

SCOTT'S "LAKESHORE" AND ITS TRADITION

(For A. J. M. Smith)

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FRANK SCOTT'S POEM "Lakeshore" first appeared in *Events and Signals* (1954), a volume that bore as its epigraph the words "between the event and the observer there must pass a signal — a wave, an impulse, or perhaps a ray of light." *Events and Signals* provides a broad conspectus of the state of Scott's art in 1954, and the volume stands, Janus-like, facing backward on the terse and satiric modernism of the poems in *New Provinces* (1936) and *Overtures* (1945), and forward to the reflective, yet experimental modes of the *Eye of the Needle*, *Signature*, *Trouvailles*, and *The Dance is One*, the latest of which was published in 1973. When Scott issued his *Selected Poems* in 1966, "Lakeshore" was placed at the beginning, as if to constitute a signal itself, a definition of the poet's vision and a statement of his art which provides a necessary prelude to confrontation with the whole man.

What kind of signal does "Lakeshore" constitute? What event does it record, and to what observer is the message sent? We need to know, in order to resolve the problem — often voiced by readers — of the meaning of the poem's ending. Is the figure of the poet musing alone on Ararat an image of contemporary disillusion, or is the fact that he has survived his Flood the expression of some kind of blessing? One route to an answer is through an exploration of the richness of the poem itself, not merely the complex interweaving of its biological and Biblical themes, but its intricate and beautiful texture. Such an exploration leads us not only to a new view of the poem, but to several other perceptions as well: a sense of "Lakeshore"'s original literary context, its meaning for Scott's art, and particularly a recognition of the extent to which it articulates a solution to the problem of man in nature which has been tested out by other Canadian poets before and since, though rarely with such mastery.

"Lakeshore"'s point of departure is a visual image striking not only in its exactitude, but in its unexpected point of view:

The lake is sharp along the shore
Trimming the bevelled edge of land
To level curves. . . .

This is the archetypal lake — Northern, one supposes — of Canadian poetry and painting. But although Scott sees it pictorially, he does not treat it as if the subject were a static one. Rather, the lake is an agent, carpentering its place in the visual ground as it trims and orders the earth around it. Yet the border between water and shore is not as sharp as we at first think:

the fretted sands
 Go slanting down through liquid air
 Till stones below shift here and there
 Floating upon their broken sky
 All netted by the prism wave
 And rippled where the currents are.

Through this amphibious medium the sands fretted by the carpenter's saw descend into the medium that works at them until the very visual ground itself shifts and inverts, and the stones beneath the water seem to move upward and float upon the broken surface that is their sky, though it is at our feet. The world is turned upside down, yet the inversion is not disorienting, for the stanza ends with the floating components of the scene serenely "netted" by the now prismatic water, which still works variations in the surface of the lake by the internal force of its own currents.

The stanza establishes a thematic opposition between the rigid delineation of boundary lines and the gathering of disordered fragments into unified wholes which turns out to have technical, structural, and eventually moral implications for the development of the poem as a whole, and which can be seen even in its metrical features. A steady, four-beat line is the prosodic unit throughout the poem, and imposes upon its internal shifts and inversions a containing net like that of the prism wave, while at the same time allowing other, more irregular forces to act. For example, "Lakeshore" is not in any usual sense rhymed after the first stanza. In the lines we have just looked at, a pattern exists: a, b, b² [*land / sands*], c, c, d, e, c² [*air / there / are*]. This looks like rhyme at first, but in fact the expectations Scott establishes include those of half-rhyme, and there is considerable internal rhyme and assonance: *bevelled / level; level / fretted; sands / slanting; stones / floating / broken; netted / rippled*. Thus, the poem, like its subject, moves amphibiously between two worlds, one rigorously ordered and controlled, the other yielding, shifting, and changing, but like the prismatic wave full of many different ways of seeing.

It is upon this metamorphic scene that the poet gazes:

I stare through windows at this cave
 Where fish, like planes, slow-motioned, fly.
 Poised in a still of gravity.

The image of his eyes as "windows" recalls the severe, almost reductive carpentering of the first lines. Earlier our vision had been led downward through a lucent

and yielding medium into another world. Now, through his “windows” the poet stares, not *down into*, but *at* a scene which he describes as a “cave.” The word “cave,” unexpectedly applied to the jewel-like underwater scene of the first lines, suggests another distinction between shore and lake. The lake, seen as cave, belongs to a primitive world before historical time, and the poet on the shore to its opposite: the sophisticated dimension of temporal experience. That the distinction between them is tragic is clear from the impoverishment of true seeing suggested in the strangled words, “stares at.”

The stillness of the staring poet is reproduced in a different way in the scene upon which he gazes. His only idiom for describing this draws upon similitudes from the windowed world he lives in: the fish are like “planes,” the suspension of law he senses is described as “a still of gravity.” And the line itself is full of expressive halts and stoppages. The light by which he sees all this is *like* the sun, only paler and of a different colour. The lines tell us that the poet and the world out of which he gazes are unilingual, perhaps even inarticulate, that they lack words and images for experiences other than their own.

YET AT THE SAME TIME, the poem is speaking to us almost privately in a language which is quite different from this constricted idiom; it is more fun, for one thing. Scott’s word-stock has the simplicity and clarity of the language of a poem by Ben Jonson — “store,” “cave,” “still,” “hangs,” “open.” But at the same time as he is presenting us with this limpid linguistic medium, he is playing with the currents in it, in such lines as

The narrow minnow, flicking fin,
Hangs in a paler, ochre sun,
His doorways open everywhere.

The stoppages in “where fish, like planes, slow-motioned, fly” seem to express the watcher’s own constraints, but balanced against this is the delicious rapport between “narrow” and “minnow,” “flicking” and “fin,” “paler” and “ochre.” And in its terminations this stanza relies not on rhyme and half-rhyme but on a few simple cases of assonance that open up alternatives in the method of the poem at the same time as the grave and regular metre provides a source of strength.

These prismatic possibilities the windowed poet can sense at the end of the stanza, when he realizes the fish’s relationship with his environment — his doorways are open everywhere — and implicitly contrasts it with his own sequestration. The image of “doorways” is still drawn from his earlier repertoire, but recognizing their openness takes him over an important boundary. Suddenly metamorphosed into a thing of nature himself, a tall frond leaning into a marine inversion of the

world in which it is nevertheless rooted, he bends to seek another light, another forest.

Scott's control of image, prosody, and diction in this poem is almost perfect. Only twice does it loosen for a moment; once here, in the flaccid line "vivid with gloom and eerie dreams" which is meant to suggest the dreamlike "otherness" of the inverted world beneath the water, but really just seems effect for effect's sake. He does the same thing, although without such costly results, when towards the end of the poem the swimmers rise towards the surface with "mermaids in their memories." This want of vigour is oddly unlike the rest of the poem, which is much tougher and more rigorous, as we can see when Scott begins to shape for us that which *seems* like dream to the descending poet, but which is to constitute a discovery of the "home that stirs the dark amphibian," that is, the ultimate reality of the experience of primal being.

Entering the water, the poet has seen himself metamorphosed for an instant into the vegetable frond, rooted on the shore though searching downward into an element mysteriously more natural to it. But Scott's real interest is in the somatic responses of human flesh — its eyes, orifices, loins — and he abandons the vegetable metaphor to explore an image which extends itself over almost all the rest of the poem: that of the body of the poet descending into the deepest of the water's colonnades, the currents of its physical rivers contracted as it strives to return to a place which is both its metaphysical centre and its point of historical origin. This experience is not a solitary one, for with him others come of their own will, naked swimmers drawn likewise to their beginnings. The image is riveting: through the water the bodies fall home "like tumbled water loosed above," not rooted like the poet, but liquid like the medium that gave them birth. "Stroked by the fingertips of love," they lie "diagonal," a seemingly ordering, but in accord with another geometry than that of the severe shore above. They fall not into water, but into what the water means: a *locus amoenus*, this sheltered grove, the place where being originated, and where the act of creation takes place again in the act of love.

Scott, however, tries to state what union in an ideal state of being means in terms that take us beyond the not unexpected sexual image. His words contradict the watching poet's original vision of the inverted marine world in stanza two, which seemed at first a curious simulacrum of the world above. He writes,

Silent, our sport is drowned in fact
Too virginal for speech or sound,
And each is personal and laned
Along his private aqueduct.

To see what Scott sees here, we have to go back to two words used earlier in the poem: "amphibian" and "prehistoric," both of which suggest conditions of being and of time that mark the "otherness" of the world beneath the prism wave. What makes this home stir us is the integrity of being suggested by "amphibian": able to

move in both elements. And this integrity of being exists in a world *before* the inception of human time, in fact, before creation. Thus it is that the amorous sport of the naked swimmers is drowned in its turn by the fact of the silent confrontation with true being which is its result: a climax without speech, or sound, and in its virgin character, beyond even the beginnings of things. In this climax, each is created as his own self. He is "personal and laned"; not alone and sequestered, but private within his aqueduct, the river of his own being.

The staring poet has thus, in moving out of his windowed isolation, reversed time. First a frond, he has then become a swimmer, then a perfected primal being as he has returned home. There is a sudden and painful contrast, then, between this tranquil completion and the anguished reversion to the historical body of evolved man which now occurs. The late-acquired lungs demand in their turn the medium for which they were developed, and the swimmers rise towards the prison of their ground, the shore, the pain of unfulfilled desire aching in their bodies. Of the experience of discovering their origins only the mermaids remain, creatures half of one element, half of another, and entirely fictive.

With the swimmers' return, there is a marked change in the rhetoric of "Lakeshore." If we contrast this and the following passages with the opening lines of the poem, we find that Scott has passed from the implicit, the pictorial, the metaphorical, to a poetry of direct statement. At the beginning, the existence of two worlds is set out for us through a direct exposition of the marine one, which in its turn indirectly creates our picture of the world above the waters, in part by making the poet fixed behind his window its exemplar. The verbal medium of the seventh stanza is altogether tenser and more direct: the moment occurs "too soon," the lungs are "tethered," "taut," and "straining," the wings are "undeveloped," the ground a "prison," and the experience of loss is "anguish." It is as if a pressure like the need for air had developed in the poem itself, and in the second last stanza it explodes in a firmly stated, indeed sententious summary of the issues that have been called up by the experience of going underwater and returning:

This is our talent, to have grown
Upright in posture, false-erect,
A landed gentry, circumspect,
Tied to a horizontal soil
The floor and ceiling of the soul.

It is the vehemence of the satirist that bursts out here. Scott's vision is one of hopeless disillusion at the consequences of the emergence of primal man into historical time. The image of the talent calls up Biblical associations, yet implies that the gift of this talent brought with it a curse. What follows is a direct and painful exposure of what we had seen before only in the person of the poet peering from his windows at the cave, and trying to name its features in his imperfect idiom. We are upright, but falsely so, powerful in our possession of land, yet (in

a dizzying bit of word-play) "circumspect," somehow possessed by it. Tied to the horizontal plane of earth, we are in fact without dimension, for earth has become both floor and ceiling of our souls. Ruthlessly Scott exploits the language of this impoverished condition to describe our futile attempts to make a new existence in the old image,

Striving with cold and fishy care
To make an ocean of the air,

and we are reminded for a bitter instant of the loveliness of the "narrow minnow, flicking fin . . . his doorways open everywhere." In the truth and permanence of the experience of primal being, it is the world of upright man that has become the inversion.

"LAKESHORE" BEGAN WITH THE POET observing the natural world of the lake at his feet: active, organic, and shimmering with prismatic visions. It ends with him looking upon another scene, the crowded urban world of the city street, at once the demonic opposite of the pastoral vision, and the consequence of our historic growth through and past that vision. There is a contrast in the types of moment involved which is worth noticing. In stanza two, the poet says "I stare," and this hypothesizes a single event, which takes place at the beginning of a narrative time in which we are guided from that beginning through a single experience, the descent, towards a single moment of vision, "too virginal for speech or sound." Stanza nine begins "sometimes," and thus changes our perspective on the poem's time of enactment. What happens now happens more than once; not frequently, perhaps, but "sometimes," and it is an experience that the poet can enter again and again as nature continues her processes around the life of evolved man. It is as if the currents of stanza one were still in action, the prism wave still netting and gathering all together, though in the darker and more ironic context of the world of history and experience, not the timeless "still of gravity" beneath the waters' broken sky. But Scott is ruthless here as well. Between the poet and our original element the experience of history does stand. In the early stanzas, we could see the effects of this in the blunting of experience which led to the poet's sequestration behind his windows, between "the floor and ceiling of the soul," and to his inability to describe the cave in terms other than those limited ones he already knew. Here we see it in a different, and in its turn, evolved way. Time and its events *within* the poem have changed the poet's perspective, and we recognize it in the verbs he uses: before, it was "I stare." Now he says, "I feel," "I hear," "watching," "I muse," and the deliberateness of their succession suggests a process of growth, from simple natural sensual perceptions, through

another kind of seeing than the fixed incomprehension of the earlier part of the poem, to thought itself.

As might be expected, the effect of this growth towards the unique human evolutionary development of thought is painful, full of loss, not like the silent sport of the naked swimmers of stanza six. The poet hears the opening of a gate and sees all of watery nature loosed upon the created world around him, and what he watches is a drowning, the apparent apocalypse which God decreed when He saw that "the wickedness of man was great in the earth and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5). Yet we remember the meaning of water in this poem — it is our healer, our connector, our originating element — and we recall also the drowning of stanza six, when the experiencing of primal fact from before the beginning of human time led to the recreation of the integrity of being, and each swimmer was "personal and laned / Along his private aqueduct." On this occasion, the poet lives the experience *in* time, not *before* it, and the result is not the discovery of ultimate self in all its integrity, but something less perfect, more tarnished by time and loss. He is simply "alone." But his solitude has a special character. Though alone, he thinks. Indeed, if he is punning on "muse," he writes poetry, and laughs. And though all around him was drowned, he does remain, on Ararat like Noah, an emblem of the compassion of the fullness of being, of timeless nature's entry into the inexorable process of history to ensure the completeness of creation by the saving of the one man who has been "righteous before me in this generation."

Thus it is that though the poet in solitude may be watching the death of the world he knows around him, he is, by virtue of three things, watching its re-creation as well. The first is the richness of implication which the image of water has born for us as a building, connecting, creating medium since the beginning of the poem.¹ The second is Ararat, the sudden but extraordinarily fruitful Biblical allusion that appears covenant-like at the end, to confirm our sense of the value of at least part of our historical experience, and suggest that it will not be swept away. The third is the process of growth that goes on in the poet himself as the poem proceeds from the staring wonder of his first vision of the lake, to a return to his own original being, to the loosing of satiric language that seems to take place as the result of this, to the crowning experience of thought that visits him when, in the presence of the tragedy of historical time, he is able to generate an image of a nature whose processes return to recreate the world again and again, and within which he can meditate on the possibility of new beginnings.

The contexts of "Lakeshore," which we can consider only briefly here, seem to me of two sorts. The first comes to Scott from Wordsworth, I believe. In "Tintern Abbey," as in "Lakeshore," the poet gazes upon nature, and in so doing takes possession of the "beauteous forms" of being, in an experience strikingly like that of Scott's naked swimmers:

the burthen of the mystery
 In which the heavy and the weary weight
 Of all this unintelligible world
 Is lightened . . .
 Until the breath of this corporeal frame
 And even the motion of our human blood
 Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
 In body, and become a living soul:
 While with an eye made quiet by the power
 Of harmony, and the deep power of joy
 We see into the life of things.

And like Wordsworth standing on the bank of the sylvan Wye, Scott at the end of "Lakeshore" dares

to hope,
 Though changed no doubt, from what I was when first
 I came among these hills.

What distinguishes Scott's poem as a genuine achievement, and not merely the working out in a modernist vein of the important Romantic theme of a crisis in the development of imaginative power, is the intervening history of the motif in English Canadian poetry, where the question of how to penetrate nature's world has assumed the urgency of a major preoccupation. The problem is made explicit by another heir of the tradition of "Tintern Abbey," Sir Charles G. D. Roberts, in "The Tantramar Revisited," which for its beauty of movement and exposition is perhaps the finest short poem in English-Canadian literature before the modern period. At the visionary level Roberts' poem of course has a major difficulty, the failure of nerve in its last lines, where the poet says,

Yet will I stay my steps and not go down to the marshland,
 Muse and recall far off, rather remember than see —
 Lest on too close sight I miss the darling illusion
 Spy at their task even here the hands of chance and change.

That Roberts' "musing" leads to a reluctance to enter nature may be symptomatic of the poet's own problems or those of his age. What is more interesting is that the act of entering nature to discover its secret of being has become one of the most persistent themes of modern Canadian poetry, a theme whose history has yet to be written. Its most startling results are a series of cognate poems on going underwater, some pre-dating Scott's like J. F. Herbin's "The Diver" or W. W. E. Ross's poem of the same name, others contemporary with "Lakeshore" or later than it, poems like A. M. Klein's hilarious and brilliant "Lone Bather" (which for many reasons bears fuller comparison with "Lakeshore"), Dorothy Livesay's fine "Fantasia: For Helena Coleman," with its forthright observation that what is under the water is "imagination's underworld," Pratt's "The Deed" and Scott's

own "For Bryan Priestman," Atwood's "Younger Sister Going Swimming," Ralph Gustafson's "On this Sea Floor," Irving Layton's and Gwendolyn MacEwen's poems both called "The Swimmer," P. K. Page's "Element," Bill Bissett's concrete poem "i herd ya laffin in th water," and most important of all, Klein's magnificent elegy, "Portrait of the Poet as Landscape," which takes as its model not Wordsworth, but Milton's *Lycidas*, a poem from another tradition which considers loss by water and regeneration.²

Scott's "Lakeshore," seen in this setting, sends between event and observer a signal of a special sort, for more than any of his contemporaries he opens up the possibility that to go underwater, beneath the surface of time and experience, is to generate new possibilities in the naked swimmer who seeks for light in the water's deepest colonnades. What is generated in "Lakeshore," however, is not only vision, but also the speech in which that vision can be uttered. Not frozen in fear like Roberts, or locked in exploration of his own solitude, like the divers of many of the other poems, Scott's poet, as the result of his descent and return, is able to confront the world that exists around him with the power of a renovated, truth-speaking language, and in so doing, earns the right to rest, however much alone, on Ararat, as nature renews the world yet again.

NOTES

¹ Scott's poem "Water," also in *Events and Signals*, seems deliberately paired with "Lakeshore," and constitutes an important gloss on it. For a different reading of "Lakeshore" in the context of Scott's treatment of the theme of evolution, see M. Constance Higginson, "A Thematic Study of F. R. Scott's Evolutionary Poetry," *Journal of Canadian Poetry*, 1 (1978), 37-48.

² Important aspects of some of these poems are discussed by Milton Wilson in "Klein's Drowned Poet," *Canadian Literature*, No. 6 (Autumn 1960), 5-17.

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