is able to recognize that impermanence may be a source of beauty, but the "pathetic fallacy" in the statement that the stars will "mourn for" humanity indicates his inability to dissociate impermanence from a sense of loss. Equally disturbing is his realization of the limitations of language. Since it is impossible to decide whether it is the poet or the stars that are "En-

tangled in the meshes of bright words," this passage is an instance of those limitations. In either case, Scott suggests that the relation between language and nature is problematic.

As a consequence of his ambivalent attitude towards beauty and impermanence, the speaker is aware of both the appeal and the terror of nature. His first impulse is to appreciate the austere beauty of the North:

On a wide blueberry plain
 Brushed with the shimmer of a bluebird's wing;
 A rocky islet followed
 With one lone poplar and a single nest
 Of white-throat-sparrows that took no rest
 But sang in dreams or woke to sing. (Scott, ll. 34-39)

Later in the poem, "the pungent fume / Of charred earth" (Scott, ll. 96-97) causes the speaker to remember another and more terrifying landscape:

The last weird lakelet foul with weedy growths
 And slimy viscid things the spirit loathes,
 Skin of vile water over viler mud
 Where the paddle stirred unutterable stenches,
 And the canoes seemed heavy with fear,
 Not to be urged toward the fatal shore
 Where a bush fire, smouldering, with sudden roar
 Leaped on a cedar and smothered it with light
 And terror. (Scott, ll. 100-08)

Scott's subsequent allusion, in the phrase "Eft-minded things" (Scott, l. 121), to Browning's "Caliban upon Setebos," implies that he accepts Browning's critique of natural theology. Caliban, it will be recalled, feels the "eft-things course" about his spine before he describes the deformed God that he has created in his own image.¹⁹ The point here is not that the Canadian wilderness is inimical to the religious or Romantic sensibility, but only that it is incompatible with naïve ideals of primitivism and progress. From Charles Sangster to Rudy Wiebe, there have been many religious responses to the sublimity of the Canadian wilderness, but "The Height of Land" is not one of them.

The various citations from Scott's criticism about the psychological significance of nature poetry are not corroborated by a close reading of "The Height of Land." Geddes notes that "although the landscape is technically a state of soul, the image of the predatory bush-fire seems rather to have been dragged up involuntarily from the poet's subconscious than to have resulted from a conscious search for secondary correspondences."²⁰ Scott's belief that nature poetry "is only tolerable if it brings with the vision of the world some harmony of the spirit" does not explain his procedure in "The Height of Land." It is difficult to maintain that Scott here makes "explicit what was already implicit in the outer scene"

(Abrams, p. 551). There are too many “outer scenes” in the poem, and they cannot be resolved into one landscape. The best one can do — and it is not much — is to argue that the duality of nature corresponds to a similar duality in man, who is the author of both “noble deeds” (Scott, l. 83) and of the “welter” of civilization (Scott, l. 48). D. G. Jones offers the following psychological interpretation of Scott:

Certainly Scott is aware of the darkness as well as the glory, of the potential violence as well as the sweetness of nature’s ferocious energy, of the difficulty of comprehending such a world as Jehovah unfolds before Job and, more especially, of man’s frequent failure to comprehend such a world so that its vitality may flow harmoniously into the forms of human life.²¹

Although one can sympathize with Jones’ and others’ attempts to make Scott into a literary height of land between the lonely nineteenth century and the welter of the contemporary world, in this poem there is no hope that nature’s vitality can “flow harmoniously into the forms of human life,” no suggestion that man’s failure to comprehend can be remedied, and little resemblance to Sheila Watson’s *The Double Hook*. Because in “The Height of Land” the significance of nature resides in its distance from humanity, the poem does not support Jones’ thesis that Scott, like Lampman, advised his readers “to escape from the garrison” in order to discover “a more vital community, a larger and more inclusive view” in the wilderness.

Between the retrospective passages on the beauty and terror of nature comes the speaker’s description of his present mood:

But here is peace, and again
That Something comes by flashes
Deeper than peace — a spell
Golden and inappellable
That gives the inarticulate part
Of our strange being one moment of release. . . . (Scott, ll. 49-54)

K. P. Stich argues that Scott’s “spell” is “inappellable” in two senses: “on the one hand, the spell . . . is inappellable in the sense of unnameable and reflects something divine; on the other hand, the spell is inappellable and evokes fate or an ultimate prison from which the poet’s words cannot release him.”²² Somewhat surprisingly, the *OED* supports only the second of these interpretations: there “inappellable” is defined as meaning “That cannot be appealed against; from which there is no appeal.” “Inappellable” is actually synonymous with “inappealable,” which the *OED* regards as obsolete. But even if Stich’s argument is accepted, it is clear that a synthesis of nature and the “spell” is not possible, and thus the landscape never does become a symbolic one. For de Man, the Coleridgean organic symbol is based on “an illusory identification with the non-self”; in Wordsworth’s poetry, de Man argues, the temptation to identify with

nature is resisted, and that resistance leads “to the unveiling of an authentically temporal destiny.”²³ De Man’s argument makes one less inclined to discuss “The Height of Land” as a failure. It also enables one to reconsider the terms of Roy Daniells’ summary indictment of Scott: “Unlike those English Romantics who moved into the wilder hills along the avenues of pastoral tradition or cheerful pantheism, Scott has trouble in interpenetrating nature with human life.”²⁴ Here Scott is criticized for not achieving a goal that he implicitly rejects in “The Height of Land.” Moreover, Scott knew that there is more to Wordsworth than “cheerful pantheism.” Earlier in his career he praised *The Prelude* for its depiction of the disjunction between man and nature: “Man is anxious to be carried away and awed by something outside himself, . . . but when he confronts the fact he finds it perfectly natural, and that he was greater than it after all.” He then adds that the disappointment of such an experience soon fades: “But I find that, as a matter of course and by some generic law, the imaginative idea resumes its place, and is if anything heightened by remembrance.”²⁵ Scott is critically aware of the complexities of memory, which can never be entirely faithful because it acts according to the “law” of its imaginative mediation, and because the poetic context is at least as important as the historical “source.”

After the “spell,” the sounds of the wilderness resume, and “The ancient disturber of solitude / Breathes a pervasive sigh” (Scott, ll. 63-64). Kelly, who interprets the poem as a “transcendent encounter,” argues that the “ancient disturber” is probably identical with the parallel “region-spirit” in the following lines.²⁶ I would argue that the “ancient disturber” is a projection of the speaker’s own sigh at the inevitable cessation of his “spell.” His use of the verb “seems” reveals his uncertainty:

the soul seems to hear
 The gathering of the waters at their sources;
 Then quiet ensues and pure starlight and dark;
 The region-spirit murmurs in meditation,
 The heart replies in exaltation
 And echoes faintly like an inland shell
 Ghost tremors of the spell. (Scott, ll. 65-71)

The last simile implies that the “meditation” that the speaker would like to think is external to him is really the echo of his own thoughts, just as the roaring sound we hear in a shell is an echo of ourselves. He never does attain a sense of a “region-spirit,” and by the end of the poem he no longer expects to.

The speaker’s inability to proceed smoothly from the “spell” to nature or to humanity is clear in the following lines: “Thought reawakens and is linked again / With all the welter of the lives of men” (Scott, ll. 72-73). His reference to the reawakening of thought suggests that his “spell” is an evasion, rather than a culmination, of thought. Furthermore, the apparently necessary connection be-

tween thought and humanity undercuts his attempt to establish the site “Here on the uplands where the air is clear” (Scott, l. 74) as a privileged one for meditation. The brief epiphany that he locates on the height of land will not suffice; the clarity that he gains is a consequence of a simplistic vision:

And here, where we can think, on the bright uplands
Where the air is clear, we deeply brood on life
Until the tempest parts, and it appears
As simple as to the shepherd seems his flock:
A Something to be guided by ideals —
That in themselves are simple and serene. . . . (Scott, ll. 77-81)

The key word is “appears”: at this distance from civilization, life may seem as essentially simple as a shepherd’s existence, but such a conception is irreconcilable with the twice-mentioned view of life as a “welter,” a view that returns at the conclusion of the poem. The speaker formulates an ideal involving the interpenetration of “noble thought” and “noble deed, . . . Making life lovelier . . .” (Scott, ll. 83-86). Scott’s following metaphor for this interpenetration stresses the fragility of the ideal:

Thus we have seen in the retreating tempest
The victor-sunlight merge with the ruined rain,
And from the rain and sunlight spring the rainbow.

(Scott, ll. 90-92)

Such an ideal is at once primitivistic, in that it is modelled on the shepherd’s “simple” relation to his “flock,” and progressivist, in that it projects life’s qualitative improvement into the future. The ideal thus constitutes a double temptation for the nostalgic speaker, though it bears no relation to the immediate landscape, which shows no evidence of either primitive harmony or of progress.

After this section come the previously-quoted passages on the “lakelet foul with weedy growths” and on the “impermanence” of the stars. The former passage provides a critique of the speaker’s previous primitivism, while the latter underlines the futility of his progressivist hopes. Instead of then rounding “upon itself to end where it began, at the outer scene, but with an altered mood and deepened understanding . . .” (Abrams, p. 528), “The Height of Land” ends inconclusively, with a long series of five questions expressing Scott’s reservations about the concept of progress. An awareness of the differences between Abrams’ account of the greater Romantic lyric and Scott’s poem makes it difficult to agree with Pelham Edgar and others that the conclusion of Scott’s poem is triumphant. “The summit levels,” Edgar argues, “become for [Scott] a peak of vision, a spiritual height of land whence in the watches of the night he envisages the poet of the future and the burden of his message to the race.”²⁷ Scott does not so much “envisage” the future poet as imply that the questions now asked will

remain unanswered. The “burden” of this scepticism is a heavy one; as Scott writes later in “At Derwentwater,” it elicits “a sadness / of which it is vain to tell”:

It was not the fleeting beauty
That gave the lasting pain,
The stars shall rise in their courses,
Day shall dawn again;
I thought on the ultimate secret, —
Long after the light had flown —
That lies beyond all appearance
And cannot be known.²⁸

Immediately before the first of his five concluding questions, the speaker turns from the present dawn to future dawns:

How often in the autumn of the world
Shall the crystal shrine of dawning be rebuilt
With deeper meaning! (Scott, ll. 123-25)

It is an exclamation that will acquire some of the force of a question as his certainty recedes. First, however, the speaker attempts to read a temporal symbolism into the landscape, so that the watersheds on either side would represent the past and the future. At the height of this attempt, in the third question, he wonders whether the future poet shall “stand”

With deeper joy, with more complex emotion,
In closer commune with divinity,
With the deep fathomed, with the firmament charted,
With life as simple as a sheep-boy’s song,
What lies beyond a romaunt that was read
Once on a morn of storm and laid aside
Memorious with strange immortal memories? (Scott, ll. 135-42)

Once again, he is lured by a progressivist optimism, and once again the pastoral diction in the phrase “simple as a sheep-boy’s song” implies that the hopes are actually projections of a primitivist nostalgia. Even if the future were to see “the deep fathomed” and “the firmament charted,” it by no means follows that such scientific advances will bring “closer commune with divinity.” As “Meditation at Perugia” reveals, Scott knew that the claims of science and religion are not so easily reconciled.

So it is that the conjunction “Or” at the beginning of the next question indicates that the speaker must consider the alternative vision:

Or shall he [the future poet] see the sunrise as I see it
In shoals of misty fire the deluge-light
Dashes upon and whelms with purer radiance . . . ?

(Scott, ll. 143-45)

According to this vision, there is no symbolic height of land between the past and the future, and there is no “deeper meaning” (Scott, l. 125) to be discovered in the dawn. As the last question suggests, if the speaker stands “At the zenith of our wisdom,” then the most that the future poet can obtain is a repetition of this vivid but indeterminate experience:

O Life is intuition the measure of knowledge
 And do I stand with heart entranced and burning
 At the zenith of our wisdom when I feel
 The long light flow, the long wind pause, the deep
 Influx of spirit, of which no man may tell
 The Secret, golden and inappellable? (Scott, ll. 152-57)

With these lines the poem achieves a satisfyingly tentative closure: the assonance in “feel” and “deep,” the half-rhyme of “tell” and “inappellable,” the repetition of words used earlier in the poem — all these bring the poem to a conclusion while the interrogative form prevents a false conclusiveness. There is a significant variation in the repeated phrases: earlier the speaker said that “yet no man may tell / The secret of that spell” (Scott, ll. 57-58); now he declares that “no man may tell / The Secret.” The omission of “yet” and the capitalization of “Secret” emphasize the incomprehensibility of life, while cancelling the expectation that this incomprehensibility will ever be alleviated.

The last question is the only one of the five in the present tense and also the poem’s only apostrophe. According to Jonathan Culler, the apostrophe “works against narrative and its accompaniments: sequentiality, causality, time, teleological meaning.”²⁹ Those narrative “accompaniments” roughly coincide with the aspects of Abrams’ account of the greater Romantic lyric that are conspicuously absent from “The Height of Land.” Culler suggests that we can “distinguish two forces in poetry, the narrative and the apostrophobic, and that the lyric is characteristically the triumph of the apostrophobic.” In “The Height of Land” that triumph comes as a thematic defeat. Turning away from his quest into the wilderness and his concern for the future to consider the status of his poem, the speaker finds that his ultimate question is dependent on what Culler terms “a trope, an *O*.” Instead of reaching the symbolic watershed of the old and the new, or of the civilized and the natural, the speaker finds that, in Gordon Johnston’s words, “the stunning fact about a watershed . . . is that things look very much the same on either side. That is, the polarity is artificial; the border is a line drawn by reason, and is comic. It provokes questions about distinctions of all kinds.”³⁰ Accordingly, to say that the past is dead and the future powerless to be born presupposes a certainty that the poem will not allow. Instead, to echo Scott’s comment on *The Prelude*, “The Height of Land” ends by calling attention to the gap between the “imaginative idea” and the disappointing natural

“fact,” and by tentatively equating a consciousness of that gap with “the zenith of our wisdom” (Scott, l. 154).

ALTHOUGH MY ANALYSIS has argued that “The Height of Land” cannot be reconciled with Abrams’ conception of the greater Romantic lyric, it also argues that Abrams provides an important point of departure. Particularly valuable is Abrams’ emphasis on the Romantic poem as a mental act: as Bornstein argues, in Romanticism and after “title and setting often simply indicate the place in which an act of mind occurs, and the act itself is the true subject of the poem”; the greater Romantic lyric, he adds, is especially suited to “the shape of imaginative experience.”³¹ I have not attempted to define Scott as a Romantic; rather, I have situated him “within the context of the nineteenth century,” where, in Geddes’ words, “most of his best verse belongs.”³²

Criticism of Confederation poetry needs to avoid the kind of narrow compartmentalization recently attacked by William C. Spengemann:

Romantic literature is writing of a certain *kind*. Victorian literature is the work of a particular *time*. And American literature comes from a certain *place*. As a result, neither are the three subcategories logically compatible, establishing some necessary relation among Romantic, Victorian, and American works, nor are they mutually exclusive, precluding the existence, say, of a Romantic work written in America during the Victorian period.³³

Can we not say that our major critics, such as W. E. Collin, E. K. Brown, A. J. M. Smith, Desmond Pacey, Northrop Frye, and Louis Dudek, among others, have avoided the “provinciality” of which Spengemann complains in American studies? Our best writers are not diminished by the realization that they are not the voices of a national self-reliance, a Canadian Adam, or the flowering of New Brunswick. In “Poetry and Progress,” Scott made his own position clear:

We talk too often and too lengthily about Canadian poetry and Canadian literature as if it was, or ought to be, a special and peculiar brand, but it is simply poetry, or not poetry; literature or not literature; it must be judged by established standards, and cannot escape criticism by special pleading.³⁴

Recently, the nineteenth century, particularly English Romanticism, has been the focus for much of the most interesting literary theory and criticism of our time. There is every reason to believe that a renewed investigation of the Confederation poets’ nineteenth-century contexts will confirm their importance and amplify our sense of their achievements.

NOTES

- ¹ Keith, "Editors and Texts: Reflections on Some Recent Anthologies of Canadian Poetry," rev. of *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse in English*, ed. and introd. Margaret Atwood, and *Canadian Poetry, Volume One and Volume Two*, eds. Jack David and Robert Lecker, introd. George Woodcock, *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews*, 12 (Spring/Summer 1983), p. 83; Mathews, "Margaret Atwood: Survivalism," rpt. from *This Magazine is About Schools in Canadian Literature: Surrender or Revolution*, ed. Gail Dexter (Toronto: Steel Rail, 1978), p. 124; Kelly, "Meanings Held in a Mist: The Major Poems," in *The Duncan Campbell Scott Symposium*, ed. and introd. K. P. Stich (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1980), p. 37.
- ² In *Duncan Campbell Scott: A Book of Criticism* (Ottawa: Tecumseh, 1974), p. 163. Hereafter cited as "Dragland."
- ³ "Literary Criticism in Canada," rpt. from *University of Toronto Quarterly* (1950) in *Essays in Canadian Criticism 1938-1968* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1969), p. 48. The next citation is from p. 46.
- ⁴ "Criticism in Crisis," rpt. from *Arion* (1967) in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, rev. ed., introd. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 13.
- ⁵ *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), p. 62.
- ⁶ "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric," in *From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Frederick A. Pottle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 527-28. Subsequent citations from this article will be included in the text, after the designation "Abrams."
- ⁷ *The Poems of Archibald Lampman (including At the Long Sault)*, ed. and introd. Margaret Coulby Whitridge; memoir by Duncan Campbell Scott (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), p. 14, ll. 7-10. Subsequent citations from this poem will be included in the text, after the designation "Lampman."
- ⁸ "Watchful Dreams and Sweet Unrest: An Essay on the Vision of Archibald Lampman, Part II," *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 7, No. 1 (1982), 20-21.
- ⁹ "Watchful Dreams, Part II," 21.
- ¹⁰ "A Decade of Canadian Poetry," rpt. from *The Canadian Magazine* (1901) in *Twentieth-Century Essays on Confederation Literature*, ed. and introd. Lorraine McMullen (Ottawa: Tecumseh, 1976), p. 114.
- ¹¹ "To J. E. Wetherell," 13 November 1892, *More Letters of Duncan Campbell Scott*, ed. and introd. Arthur S. Bourinot (Ottawa: Bourinot, 1960), p. 68.
- ¹² Introd., *Lyrics of Earth, Sonnets, and Ballads*, ed. Scott (Toronto: Musson Book Company, 1925), p. 44.
- ¹³ In *The Poems of Duncan Campbell Scott* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1926), p. 46, ll. 16-18. Subsequent citations, for which I have provided the line numbers, will be included in the text, after the designation "Scott."
- ¹⁴ "Piper of Many Tunes: Duncan Campbell Scott," rpt. from *Canadian Literature* (1968) in *Dragland*, p. 167.
- ¹⁵ *Transformations of Romanticism in Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 51.
- ¹⁶ For an important account of Scott's relations with the Indians, see John Flood, "The Duplicity of D. C. Scott and the James Bay Treaty," *Black Moss*, Second Series, 2 (Fall 1976), pp. 50-63.

- ¹⁷ *Empedocles on Etna: A Dramatic Poem*, in *Poetry and Criticism of Matthew Arnold*, ed. A. Dwight Culler (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), p. 63, II.i. 18-20. What are we to make of E. K. Brown's two contrary comments on Scott's resemblance to Arnold? In 1943, he writes that "even Arnold was not so dubious as Scott here shows himself in his formulation of the Being that lies within nature and lends to it its deepest meaning"; "Duncan Campbell Scott," rpt. from *On Canadian Poetry* (1943) in Dragland, p. 90. Eight years later, he finds that Scott "has a faith firmer than Arnold could attain"; "Memoir," in *Selected Poems of Duncan Campbell Scott*, ed. Brown (Toronto: Ryerson, 1951), p. xxvii. There is indeed little agreement on the meaning of "The Height of Land."
- ¹⁸ *Shelley: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), p. 160.
- ¹⁹ In *The Poems, Volume One*, eds. John Pettigrew and Thomas J. Collins (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 805, l. 5.
- ²⁰ In Dragland, p. 167.
- ²¹ *Butterfly on Rock: A Study of Themes and Images in Canadian Literature* (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1970), p. 106. The subsequent citation is from p. 166.
- ²² "North of Blue Ontario's Shore: Spells of Emerson and Whitman in D. C. Scott's Poetry," *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews*, 12 (Spring/Summer 1983), p. 7.
- ²³ "The Rhetoric of Temporality," rpt. from *Interpretation*, ed. Charles Singleton (1969) in *Blindness*, pp. 207, 206.
- ²⁴ "Crawford, Carman, and D. C. Scott," in *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English*, ed. Carl F. Klinck et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 421.
- ²⁵ In a column of 24 June 1893, in *At the Mermaid Inn: Wilfred Campbell, Archibald Lampman, and Duncan Campbell Scott in The Globe 1892-93*, introd. Barrie Davies (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), p. 338.
- ²⁶ "In the Listening World: The Poetry of Duncan Campbell Scott," *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 4, No. 1 (Winter 1979), 76.
- ²⁷ "Canadian Poetry," rpt. from *The Bookman* (1919) in *Twentieth-Century Essays*, ed. McMullen, p. 125.
- ²⁸ In *The Circle of Affection and Other Pieces in Prose and Verse* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1947), p. 78. The resemblance of "At Derwentwater" to "The Height of Land" is noted in William Paul Denham, "Music and Painting in the Poetry of Duncan Campbell Scott," M.A. Thesis, Western Ontario 1964, p. 80.
- ²⁹ "Apostrophe," in *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (1981; rpt. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 148. The following citations are from pp. 149 and 152.
- ³⁰ "The Significance of Scott's Minor Poems," in *Scott Symposium*, p. 14.
- ³¹ Bornstein, pp. 2, 53.
- ³² In Dragland, p. 165.
- ³³ "Three Blind Men and an Elephant: The Problem of Nineteenth-Century English," *New Literary History*, XIV, No. 1 (Autumn 1982), 155. The subsequent reference is to 158.

³⁴ Scott's 1922 Presidential Address to the Royal Society of Canada is rpt. in *Dragland*, p. 10.

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FIVE POEMS

Antonino Mazza

ARS POETICA

There is a splintering in our planet
and the ocean goes up and splashes as high
as a Sanscrit prayer
and falls in an abyss of birds!
There is a deafening joy everywhere,
smashing like a bowling ball into ten pines.

Our comet was made by a master jeweler
out of electricity.
We play on it as on an Ondes Martenot
in fifty tones

and dance
thinly, mathematically, inventing every second.

FOREST

In the autumn it is good to eat roots in the woods
when the sun is a warm friend
and blueness is everywhere harder than nuts
solitude is a gray dog circling an empty bottle

in the autumn it is good to eat wind in the woods
we are alone because someone forgot our names
in the night in the night
a tiger is circling an empty bottle
luminously empty like god's mouth