

# THE I OF THE OBSERVER

## *The Poetry of F. R. Scott*

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**B**OTH EYES AND I'S ARE IMPORTANT in the poetry of F. R. Scott. The eye sometimes seems remarkably detached, the "needle" through which "long filaments" of vision flow (as in the poem "Vision"). The "wires" with which it is equipped seem almost mechanical. One might be tempted to think the "I" behind the "eye" rather a chilly one except for the reminder that these wires "vibrate with song/ When it is the heart that sees."

In the early poems "we" is almost more common than "I." *Overture* (1945) is full of poems in the first person plural: "Dedication," "Flux," "Armageddon," "Recovery," "Spring: 1941," "Spain: 1937," "War News," "Resurrection," "Enemies," "The Barons," "Villanelle." These are public, didactic, hortatory poems, often calls to action, expressing a kind of solidarity with the human race and a faith in a new socialist world. In this period of change and conflict, as the author says in "Flux," "There's naught for me and you, only for us." Yet, as he says in the same poem, it is "the ultimate I, the inner mind," which is "The only shelter proof against attack."

"I," when he appears in some of the poems in *Overture*, is close to the didactic "we." The seeing "I" of "Conflict" could be changed to "we" without much change in mood or meaning. In the title poem itself the speaker watches (the word seems more exact than listens to) a Mozart sonata, detaching himself from the "pretty" performance because this "perfection" seems trivial when placed beside the "world crescendo" outside the room. Yet his feelings are not as contemptuous as he pretends. He is obviously delighted to see "The bright/ Clear notes fly like sparks through the air," tracing their "flickering pattern." These sounds are strikingly visual, and their visual and tactual nature is emphasized when the author speaks of "harmonies as sharp as stars."

Sometimes the speaker shifts back and forth between "I" and "We." In "Examiner" Scott writes from the point of view of the teacher watching the "hot

and discouraged” students write the examination he has set. He also looks out from a window onto the natural world of trees and grass, contrasting with “the narrow frames of our text-book schools.” Because the “I” of this poem is a public personality, an educator speaking in anger at the kind of education he is obliged to give, it is easy for him to shift to “we” when he asks,

Shall we open the whole skylight of thought  
To these tiptoe minds, bring them our frontier worlds  
And the boundless uplands of art for their field of growth?

Scott’s eye likes a wide space, we notice. He likes to gaze out beyond the windows to “boundless uplands,” whether actual or metaphorical.

The same sort of wide-ranging eye is at work in “Trans Canada,” where “we” rise from Regina in “the plane, our planet,” travelling “into a wider prairie.” Because of the triumph of science involved, “every country below is an I land” (a curious change of the “No man an island” allusion, since the “I land” in Scott’s poem is “common to man and man” and therefore indicates, or appears to indicate, community rather than isolation).

In the final five lines of the poem, there is a startling shift from “we” to “I” (though perhaps prepared for by the “I land” line). The narrator recalls other nights, on land instead of in the air, when he has “sat by night beside a cold lake/ And touched things smoother than moonlight on still water.” We are suddenly — and effectively — made aware of the jar between the public, didactic “we,” making comments on man and science, and the personal “I,” who remembers making love down there on the earth and is now rather afraid of the inhumanity of moon on cloud, although he also exults in this spacious coldness.

It is chiefly in love poems (“Autumnal”) or poems about the natural world (“Laurentian”) that the personal enters these early Scott poems; yet the love poems are certainly not confessional, and the poet is acutely conscious that the experience he writes about is a “literary” experience:

Leaves curl and die:  
All has been said of them that need be said  
By the old poets, and all has been said  
Of you and me long years ago. . . .

**P**ERHAPS THE BEST OF SCOTT’S POEMS are contained in two books published in the middle of his poetic development: *Events and Signals* (1954) and *Signature* (1964).

A. J. M. Smith, in his well-known article “F. R. Scott and Some of his Poems,” speaks of “the sensuous mind that is the protagonist of so many of Scott’s poems” while discussing “Lakeshore,” from *Events and Signals*, a poem which he recog-

nizes as central to Scott's non-satirical work. Smith recognizes also in this poem and others "the identification of the poet's Self with Man." As in "Trans Canada," the self in this poem is detached and observant; and at the end of the poem the narrator says of himself, "Watching the whole creation drown/ I muse, alone, on Ararat." There is exultation in this conclusion, in the narrator's ability to reach back in time to Noah, to see the passage of centuries in a moment of time. And there is something godlike (if also mildly frightening) about this "I" who watches "creation drown" from the top of a mountain, as the "I" of the later "Mount Royal" seems to derive a grim pleasure from warning the "quarrelsome ephemera" of Montreal that their city may in time be overwhelmed by ice or oceans. Although Scott does frequently identify "Self with Man" (and perhaps therefore can frequently merge the "I" in the "We") he not infrequently separates Self out from other men and places it in pleasurable solitude on a mountain top or in the air. The individual cannot always be social, fraternal, public-spirited, and benevolent. Some of the best of Scott's poems (such as "Incident at May Pond") derive their peculiar effectiveness from the clash between the benevolent social self and the solitary, sardonic, observant "I."

"We" is less common in *Events and Signals* than in *Overture*. It occurs in "Lesson," a poem which speaks for the collective conscience, and in "A l'Ange Avantgardien," where Scott exhorts his fellow poets on their journey into the unknown country of new poetry. In "Picnic" the "we" is genuinely personal, as the poet speaks for a group on an outing into the country. It is a group which worships with "ceremonial bread" and the "ancient blaze" of fire; yet the high moment of the day comes when each member of the group is touched by the land's quiet, and "As the failing sun goes down/ Each one is left alone." In "A Grain of Rice" there is a movement back and forth between the "We" and the "I" and also between a microcosmic and a macrocosmic vision. The speaker is conscious of the "majestic rhythms" of the universe:

The frame of our human house rests on the motion  
Of earth and moon, the rise of continents,  
Invasion of deserts, erosion of hills,  
The capping of ice.

He is also conscious of the "tiny disturbances," human and natural, which the eye of the individual observer can see — the appearance from its cocoon, for instance, of "a great Asian moth, radiant, fragile." The voice of the poet is meditative, almost Wordsworthian, explicit in its statement, but expressing wonder and worship rather than making any call to action:

Religions build walls round our love, and science  
Is equal of error and truth. Yet always we find  
Such ordered purpose in cell and in galaxy,

So great a glory in life-thrust and mind-range,  
Such widening frontiers to draw out our language  
We grow to one world through  
Enlargement of wonder.

Although the speaker is aware of the flaws in both religion and science, he is a partial believer in both. The universe, with its "ordered purpose" and "widening frontiers" is a miracle to him. Not for nothing is F. R. Scott the son of the late Archdeacon Scott, devout Christian, socially conscious citizen, and amateur astronomer.

The "I" of "Bangkok" is conscious of both the universality of religion and the differences in its forms. Outside a Bangkok temple he reflects:

I had been here before  
But never to this place  
Which seemed so nearly home  
Yet was so far away  
I was not here at all.

The wind in the temple bells is almost able to create a "continent of love" within the temple; but the narrator's own "lack of love" prevents the miracle.

The serious, meditative "I" of such poems as "Lakeshore," "A Grain of Rice," and "Bangkok" may be contrasted with the comic party-goer of "Martinigram" and the role-playing "I" of "I am Employed." The comic is not without its serious overtones in these poems:

How hard to strike against this management,  
picket one's habits, unionise dreams,  
down tools and march into the thoroughfares  
holding the banner high: UNFAIR TO MYSELF.

The discontent with the "management" of the Self comes out more seriously in "Ann Frank." The poet, with his typical fondness for wordplay, points out that he and Ann Frank "share a common name." Yet the name is not the chief bond between them, nor has he "stared into the dark" while waiting "the Nazi knock." What they share is imprisonment and hunger, hers literal, his in "the prison of the self," with the food of the emotions beyond reach though not beyond sight.

"Ann Frank" is placed directly after a group of love poems. (Maybe it is itself a sort of love poem to the unknown girl.) The love poems here seem more personal, less "literary," than those in *Overture*. Yet the beloved is usually seen in terms of cold landscape, or, incidentally, of battle, as in "Signature." The image in "Departure" is typical of the view of the beloved as part of landscape:

Always I shall remember you, as my car moved  
Away from the station and left you alone by the gate  
Utterly and forever frozen in time and solitude  
Like a tree on the north shore of Lake Superior.

How much of the loneliness of the woman-as-tree is a reflection of the inner solitude of the eye that observes her?

One of the poems about love which has the air of being intensely personal is not in the first person at all, but in the third person. This is "Invert." Here the poet writes about a man who so yearns for love that each minor "conversion" causes him to pour forth "a whole cathedral of worship and prayer" to the lady who caused it. Disillusionment always follows, however.

Always he came away with his own lost soul  
 Wrapped round the cold stone fact he would not face  
 Till, lonely amid the flux, his ego turned  
 And creeping back upon its source was left  
 Beside his own true love, himself, in the crypt of his heart.

The poem may not be a self-revelation, but, placed as it is near the end of the group of love poems, it seems dramatically to make an ironic or bitter comment on their authenticity. Yet it is followed by "Caring" — which is in turn followed by "Ann Frank."

*Signature* (1964) contains some interesting appearances of the "I" and the "eye." Scott's fondness for the godlike vision appears in "Incident at May Pond," "A Hill for Leopardi," and "Eclipse," as well as in "Mount Royal." In "Incident at May Pond" the narrator tells of an incident in which he plays God (or perhaps experimental scientist) to an ant, which he places on a stick that he then puts on the waters of the pond. The narrator's feelings are divided. He identifies in part with the ant "(And straightway I was captive too)," but clearly he is also fascinated by this opportunity to see how the ant will act in its frightening predicament. The stick, after some misadventures, comes to rest beside a log which could act as a dock to the little ship and lead it to ground; but the perverse ant decides to swim. Astonishingly, he manages to swim six out of the ten feet to land:

I was enchanted by his skill,  
 His canny sense of where to go.  
 I felt exempted from the guilt  
 Of playing God with someone's life. . . .

But both ant and poet are surprised by a minnow "lurking furtive underneath." And underneath the "swirl" created by the minnow there is "A second swirl, a splash, a plop." Nature is as full of hidden dangers as it is in a Pratt poem; but they are comic here because of the smallness of the scale. The comedy is half frightening, however. This narrator is clearly the same as the god-like narrator of "Lakeshore," who watches "the whole creation drown," not without some pleasure.

The microcosmic vision of "Incident at May Pond" complements the macrocosmic vision of "Hill for Leopardi." This poem takes off from a poem by Giacomo Leopardi, "L' infinito." In Leopardi's poem, the narrator on his lonely hill imagines "vaster space" and "unfathomed peace" beyond it; listening to the wind, he says,

I match that infinite calm unto this sound  
And with my mind embrace eternity,  
The vivid, speaking present and dead past;  
In such immensity my spirit drowns,  
And sweet to me is shipwreck in this sea.

Presumably it is Leopardi's sense of infinity of space and time which appeals to Scott, resembling as it does the feeling of his own narrator of "Lakeshore." The "I" of "A Hill for Leopardi" is a sort of astronaut of the mind:

The traffic and all the trivial sounds  
Fade far away. I mount  
Swiftly, for time is short, flight beckons  
Out where the world becomes worlds, suns pass, distances  
Curve into light, time bends, and motion  
A sweep of laws  
Rolls up all my strength and all  
Into one marvel.

The poem voices effectively the religious-scientific awe of the human mind observing the "sweep of laws" of the universe; it also hints, by the allusion to Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" and by the suggestiveness of the word "mount" (and later "thrust"), at the sexual ecstasy which is akin to this sense of the marvellous. But Scott's narrator (unlike the narrator of Leopardi's poem) comes back to earth.

A loved voice, a touch  
A phone ringing, and the thrust dies.  
Another journey ends where it began  
Shipwrecked on ground we tread a little while.

The narrator is brought back to ordinary reality by voice or touch; he is "shipwrecked" at the point where the journey began. (There is an interesting contrast with Leopardi, who also experiences shipwreck, but on the sea in which he drowns with happiness. Scott's narrator is shipwrecked on dry ground; his spirit is not drowned in the experience of eternity.)

Scott's fondness for the godlike vision comes out more amusingly in the two-line poem "Eclipse":

I looked the sun straight in the eye.  
He put on dark glasses.

One sees the "I" of the poem, even though jokingly, assuming a godlike equality with the sun — even a superiority to him. Pratt's "Truant," asserting his superiority to the "Great Panjandrum," comes to mind.

One of the most interesting poems of *Signature* is "Vision," which I mentioned at the beginning of this essay. Here the "I" talks about the "eye" and in the final stanza addresses it directly. If "I" and "eye" are not identical, at least the "eye" does much to create the "I," for "I am clothed in what eye sees." "Mind" bends its appearance to the colours it sees. The physical nature of vision is emphasized in a statement such as "I am fastened to the rose / When it takes me by surprise." The self is intensified by the "stars and stones" which it observes. Yet it is when the heart sees that the "wires" of the "tireless eye" are made to "vibrate with song." Poetry is the creation of an "I" in which "eye," "mind," and "heart" combine. "Eye" does, however, seem rather to dominate.

More uses of "I" and "eye" might be noted in *The Dance Is One* (1973) but they would probably not be significantly different from earlier examples. The "I" of *The Dance Is One* is generally (as in "On Saying Good-Bye to my Room in Chancellor Day Hall" or "Orangerie") more casual and conversational than the "I" in *Overture*. In "On the Terrace, Quebec," he gives us a rare nostalgic glimpse into his childhood:

By Valcartier, three Laurentian hills.  
Many years ago, as children  
looking north from the Rectory window  
on the longest day of each year  
we saw the sun set  
in the second dip.

In "Counter-Signs," he jokingly takes on the persona of Irving Layton. In "Dancing," the separateness of the "I" from others, including the beloved, is seen not as loss but as gain:

we are two  
not one  
the dance  
is one

Finally, in "Signal," two lovers are isolated (as the sacrament is isolated from worshippers in a monstrance above the altar) by

the screen of me  
and the screen of you  
the inside and outside  
of a window

In a typical Scott metaphor, which contains suggestions of winter, wide vision, sunlight, and religious and sexual experience, he concludes:

I scratch the frosted pane  
with nails of love and faith  
and the crystallized white opens  
a tiny eye  
reveals  
the wide, the shining country.

I have largely ignored Scott's satires, the productions of his "needle eye," not because I do not admire them but because I wanted to concentrate on other aspects of his vision. I have also omitted discussion of his translations and found poems. Certainly when an author chooses to adopt the "I" of another author he is in some measure revealing his own vision; but the revelation is not as direct as that made in the poems that are entirely his own.

What appears in the poems I have discussed is an "I" ("We") of considerable complexity, sometimes witty, sometimes didactic, sometimes reflective, angry or loving, revealing itself obliquely rather than directly. It is not as confessional or overtly autobiographical an "I" as that of Alden Nowlan or Al Purdy, for example, although of course the confessional "I" of Purdy or Nowlan may have its own kind of self-protection. Scott's "I" is greatly concerned with his "eye," with the way he sees things, whether physically or mentally with his "vision." His vision may be microcosmic or macrocosmic, but he especially enjoys a broad view, a view of suns, stars, space, unknown frontiers, "boundless uplands," and "the wide, the shining country." It is in some ways a lonely vision in which the self is isolated and separate, except on those rare occasions when one world pulls another into its "field of force" (as the little girl in "Girl running Down Hill," from *Signature*, pulls the man). But it is also a vision of unity in separateness. Worlds, suns, nations, lovers, insects, all take part in a cosmic dance, and "the dance is one."