

A POET OF THE MIDDLE SLOPES

Robin Skelton

AT A TIME WHEN frenetic symbolism and rhetorical gesticulation are running neck and neck with pseudo-imagist reportage and structureless colloquialism in the race towards a Canadian Parnassus, it is enormously rewarding to turn one's glasses on a poet of a different colour, and one whose measured steady progress has been unattended by ballyhoo and self-dramatization. F. R. Scott's *Selected Poems*¹ brings together the best work of over forty years, and the result is impressive.

Mr. Scott has not chosen to date the poems in his collection, so that it is impossible, without doing a good deal of research, to discuss the poems chronologically. I am sure this is deliberate; what matters about poetry is not its development but its identity. This book represents, not a history, but a poetic personality, and the varying viewpoints and tones are better seen as complementary portions of one pattern than as stages upon a journey.

As one reads the book the pattern emerges very clearly. It is, I think, the pressure of intelligence that dominates and moulds Mr. Scott's poetry. This intelligent, rigorous, even sceptical, approach to experience is most obvious in the satirical poems, of course, for there the intelligence must have the last incisive and derisory word. It is also, however, present in the most lyrical and most symbolic poems. Thus, when we read the final stanza of "Old Song":

only a moving
with no note
granite lips
a stone throat

while we are affected by the associative power of the imagery, we are equally moved by the economy and rigour of the language; the poem displays its decisive-

¹ F. R. SCOTT, *Selected Poems*, Oxford University Press. \$4.75.

ness as an essential part of its perception. Thus again in "Trans Canada" the implications of the opening images are witty as well as sensually vivid.

Pulled from our ruts by the made-to-order gale
 We sprang upward into a wider prairie
 And dropped Regina below like a pile of bones.

If, here, the implications of the ascent of the spirit from the body, and the hint at the hackneyed after-life image of happy hunting grounds, have, like the "made-to-order gale", sardonic overtones, this does not in any way destroy, but rather enriches the validity of the speaker's emotions. Scott, like Donne, like Carew, and like Marvell, speaks as a complete man; his passions involve his intelligence, and his intelligence gives rise to passion.

IT IS, PERHAPS, characteristic of any poet addicted to the precise counterpointing of intelligence and passion that he should also be inclined towards neatness of form. Scott has handled most kinds of verse in his time, and his sense of form is such that he can make the most of free as well as of highly disciplined patterns. He knows the possibilities of colloquial ease as well as he knows the opportunities of formal rhetoric. Thus, looking through his work one can gather examples of technical expertise in almost every manner.

Compare for example the deftly Whitmanesque opening of "Audacity" with the gnomic traditionalism of "Advice".

They say we lack audacity, that we are middle class, without the
 adventurousness that arises from the desperation of the lower
 classes or the tradition of the upper classes.
 They say we are more emphatically middling than any country west
 of Switzerland, and that boldness and experiment are far from
 our complacent thoughts.
 But I say to you, they do not know where to look, and have not the
 eyes to see.
 For audacity is all around us,
 Boldness sits in the highest places,
 We are riddled with insolence. ("Audacity")

Beware the casual need
 By which the heart is bound;

Pluck out the quickening seed
That falls on stony ground.

Forgo the shallow gain,
The favour of an hour.
Escape, by early pain
The death before the flower. ("Advice")

This type of control leads sometimes to a self-consciousness that militates against passion and over-emphasizes the virtue of order. Certainly there are very few instances of emotional excess, and even the visionary poems rather suggest a disciplined contemplation than a blinding illumination on the road to Emmaus.

This is, perhaps, healthy. The Romantic heresy that the philosophic importance of an experience is the greater the nearer it gets to hysteria finds no support in F. R. Scott; he is clearly inclined to reverse Blake's dictum and say "Bless braces, damn relaxes". Nevertheless, there is great emotional power in many of his poems; the power is expressed by the tautness of the verse and the poised tension of the language, thus "Coil" begins:

Coil is a tense
a caged thing
coil is a snake
or a live spring

Against the tension, however, is balanced a sense of calm and a feeling for slow organic movement. Thus "Departure" concludes:

We shall find, each, the deep sea in the end,
A stillness, and a movement only of tides
That wash a world, whole continents between,
Flooding the estuaries of alien lands.
And we shall know, after the flow and ebb,
Things central, absolute and whole.
Brought clear of silt, into the open roads,
Events shall pass like waves, and we shall stay.

Mr. Scott's imagery is rarely very novel, though it is almost invariably appropriate. He deals in images of the natural landscape and the seasons more than in those of the city, though his satirical poems are inclined to be both urban and urbane. The third stanza of "Boston Tea Party 1940" runs:

The Harvard pundit's tea is brought
 Amid the ample female forms.
 He quits his crevices of thought
 To taste the soft and simpler norms . . .

This, in syntactical structure and in cadence, is very close to Eliot, and I am sure the closeness is intentional. Here, however, as in some other cases, the result is rather a predictability of tone than an enriching ambiguity of reference. A poem that operates simultaneously in terms of two sensibilities, one ostensible and one implied by allusion or pastiche, requires an all-embracing, all-including originality of vision if it is not to become merely a pleasing game. It must be admitted that many of Mr. Scott's poems become games. Sometimes these are delightful, and yet such trivia as "The Canadian Authors Meet" and "Saturday Sundae" impose a superficiality upon the total persona of the book; the former jibe has point and still applies, but even here there are moments of mere facetiousness. "Saturday Sundae" is worse, being both arch and insensitive.

Him of the front-flap apron, him I sing,
 The counter-clockwise clerk in underalls.
 Swing low, sweet chocolate, Oh swing, swing,
 While cheek by juke the jitter chatter falls.

The sensibility portrayed by the poem's speaker seems to me to be even less attractive than that of the world he mocks.

My brothers and my sisters, two by two,
 Sit sipping succulence and sighing sex.
 Each tiny adolescent universe
 A world the vested interests annex.

There is an element of potential pathos here which undermines the whole poem, and makes the final verse appear both imperceptive and heartless.

The satirical poems of F. R. Scott, though much praised, seem to me too often to lack that hunger after the ideal, which animates the best satirists, whether of the radical or other persuasion. There is more cleverness than vehemence about them; they relate to the great satires as the grotesqueries of Leech relate to those of Goya.

It is, perhaps, by way of the satires that I find myself coming to a conclusion about Scott's work. He is a splendid versifier, an intensely intelligent writer, a wit, and a man of deep feeling; nevertheless, though his stated opinions are often

radical, liberal, and sophisticated, his modes of operation are so dependent upon already established modes and attitudes that poetically (and in the context, not of Canada, but of the English-speaking world) he must be regarded as a conservative. Nevertheless on the Canadian scene he is an important figure, he represents emotional discipline, intelligence, and craftsmanship, and must be reckoned one of our four or five finest living poets. His work may not place him alongside the greatest of the twentieth-century poets of England and America, but poets should be judged by their excellences not by their limitations, and Scott has made a number of poems that ensure his survival down the years. He may not have reached the highest peak of Parnassus, but he is assured of a place upon the middle slopes. Only a very few can ever hope to climb farther.

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