

# PIPER OF MANY TUNES

*Duncan Campbell Scott*

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WHAT STRIKES ONE most forcibly about D. C. Scott is his versatility, his wide range of ability and interest; he is, in fact, the one breath of fresh air escaping from the mixed bag of Confederation poets. Scott not only has a deep response to nature, like his contemporaries, Roberts, Carman and Lampman, but he has also added to this a genuine appreciation of the savage, a Browning-esque monologue, and a sophisticated sense of form and mission. And yet, in spite of this diversity, there is an unexpected narrowness in the way in which critics have discussed his poetry. In his own time, Scott complained about "the cant of the more careless critics to keep dinging away that all Canadian poets are nature poets".<sup>1</sup> Half a century later, his public image is equally distorted: Pelham Edgar has found it necessary to rationalize Scott to the twentieth century by singling out Scott's "original response to the wilder aspects of the Canadian scene".<sup>2</sup> Recognition of his primitive verse was necessary and justified, but what began with Edgar as a special emphasis has become in the intervening years an institution. It is now possible, for example, for Professor Daniells, in *The Literary History of Canada*, to conclude that Scott's reputation rests ultimately on a small group of poems, such as "Night Hymns on Lake Nipigon", and that "*only nature* [italics mine], and preferably nature in her most primitive and untamed aspect, is capable of releasing Scott's powers as a poet".<sup>3</sup> This one-sided view of Scott's poetry indicates a failure to see him within the context of the nineteenth century, where most of his best verse belongs; furthermore, the attempt to modernize Scott obscures his larger significance. Scott was already sixty when "The Wasteland" was published and he was too firmly rooted by age and temperament in the nineteenth century to respond favourably, no less creatively, to

the prophecies of Yeats and the arid, shifting sands of the twentieth century. To expect Scott to be concerned with imagistic modes, cross-fertilization of metaphor, and so on, would be tantamount to expecting the later Milton to have written neo-classical satire. If evaluation of his poetry is to have any meaning, Scott must be re-classified; he must be seen alongside not his temporal but his spiritual mentors — Coleridge, Tennyson and Arnold. In what follows, then, I have tried to approach Scott's poetry through the medium of his published letters, with a view to dispelling a number of misconceptions concerning his aims and achievement; at the same time, I have been tempted to look freshly at some old favourites, especially "The Piper of Arll".

To re-classify Scott as a nineteenth-century poet is less seriously limiting than one might think. "Give me some credit for logic as applied to aesthetics", he wrote in 1905, "for I declare that I value brain power at the bottom of everything. If you call *me* a nature poet you will have to forget some of my best work".<sup>4</sup> These are not the words of a man denying his artistic destiny, but rather the sincere expression of a desire to be seen in the right perspective. Scott fully understood the place of nature in his poetry, but he believed that some of his best work derived its stimulus from elsewhere — from man and from the life of the imagination itself. I would like to discuss his poetry from these three points of view — nature, man, and the life of the imagination. This plan is not meant to provide a rigid tripartite division of Scott's poetry or to suggest arbitrary pigeon-holes for poems having an integrity of their own; on the contrary, it is a more fertile and flexible way to approach Scott, and one which is at least consistent with his expressed views of his poetry.

Scott responded to nature in the best traditions of romanticism — appreciation without prostration. While unwilling to prostitute himself emotionally and artistically to the enchanting elements and terrain of Canada, Scott nevertheless recognized their imaginative possibilities. "The life of nature", he declared, "is as varied and complex as the life of the spirit and it is for this reason that man finds in nature infinite correspondences with his spiritual states."<sup>5</sup> Fundamental to this impressionism, however, is the understanding that nature is not a repository of "truth", but rather the means by which man's own important sensations are elicited and activated. Nature remains subordinate to man, a vast reservoir from which he draws at will; it is but one of the means by which man may penetrate to the truth of his own sensations. Scott quoted Amiel's statement that "landscape is a state of soul", insisting that "in the apprehension of some such truth lies the sole excuse for poetry in which nature is described."<sup>6</sup>

In "The Height of Land", his most philosophical poem, nature becomes an incentive to reminiscence and reflection. The poet stands on the uplands in the serenity of evening, brooding about the lives and ideals of men. His senses sharpen to the hush of wind and the play of moths around a low fire, so that he can almost hear the "gathering of rivers in their sources". As he surveys the land in this hyper-sensitive state, a mysterious "Something comes by flashes/ Deeper than peace," as unexpectedly quiet and intriguing as the calm at the eye of a hurricane.<sup>7</sup> At that moment the state of the land may be said to reflect exactly the state of the poet's mind. The symbiosis is prelusive to finding a "deeper meaning" than is written on the surface of things. The poet's emphasis is centred not on the details of the physical scene, but on the impression which it fixes on his mind; thus, it may be seen, his reflections on life constitute a somewhat higher level of participation in nature — that is, a philosophical rather than a purely descriptive involvement.

Scott's insistence, that nature can only provide correspondence to man's spiritual states, is perhaps more rigorous than his practice justifies. In the same poem, for example, a significant change of pace occurs. Suddenly the smell of charred ground transports the poet back in time to a bush-fire he has experienced:

Then sudden I remember when and where, —  
 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.

There is something more instinctive than rational in the way this image is presented. 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. The sheer force and immediacy of the experience clearly indicates that Scott's response to nature was, at times, stronger than his theory suggests. Certainly this passage supports the emphasis that Daniells and Edgar place on Scott's susceptibility to the more turbulent aspects of his environment.

Similar spontaneous responses to nature occur in "September" and "In Winter", but Scott is at his most lyrical and unrestrained in "Ecstasy". Witnessing the upward flight and the jubilant morning song of the shore-lark, the poet is moved to ecstasy:

The shore-lark soars to his topmost flight,  
Sings at the height where the morning springs,  
What though his voice be lost in the light,  
The light comes dropping from his wings.

Mount, my soul, and sing at the height  
Of thy clear flight in the light and the air,  
Heard or unheard in the night in the light  
Sing there! Sing there!

Coming in the wake of Shelley's "To a Skylark", "Ecstasy" invites comparison. As Dr. Johnson would have observed, Shelley's imagination soars higher and is longer on the wing; his intellectual and artistic powers equip him for a more profound and sustained flight. "Ecstasy" does not pretend to be profound or philosophical. Whereas Shelley uses the flight as a sustained metaphor, Scott keeps to its simpler, more immediate appeal. Less ambitious in scope, "Ecstasy" is nonetheless skillfully contrived; it is also free from the undue strain which length and poeticality place on Shelley's poem. With an almost breathless rhythmical sweep, a pronounced absence of simile and poetic diction, a predominance of crisp consonants and light palatal vowels, Scott captures the upward flight of the shore-lark. And this is no small accomplishment with a lark of the less sophisticated, Canadian, shore-bound variety!

From the poems already mentioned, it would not be difficult to equate Scott's rejection of the "nature poet" label with Wordsworth's *post facto* denial of his own phrase, "worshipper of nature". No doubt both poets do protest too much. At the same time, however, Scott was too classical in his tastes to countenance an over-abundance of feeling and a deficiency of art. Nature poetry, characterized in his mind by excesses of emotion and description, stands here opposed to "brain power" and "logic as applied to aesthetics". As such it is below the dignity of serious poets. "One of my faiths is expressed by Ben Johnson [sic]," Scott said, " 'It is only the disease of the unskillful to think rude things greater than polished.'"<sup>8</sup> Like Jonson himself, Scott was a careful craftsman. "You could find plenty to say about metre and I have invented not a few new stanzas," he insisted. "I have not been self-conscious in practice; my desire was to make the thing under my hands as perfect as I could make it."<sup>9</sup>

Scott was pleasantly surprised to have pointed out to him by E. K. Brown the "intensity and restraint" in his poetry.<sup>10</sup> Consciously or unconsciously, Scott had long been pursuing this elusive goal. In his introduction to Lampman's *Lyrics of Earth*, he quoted Coleridge's famous statement: "In poetry it is the blending of passion and order that constitutes perfection".<sup>11</sup> Scott's respect for the guiding and restraining influence of traditional forms and metres parallels Coleridge's claim that metre originates psychologically, "to hold in check the workings of passion".<sup>12</sup> Control is the standard for both art and life. In "Ode for the Keats Centenary", Scott praises Keats,

Who schooled his heart with passionate control  
To compass knowledge, to unravel the dense  
Web of this tangled life.

"The Woodspring to the Poet" describes the "vast wave of control"; "In a Country Churchyard" asserts the "moderate state and temperate rule".

THE CLASSICAL BALANCE between passion and order, which Scott shared with Coleridge and Arnold, is best illustrated in "At Delos", a poem which is unexplainably absent from Brown's edition of the *Selected Poems*, but included in A. J. M. Smith's *The Book of Canadian Poetry*:

An iris-flower with topaz leaves,  
With a dark heart of deeper gold,  
Died over Delos when light failed  
And the night grew cold.

No wave fell mourning in the sea  
Where age on age beauty had died;  
For that frail colour withering away  
No sea-bird cried.

There is no grieving in the world  
As beauty fades throughout the years;  
The pilgrim with the weary heart  
Brings to the grave his tears.

"At Delos" illustrates finely the meeting and mingling of the classical and the romantic in Scott; it is a beautiful and delicate rendering of a romantic grief at

the passing of beauty, handled not subjectively but impersonally, and with classical restraint.

While admitting the influence of nature in his poetry, Scott hoped to make clear that his main interest and stimulus was in man. "It is inevitable that we should deal with nature and somewhat largely," he wrote to J. E. Wetherell in 1892, "but I think it will be found that much of this work rises from and returns again to man and does not exist from and to itself."<sup>13</sup> Even his impressionism, which asserts the superiority of the impression to the object, reflects Scott's humanism. Similarly, he despised all types of artistic escapism and obscurantism as much as he despised the mindless veneration of nature, because both led away from the proper study of mankind. He had only contempt for Yeats, who required a "fund of Irish legends to set imagination aglow".<sup>14</sup>

In "Ode for the Keats Centenary", Scott lamented the loss of beauty from life — "Beauty has taken refuge from our life,/ That grew too loud and wounding" — but his Indian and habitant poems reveal that he discovered beauty again in the very noise and wounds he had lamented, in the beauty of human suffering. In "The Height of Land", Scott paused to "Brood on the welter of the lives of men", but he did not pause long; he plunged beneath the surface of beaver-skins and tail-feathers into the dark recesses of the human heart. And the raw life he found there is quite distinct from anything outside of Pratt in anthologies of Canadian poetry. The tragic killing of Keejigo in "At Gull Lake: August, 1810" is a dramatic *tour de force*:

At the top of the bank  
The old wives caught her and cast her down  
Where Tabashaw crouched by his camp-fire.  
He snatched a live brand from the embers,  
Seared her cheeks,  
Blinded her eyes,  
Destroyed her beauty with the fire,  
Screaming, "Take that face to your lover."  
Keejigo held her face to the fury  
And made no sound.  
The old wives dragged her away  
And threw her over the bank  
Like a dead dog.

The strength here is not descriptive but dramatic; Scott combines the economy of the ballad, the human interest of the drama, and the suspense of both.

The difficulty Scott had in subduing his subjective and descriptive impulses was largely dispelled when he embraced the human drama. In "At the Cedars", a fascinating dramatic monologue, the narrative is exceedingly stark — boiled right down to the skeleton. Bones, at any time, are provocative, and these are no exception; consequently, the temptation to find allegory in the suggestive names — Isaac, Baptiste and Virginie — and the *diabolus ex machina*, is subdued only by the rapid pace and intensity of the narrative. As in the ballad, much of the success of "At the Cedars" depends on what is left unsaid; the poem gains considerably by the indefiniteness of the motives in the suicide of the nameless sister of Virginie:

There were some girls, Baptiste,  
 Picking berries on the hillside,  
 Where the river curls, Baptiste,  
 You know — on the still side;  
 One was down by the water  
 She saw Isaac  
 Fall back.

She did not scream, Baptiste,  
 She launched her canoe;  
 It did seem, Baptiste,  
 That she wanted to die too  
 For before you could think  
 The birch cracked like a shell  
 In that rush of hell,  
 And I saw them both sink.

To call Scott a poet of nature in these poems can only be justified if one means what Dr. Johnson meant when he applied the same label to Shakespeare — *human nature*.

While responding creatively to man and nature, Scott also rejoiced in the fervid life of his imagination. "The life of poetry is in the imagination," he insisted, "there lies the ground of true adventure and though the poet's mind may be starved and parched by the lack of variety in life, he persists nevertheless to make poetry out of its dust and ashes."<sup>15</sup> Much of his poetry finds its life not in external stimuli but in an internal compulsion, in the "volcano", as Scott called the imagination.<sup>16</sup> And it is there — in the heat of imagination — that one of Scott's finest poems arose, Phoenix-like from the ashes. "The Piper of Arll" stems from, and is itself a poem about the life of the imagination.

"The Piper" has had a poor press; critics seldom fail to mention it, but always for the wrong reasons. John Masefield, the poem's most vigorous supporter, no doubt began this negative reinforcement. Faced with the challenge of defending "The Piper" against a charge of meaninglessness, Masefield side-stepped the issue: "let it escape", he said of the symbolism, the "romantic mood and the author's dream may be of deep personal significance and joy, even if the author's thought eludes us."<sup>17</sup> Criticism of this sort we can do without. Indeed, nothing could have been more damaging to the poem's reputation at a time when wit and intellect in poetry were at a premium. Subsequent criticism reveals quite clearly that Masefield unwittingly closed the doors on serious study of "The Piper": Pelham Edgar, for example, praises the poem as "musical incantation"; W. J. Sykes asserts that it seems "too tenuous, too unsubstantial to induce that 'willing suspension of disbelief' " and lacks "concrete meaning"; Daniells also notes that "Even the often quoted 'Piper of Arll' is lacking the compulsion of true magic"; even E. K. Brown, whom the meaning does not elude, nevertheless finds the poem a "mass of suggestions which do indeed lack definiteness."<sup>18</sup>

Criticism of "The Piper" seems based on the mistaken assumption that meaning and indefiniteness are mutually exclusive. That the poem is intentionally vague and mysterious there can be little doubt. "At the root of everything is mystery," Scott wrote. "Poetry illuminates this mass of knowledge and by inspiration will eventually reach the core of the mystery."<sup>19</sup> He preferred the poetry of Maeterlinck, who was "endeavouring to awaken the wonder-element in a modern way, constantly expressing the almost unknowable things we all feel."<sup>20</sup> To convey the mystery and wonder surrounding our daily lives, the poet requires a special vocabulary. As Scott says in "Meditation at Perugia": "Our common words are with deep wonder fraught". Scott laboured, of set artistic purpose, to leave "The Piper" indefinite and suggestive; he aimed at a fusion of form and content. "He may not care for the mystical," Scott said of his critic, Sykes, "but there is more in 'The Piper of Arll' than he seems to have discovered."<sup>21</sup>

"The Piper" may be seen on one level as an allegory of the artist. Living in harmony with his idyllic environment, the artist is confronted with a vision of loneliness to which he responds creatively. When the vision passes and inspiration dies, his remorse drives him to such distraction that he abuses his powers of compassion and communication:

He threw his mantle on the beach,  
He went apart like one distraught,



His lips were moved — his desperate speech  
Stormed his inviolable thought.

He broke his human-throated reed,  
And threw it in the idle rill;  
But when his passion had its mead,  
He found it in the eddy still.

Through conscious self-renunciation the artist begins to heal and he resurrects out of the ashes his initial heart-felt response to the vision. When this is accomplished, in a burst of selfless creative energy he pours out his soul in perfect harmony with the world and is reunited with his dream-vision in a beautiful immortality.

The nature of the poetic experience, thus oversimplified, is essentially religious, and it is almost certain that Scott intended the parallel to run throughout the poem. Given his desire for indefiniteness and suggestiveness, it would be trite to observe that the image of the three pines in "The Piper",

There were three pines above the comb  
That, when the sun flared and went down,  
Grew like three warriors reaving home  
The plunder of a burning town,

is less obviously and less effectively symbolic than the similar image in Eliot's "Journey of the Magi". Scott's simile works well as a symbolic pre-figuring in nature of the piper's experience: as the image of the plunder-laden warriors comes at sunset, is lost in the night, and then returns, so also the piper receives, loses, and then regains his artistic "loot" — his inspiration — from the vision ship. The problem of the loss of inspiration is stated more explicitly in "Prairie Wind":

But the vision you found in the twilight,  
You could never again recapture,  
It was lost in one careless impulse  
In the first wild rush of the rapture.

The piper's loss, however, is not so permanent; he is able to recapture the fleeting vision:

He mended well the patient flue,  
Again he tried its varied stops;  
The closures answered right and true,  
And starting out in piercing drops,

A melody began to drip  
That mingled with a ghostly thrill  
The vision-spirit of the ship,  
The secret of his broken will.

The "secret of his broken will" may mean simply the necessary conversion of inspiration to elbow-grease which all serious artists learn, or it may refer to what Eliot calls "depersonalization" — "a continual surrender . . . to something which is more valuable. The progress of the artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality."<sup>22</sup>

The poem does support a religious interpretation of the image of the three pines. The piper responds to God as the bay responds to the ocean's tides. The vision-ship comes with an angel at the bows, who departs just as the piper achieves his immortality. The piper's broken will corresponds, of course, to the Christian paradoxes of life in death, fulfillment in self-sacrifice and knowledge through child-like faith. At the moment of his mastery over passion and power, the piper is standing at the foot of the three pines, "Immortal for a happy hour". The piper must learn the lesson which the woodspring teaches in "The Woodspring to the Poet": "Give, Poet, give!/ Thus only shalt thou live./ . . . Give as we give unbidden." This responsiveness or sympathy cannot be achieved otherwise than by instinctive humility, by an unconscious giving of self. This achieved, the piper's powers are restored:

He, singing into nature's heart,  
Guiding his will by the world's will,  
With deep, unconscious, childlike art  
Had flung his soul out and was still.

He has experienced the reconciliation which was achieved by the Ancient Mariner, when he blessed the water snakes unawares.

The intriguing conclusion of "The Piper", in which the intimations of immortality are realized, is the artistic equivalent of Elijah's translation:

And down she sank till, keeled in sand,  
She rested safely balanced true,  
With all her upward gazing band,  
The piper and the dreaming crew.

And there, unmarked of any chart,  
In unrecorded depths they lie,  
Empearled within the purple heart  
Of the great sea for aye and aye.

Their eyes are ruby in the green  
 Long shafts of sun that spreads and rays,  
 And upward with a wizard sheen  
 A fan of sea-light leaps and plays.

The *Tempest*-like sea change implies a concept of art as stasis. Life, in Scott's poetry, is a movement towards eternal rest, a rest which is common to all men — the poet, the religious and the oppressed of every kind. Even the violent death of Keejigo in "At Gull Lake" becomes a release from suffering, a final, beautiful merging with the natural cycle of the universe. The accompanying storm brings the rainbow; the moon changes its shade for the perfect glow of the prairie lily. Her death is a victory, a final reward: "After the beauty of terror the beauty of peace". Like Keejigo, the piper achieves his rest; first his will and then his body merge with the harmonious cosmos.

So much for the lack of meaning in "The Piper". Most of what is best in poetry, as Frost suggests, is lost in the translation. While a too extensive explanation of "The Piper" would destroy a good deal of its magic, existing criticism deserves to be challenged. What is important in the present discussion is that the poem be reconsidered as fundamental to an understanding of Scott's poetic achievement. These remarks are a suggestive rather than an exhaustive step in that direction.

NORTHROP FRYE has cited Scott's poetry as a prime example of what he calls the "incongruous collision of cultures" — the primitive and sophisticated — to be found in Canadian literature.<sup>23</sup> To be accurate one would have to add classical and romantic, natural and mystical. And yet the results are neither incongruous, nor a collision. Scott does not jar by throwing his various interests together pell-mell into a single poem; "On the Death of Claude Debussy", "At the Cedars" and "The Piper of Arll" have an integrity of their own. Scott's many-sidedness stems not so much from his wide areas of interest as from his conception of the function of poetry.

The responsibilities of the poet are outlined in "The Woodspring to the Poet", Scott's poetic manifesto. The woodspring presents himself as an exacting master. He counsels the poet to cultivate flexibility (a good Canadian virtue!), to be all things to all men, a sort of general practitioner whose task it is "To charm, to comfort, to illumine." To fill this colossal order the poet must write poems of every

kind: he must write those which will guide and inspire youth, "Till over his spirit shall roll/ The vast wave of control"; he must nurture the creative spirit with poems like "The Piper of Arll" —

Give them songs that charm and fill  
The soul with an alluring pleasure,  
Prelusive to a deeper thrill,  
A richer tone, a fuller measure;

and, finally, he must administer to the dead souls of academe and the marketplace a particularly metaphysical cure:

Helve them a song of life,  
... Proud pointed with wild life,  
Plunge it as the lightning plunges,  
Stab them to life!

This broad view of the function of poetry beggars the notion that Scott was only a nature poet. Whatever his creative stimulus — whether nature, man, or the life of the imagination — Scott directed his various melodies to the needs of the human heart; and if his poetry has a wide-spread appeal, it is because Scott was a piper of many tunes.

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *More Letters of Duncan Campbell Scott* (2nd Series), selected, edited and published by A. S. Bourinot, Ottawa, 1960, 68.
- <sup>2</sup> Pelham Edgar, "Duncan Campbell Scott," *Leading Canadian Poets*, Toronto, Ryerson, 1948, 213.
- <sup>3</sup> "Crawford, Campbell and Scott," *Literary History of Canada*, edited by Carl F. Klinck, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1965, 421.
- <sup>4</sup> *Some Letters of Duncan Campbell Scott and Others*, selected, edited and published by Arthur S. Bourinot, Ottawa, 1959, "Autobiographical Note."
- <sup>5</sup> Editor's introduction to Archibald Lampman's *Lyrics of Earth*, Toronto, Musson, 1925, 44.
- <sup>6</sup> *Loc. cit.*
- <sup>7</sup> All citations from Scott's poetry, unless otherwise indicated, are from *Selected Poems*, Toronto, Ryerson, 1951, and *The Poems of Duncan Campbell Scott*, Toronto, McClelland & Stewart, 1926.

- <sup>8</sup> *Some Letters*, *op. cit.*
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.
- <sup>10</sup> *On Canadian Poetry*, Toronto, Ryerson, 1943, 122.
- <sup>11</sup> *Lyrics of Earth*, 45.
- <sup>12</sup> *Biographia Literaria*, II, 49-50.
- <sup>13</sup> *More Letters*, 68.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.
- <sup>15</sup> *Lyrics of Earth*, 37.
- <sup>16</sup> *Some Letters*, 29.
- <sup>17</sup> Quoted in Brown, *op. cit.*, 124.
- <sup>18</sup> Edgar, *op. cit.*, 217; "Duncan Campbell Scott," *Queen's Quarterly*, XLVI, 1939, 60, 52; *Literary History of Canada*, 418; Brown, *op. cit.*, 124.
- <sup>19</sup> *More Letters*, 28.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.
- <sup>21</sup> *Some Letters*, 47.
- <sup>22</sup> "Tradition and the Individual Talent."
- <sup>23</sup> *Literary History of Canada*, 825.