

*NO HEAVENLY HARMONY:
A READING OF POWASSAN'S DRUM*

by
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The notion of music and the musician as a force which upholds and sustains matter is enshrined in the Greek legends of Amphion and Orpheus. In English-poetry, it has found its most full expression in the lines from John Dryden's *A Song for St. Cecilia's Day*:

From harmony, from heavenly harmony
This universal frame began:
From harmony to harmony
Through all the compass of the notes it ran,
The diapason closing full in man.

Duncan Campbell Scott had been a musician before he had been a poet. As one, he must have known the feeling which every musician has when he plays, that of creative power, of building a harmonious universe of sound where had been silence before. It does not matter that the universe thus created passes with the creation and goes no further than the listening ears. Qualitatively, any creation is all creation while that creation is in progress.

It is easy therefore to imagine a cultured poet and musician, familiar with classical and English literature, turning to a musician and to music whenever it occurred to him to fashion a creation myth. Following the Greek tradition, Scott had used pastoral music in his great mythical poem of poetic creation, "The Piper of Arll." The Greek myth of musical creation and Dryden's Christian adaptation of it, however, were patently unsuitable for an apocalyptic vision of life. They posited a noble creator and a creation that was harmonious and good.

A man as sensitive and intelligent as Scott was could not be unaware, both as an official in the Department of Indian Affairs and a citizen of Canada in the twentieth century, that the harmony created by the musician, the poet, and the artist was of an order different from the details of daily life. By comparison, the latter were a flawed creation. When, therefore, he attempted an apocalyptic poem, dealing with his vision of these things, he found it necessary to posit a flawed creator. For this he

found abundant precedent in the Indian legends of creative spirits, and in the personalities of the shamans or medicine men who preside as drummers at the rain dances and the ghost dances of Indian tribes and who "made magic" in a limited way among the daily affairs of Indian peoples. Indian demiurges were almost always less responsible and more malicious than the social goals which the Indians set for themselves. Indian medicine men, moreover, were chosen because their physical weaknesses and/or deformities unfitted them for the hunt. They wielded their magic powers with a certain malevolence toward more normal mortals. They were feared, not loved.

It is, then, both fitting and natural that Scott, in writing "Powassan's Drum," would have chosen for his flawed creator drumming into being a divided and doomed creation, an Indian medicine man, Powassan, a dwarf:

Wizened with fasting,
Fierce with thirst,
Making great medicine
In memory of hated things dead
Or in menace of hated things to come.

Powassan's creation is, of course, the artist's vision expressed in the

Throb-throb-throb-throb-throbbing
The sound of Powassan's Drum

and to Powassan, who creates it with closed eyes, and to the listener as well, the physical universe against which it is counter-pointed "seems lost and shallow" in comparison. It is interpenetrated by the throbbing music of the drum as being is interpenetrated by the pulse of being. So close does this interpenetration come that the drumming, like the physical universe itself, is thought of as embracing all duration:

Has it gone on forever
As the pulse of being?
Will it last till the world's end
As the pulse of being?

As Powassan beats his drum continually and morning dawns and as day draws to twilight, the interpenetration is such that it seems to the listening animals, and to the poet describing the slow change of light, that the drumming is more than interpenetration, that Powassan's music is building the universe to one vast vision, an apocalyptic climax.

I shall quote the climax of the poem completely because in it can be found the keys to an understanding of the poem. It occurs immediately after the throbbing of Powassan's drum is categorized as "An infusion of bitter darkness" that "Stains the sweet water of twilight."

Then from the reeds stealing,
 A shadow noiseless,
 A canoe moves noiseless as sleep
 Noiseless as the trance of deep sleep
 And an Indian still as a statue
 Molded out of deep sleep,
 Sits modelled in full power,
 Haughty in manful power,
 Headless and impotent in power.
 The canoe stealthy as death
 Drifts to the throbbing of Powassan's Drum.
 The Indian fixed like bronze
 Trails his severed head
 Through the dead water
 Holding it by the hair.
 Wound with sweet grass and tags of silver.
 The face looks through the water
 Up to its throne on the shoulders of power,
 Unquenched eyes burning in the water,
 Piercing beyond the shoulders of power
 Up to the fingers of the storm cloud.

This passage presents so many implications all interlocked that it is difficult to sort them out and isolate them in one's mind. It is perhaps best, first of all, to consider it in relation to its immediate creator, the protagonist, Powassan. The Indian "modelled in full power/Haughty in manful power" is an embodiment of the physique which Powassan, the dwarf, longs to have but has not. He, therefore, out of malevolence has made his otherwise perfect manly creation "Headless and impotent in power" while the canoe continues to drift as the throbbing of the drum whips up the storm which will overwhelm the symbol of Powassan's tribe's manhood. The vision, then, is both Powassan's revenge on his own tribe for his physical inferiority and an assertion of his own superiority, through magic. As such, it is psychologically appropriate. The eyes in the severed head burn as Powassan's eyes had burned earlier in the poem.

There are larger implications, however, in this passage which Duncan Campbell Scott must have had in mind, so consistently are they worked out. The first consideration is, quite naturally when one considers the imagery of the poem, an ethnic one. Powassan's vision is, quite simply, the Indian considered as history. His physical shape (his body) is severed from his culture (his head), and he is unable to navigate his canoe (his power over his environment) through the "dead" water, and he therefore must perish in the first inevitable great storm. This pattern, however, is capable of amplification so long as certain salient facts are borne in mind. First and foremost is the consideration that "the head" is severed and trailed in the

water and not in its rightful place "on the shoulders of power." In consequence the Indian cannot steer the canoe of his own volition. It either drifts on the river of life or is moved by some external harmony or disharmony. Whether the head symbolizes the human intellect and the body the human passions and desires, whether the head symbolizes leadership and the body the mass of the people (the body politic), whether the head symbolizes spiritual desires and the body material appetites, the implications are the same, and portentous for modern man: because man is not a unified whole, he is powerless of his own agency to direct the course of events which are leading to an inevitable catastrophe.

To me, the most interesting implication in this passage is what it reveals of Duncan Campbell Scott's insight into the nature and role of the artist in his own time. The head may be considered as the artist and the eyes as the artist's vision. Instead of being united with the body politic "on the shoulders of power" and able to steer according to his vision, the artist is trailed beside the boat and compelled to look through water toward its true throne. In an earlier passage, the world to the sound of the drum had "seemed full of water", an illusion created by the music of Powassan's hate. Water is not, therefore, a true medium of vision. It refracts and distorts what is seen through it. In consequence, the creative artist, although his eyes are "unquenched," sees not "the shoulders of power" but "beyond the shoulders of power/ Up to the fingers of the storm-cloud," The eyes can see, but they overshoot their true home to a storm beyond. Artistic vision, then, severed from the rest of mankind and distorted by external passion, is both inaccurate and powerless to avert the violence which is the only answer that nature can give to the malevolent power expressed when hatred is unleashed.

Powassan's drumming is an orchestration of man's hates and fears working through history and building up to an apocalyptic vision of a divided mankind unable to act in the face of destruction:

The murdered shadow sinks in the water.
Uprises the storm
And crushes the dark world!
At the core of the rushing fury
Bursting hail, tangled lightning
Wind in a wild vortex
Lives the triumphant throb—throb—throb—throb
Throbbing of Powassan's Drum.

One final consideration illuminates what Duncan Campbell Scott was expressing in "Powassan's Drum." That is his counterpointing of the movement of Nature against the conjuring vision of Powassan's drum. Here the creator of Nature is quite aptly symbolized by the sun — personified as an Indian of the opposite type from Powassan. Instead of

skulking in his tent making magic, the sun is a brave who fishes his sky-ocean with admirable patience and self-control. Neither he nor the animals, nor the trees, nor the water, nor the sky can respond directly ("answer") the challenge of Powassan. There is nothing in the normal constructive pulse of Nature that can correspond to the malevolence drumming in the human will. But Nature has its cataclysmic other side, the destructive force of the storm, and the slow persistence of Powassan's drumming works a two-fold magic. On the one hand, it conjures up its human vision of a headless Indian trailing his severed head by the side of a drifting canoe. On the other hand, through a gradual interpenetration with nature it builds up an impending storm that at the poem's conclusion sinks Powassan's own vision, "crushes the dark world," and overwhelms everything in a "Wild vortex" that "Lives in the triumphant throb — throb — throb — / throbbing of Powassan's Drum." Nature and Man are separate at the beginning of the poem. They are joined in destruction at its close. Nature will presumably survive, but when the "murdered shadow sinks in the water," man's hate-formed vision perishes in a greater storm. The implication is that this vision *is* mankind. "Powassan's Drum" is a superbly integrated apocalyptic poem, but what it expresses can bring no comfort to the human spirit.

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