LAMPMAN COULD TELL HIS FROG FROM HIS TOAD: A NOTE ON ART VERSUS NATURE

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A comment by D. C. Scott, endorsed by Stan Dragland in a recent issue of *SCL* (Summer 1976), prompts this reply and provides an excuse for a brief explication of some of the meanings and functions of Lampman's frogs and toads. Here are Scott's observations followed by Dragland's:

> A. L.'s frogs were toads. I have confirmed this fact from a naturalist. He came to know that but found it impossible to be accurate. That long trill we hear in spring is the love-call of the male toads. There are several kinds of frogs including bull-frogs and they all have voices but moderate and unromantic and therefore not available for poetry.
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> This may serve as a footnote to Lampman's "The Frogs." I think Scott was right not to make much of Lampman's substitution of frogs for toads. It does not reduce my own admiration for the very fine sequence, however much it qualifies the impression of Lampman as naturalist. At the same time, Scott's comment is a very level-headed one. As clearly as anything he wrote about Lampman it shows that he was unwilling to be carried away either by appreciation for Lampman's poetry or by romanticism of his friend as a person.[1]

Scott's emphasis on "accurate" is significant. The value of Lampman's poetry does not lie finally in a "realistic" presentation of natural scenery, though it is usually accurate enough to satisfy most and mislead others. Having provided a physical reality to an extent, a task which he performed with ease, Lampman was not primarily interested in accuracy. "April Night," for example, ends with the "murmuring" of "sleepless toads," a choice of words incidentally which disproves Scott on a point of fact. Elsewhere in Lampman's poetry there are frogs, but either/or serves his purpose. It is precisely because frogs are conventionally unromantic that they are available to the poetry, if not of Scott, certainly of Lampman. He is fascinated by their alienness of shape, their physical unobtrusiveness — in the sense that they are more often heard than seen — and with their insignificance or unimportance to contemporary civilization. There is more than enough evidence to show that Lampman identified himself with the frogs, and at one level they represent the poet; at another, the ideal sought by the poet.

In "Favourites of Pan" the frogs symbolize what Pan stood for. Pan is conceived of as the unity to which nature testifies, and the frogs

[1]Stan Dragland, "Duncan Campbell Scott as Literary Executor for Archibald Lampman: 'A Labour of Love,'" *SCL*, 1 (Summer 1976), 149.

repeat
The murmur of Pan's pipes, the notes,
And answers strange and sweet.

Despite their appearance, they are capable of sweet harmony. They form a chorus which is partly a commentary. That they are amphibious and terraqueous recalls a further preoccupation of Lampman's which needs clarification. In fairy-tales, of which two by Lampman survive, the frogs are associated with miraculous change. Lampman was interested in the idea of metamorphosis, a concern which is not surprising for one so evidently intrigued by the nature of reality and by the perpetual change and newness of unity. Thus transmogrification underlies many of his poems and contributes to the definition of his theme in the fairy-tale, "Hans Fingerhut's Frog Lesson," and in the poems "The Monk," "The Story of an Affinity," and "At the Long Sault," to take some obvious examples. The point that I wish to emphasize here is that the poet is part of the same meaning inherent in Pan, Syrinx, the reed, the pipes, and most inclusively the frogs. He irrevocably shares the alienation from a society unwilling or unable to apprehend that meaning.

In contemporary civilization, the degenerate senses of mankind are adequate only for coping with mundane reality. In that central poem "The Frogs," Lampman explores the need, or rather the compulsion, of certain men to push beyond the generally accepted, the limits often imposed by men upon themselves. Characteristically and logically, the poet locates his theme not in the sublime and imposing aspects of nature, but in those insignificant and unregarded creatures, frogs. Once more Lampman is saying that the apparently insignificant is in reality pregnant with meaning if correctly apprehended. The voices of the frogs, then, in the fourth stanza of the poem express the informed purpose of nature, and as they sing, the movement of life begins. The final stanza returns in time to the present in which the poet's apparent alienation appears logically motivated and reasonable. The description of the "outer roar," or the voices of mankind opposed to those of the frogs, as "strange" is felt to be exact when we realize that it is the society of men which is in fact alien to an order of which the poet is part. In the last four lines, there is a willing return to the world of flux, a return which is not accompanied this time by pain and loss. Here the poet's insight sustains him; that is, the dream remains the reality, and so-called "reality," though recognized, is not felt to be oppressive.

Although Lampman's intentions were lost on D. C. Scott and have been misconstrued by even his recent commentators, they would certainly have been appreciated by Charles Mair. Almost thirty years before Lampman, Mair wrote an essay in praise of the "aesthetic tastes — the art and love of art, and the powers of discrimination and comparison"[2] of frogs and toads. Whether Lampman read the essay is immaterial, for with Aristophanes and Thoreau he stills Mair's lament: "But what poet now-a-days would dream of inditing a Sonnet to a Frog, or allow his poetic fire to waste away in an ode. And yet within the domain of its habits and associations are to be found the materials of real poetry."[3]

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[2]Charles Mair, "On Frogs and their Kin," *The British American Magazine*, November 1863, rpt. in *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, 2, No. 3 (Summer 1973), 92.
[3]Mair, p. 91.