

*IN THE LISTENING WORLD:  
THE POETRY OF  
DUNCAN CAMPBELL SCOTT*

*Catherine Kelly, S.C.I.C.*

Consciousness of large, essential life at the core of being seems basic to Duncan Campbell Scott's poetry. Appearing virtually in every context of his writing as its inspiration, such an experiential awareness of fundamental life reveals itself in three dominant ways: as being compelling and fulfilling, as being personal and intimate, as being unsettling and mysterious. I shall attempt here to catch only the compelling and fulfilling quality of this transcendent encounter as it is perceived by the listening or receptive soul and to point in the process to the probable source of that sense of vagueness which seems to adhere to this poetry.

I

An interesting little poem from Scott's later work, "These Are in the Beginning," throws some light on the nature of the basic experience:

A branch-tangle of elms  
That spreads a woven net  
In the sea-water sky  
Of twilight in Spring  
Before on the limbs are laid  
The burdens of shade.

The throb in the secret heart,  
A warning of vision, —  
A gleam, — not a thought,  
Before the image is caught,  
Sullied or blurred  
By the touch of a word.

*(The Circle of Affection)*

This poem is a refinement of the root concern of one of the new poems included in *The Poems of Duncan Campbell Scott*, "Morning at Paramé." There the emphasis on the supernatural is unmistakable. True, the speaker respects the fisherman despite the latter's narrow view of life. But the limitless scope of the poet's own vision recreated through rhythm and symbol contrasts overwhelmingly with the outlook of a person who is

Unaware of a world beyond his world  
 Untroubled by the unsolved secret of being  
 Unmoved by the passion that searches the net of life  
 For some treasure of the soul. (11. 10-13)

Scott's poetry demonstrates that he too was aware, was troubled, was moved. In its entirety this body of work constitutes a living record of an intensive search for "treasure of the soul." And the search is the necessary response to the kind of experience shared in "These Are in the Beginning." The net of each poem, the symbolic instrument of search, functions nicely on two levels — it signifies the sensuous appreciation of the natural world as the means of entry into the supernatural realm, and it provides the "caught" life of nature as a participatory analogue to dynamic supernatural life — to, precisely, an encounter with the divine.

What happens "in the beginning" of such life? Two movements: the initiating revelation of presence by some positive, enlightening power and the response of the individual receiving the experience. "These Are in the Beginning" (note the verb's echoes of Exodus 3:14.) might be paraphrased thus: early in the life of the human spirit, in Spring (1. 4), a distinct apprehension is given from the natural environment or its essence and is definitely received, known, by the soul. The experience happens in full actuality before it can be articulated. Though given, it has to be wanted (1. 2), and after its perception it has to be answered (11. 5-6). It is truly experience, fragile, a "throb in the secret heart," enlightening the person even before the intellect formulates the happening. And the formulation, however precise it may be, is inevitably imperfect. Any net, including the net of life, is only able to catch bits of the sea's treasure, no matter how carefully it is spread. The opening stanza of "Powassan's Drum"<sup>1</sup> focuses on the source of such experience, stressing its pervasiveness while pointing up the elusiveness of its reality:

---

<sup>1</sup>All poems unidentified by volume are from *The Poems of Duncan Campbell Scott* (Toronto: McClelland, 1926).

Is this throbbing a sound  
 Or an ache in the air?  
 Pervasive as light,  
 Measured and inevitable,  
 It seems to float from no distance,  
 But to lie in the listening world—  
 (11. 2-7)

Although "Powassan's Drum" is essentially about disorder in the world, the wording presupposes a condition in nature which, if it does not convey the impression of ache (1. 3), is always there to be heard by the listening being. This habitual presence seems understood in the following questions:

Has it gone on forever,  
 As the pulse of Being?  
 Will it last till the world's end  
 As the pulse of Being?  
 (11. 25-28)

"Throbbing," "pervasive as light," "measured and inevitable," "to float from no distance," "to live in the listening world" — the characteristics are those of a human heartbeat and of something more. "Powassan's Drum" says "Being," and "The Height of Land" says "Something."

"The Height of Land" reveals most intensively this fundamental experience in Scott's work. The poem attempts to embody what it affirms is unnameable, what "no man may tell" (11. 57, 157), and also places the experience in context. The spiritual connotation seems present even in the title in a possible reference to the Old Testament use of "land" whereby Yahweh's promises in one sense ultimately refer to the individual soul. The first line of the poem itself emphasizes metrically the quality of this particular experience over others of the same order but of a lesser degree, a judgment supported by the journey imagery of section two of the poem:

/ - - / - /  
 Here is the height of land. (1. 1)

This experience has been reached by degrees, is a point in a specific journey with a specific but unmentioned goal, unmentioned because the poem is concerned with the experience itself. "The Height of Land" falls into five sections marked off by the spatial divisions in the

text in *Poems*. They present: (1) the general context and level of awareness of the speaker in contrast to that of the two Indian guides (11. 1-21), (2) the journey to the height of land as a climb from level to level (11. 22-59), (3) the positive experience of deep self-awareness (11. 60-92), (4) the negative element (11. 93-119), and (5) the possible future in contrast to the present experience (11. 120-57). In each of the five sections, the focus is on the positive happening, even in section four where the speaker's awareness of personal danger and weakness transcends the evil. Quotation of key lines from each section should help us to grasp the speaker's intent:

Here there is peace in the lofty air,  
 And Something comes by flashes  
 Deeper than peace;—(11. 16-18)

But here is peace, and again  
 That Something comes by flashes  
 Deeper than peace,—a spell  
 Golden and inappellable  
 That gives the inarticulate part  
 Of our strange being one moment of release  
 That seems more native than the touch of time,  
 .....  
 Though yet no man may tell  
 The secret of that spell  
 Golden and inappellable.

(11. 49-59)

The ancient disturber of solitude  
 Breathes a pervasive sigh,  
 And the soul seems to hear  
 The gathering of the waters at their sources;  
 Then quiet ensues and pure starlight and dark;  
 The region-spirit murmurs in meditation,  
 The heart replies in exaltation  
 And echoes faintly like an inland shell  
 Ghost tremors of the spell.

(11. 63-71)

The ancient disturber of solitude  
 Stirs his ancestral potion in the gloom,  
 And the dark wood  
 Is stifled with the pungent fume  
 Of charred earth burnt to the bone  
 That takes the place of air.

.....  
 'Tis overpast. How strange the stars have grown;

The presage of extinction glows on their crests  
And they are beautied with impermanence.  
(11. 93-98; 114-116)

Or shall he see the sunrise as I see it  
In shoals of misty fire the deluge-light  
Dashes upon and whelms with purer radiance,  
And feel the lulled earth, older in pulse and motion,  
Turn the rich lands and the inundant oceans  
To the flushed color, and hear as now I hear  
The thrill of life beat up the planet's margin  
And break in the clear susurrus of deep joy  
That echoes and reechoes in my being?  
(11. 143-51)

From these excerpts we see that the experience itself is an awareness of a presence (11. 17, 50) perceived in a definite but inexplicable deep inner feeling (11. 18, 51). This "golden" sentience is predominantly a transcendent joy (11. 53-55), fulfillment, a unity with the dynamic source, the Something. And this Something is present both in the setting and in the speaker (11. 63-71). The experience is thus a joy in a felt awareness of what seems "more native than the touch of time" and in a hearing of the motion or gathering of "the waters at their sources"; it is a replying exaltation, echoing like a sea-shell the stirrings of the larger life of which the heart is a part. It is a felt, personal experience which "To the Heroic Soul" describes as being divine (the adjective also invited by 1. 137 of "The Height of Land"):

Nurture thyself, O Soul, from the clear spring  
That wells beneath the secret inner shine;  
Commune with its deep murmur,—'tis divine;  
Be faithful to the ebb and flow that bring  
The outer tide of Spirit to trouble and swing  
The inlet of thy being. (11. 1-6)

It is a close-up of the more distanced order of things in the initial situation of "The Piper of Arl":

The bay was faithful, wild or still,  
To the heart of the ocean far away.  
(11. 7-8)

His heart was swayed with faithful love,  
From the springs of God's ocean clear and deep.  
(11. 15-16)

Centrally, this experience of exaltation in rightness, in oneness, includes a vivid awareness of the pull to disorder (11. 93-98). As projected in section four, this tendency is known to be humanly real and fearful, while the resulting inevitability of death is wistfully accepted as being just in its own kind of beauty, of harmony (11. 114-16). The height has its depths, just as the height is a realization of the depths. Here the dynamic tension so apparent in Scott's work is seen to be at the core of his vision: at the very time the soul is uplifted in transcendent encounter it experiences the reality of evil as part of the natural universe, as part of itself.

The speaker of "The Height of Land" sees that life is "A Something to be guided by ideals" (1. 81). Thus life is what the central experience is — "Something" (11. 17, 50), which in the final line is "The Secret" (1. 157). The equation bears out the discussion above where the human spirit is experienced as part of the dynamic life present in the universe and the mutual reverberations are experienced as conversation with the divine, close "commune with divinity" ("The Height of Land," 1. 137). Notwithstanding such consistency, it is easy to see why a charge of vagueness could be laid. The poem speaks of "Something . . . deeper than peace" (11. 87-88), a "spell / Golden and inappellable" (11. 51-52), "the ancient disturber of solitude" (11. 63, 93), "the region-spirit" (1. 68), "the gathering of the waters at their sources" (1. 66), "the thrill of life," (1. 149), and finally

The long light flow, the long wind pause, the deep  
Influx of spirit, of which no man may tell  
The Secret, golden and inappellable?  
(11. 155-57)

The variables seem many. But are they? The speaker attempts by these means to convey the experience in terms of pleasurable feeling, of delicate sound, and of an invisible "other" ("the ancient disturber of solitude," probably identified with the "region-spirit" because of the parallel structuring of 11. 68-69 with 11. 63 and 65). Thus we have an initiating "other," larger, greater than human life, yet comprising (so it seems to the speaker) the most real part of human nature to the extent that experience of this presence generates the feelings described: it "sounds" to the listening soul like the very source of life, enlightening, inspiriting. Are not, then, the differing indications of this life attempts to articulate an experience which of its

nature defies the concrete? It is invisible, intangible. Yet the poem affirms that it makes itself known when it chooses (it comes in flashes: 11. 17, 50.) so long as the invisible element of man, the soul, is at peace and is openly receptive:

There is no sound unless the soul can hear  
The gathering of the waters in their sources.  
(11. 23-24)

The ancient disturber of solitude  
Breathes a pervasive sigh,  
And the soul seems to hear  
The gathering of the waters at their sources;  
Then quiet ensues and pure starlight and dark.  
(11. 64-67)

Part of the sense of vagueness issues from the alliance of person (the ancient disturber "breathes," l. 65, and "Stirs his ancestral potion," l. 94) qualified as divine with the apparent lack of life in "Something" (11. 17, 50, 81) and "The Secret" (l. 157). Capitalization of the latter serves to suggest the conventional idea of God, while the echoes of Genesis reverberating from "ancient" (11. 63, 93), "ancestral potion" (l. 94) and "The gathering of the waters at their sources" (11. 24, 66) introduce a Biblical connotation into the former. Yet in such maneuverings there seems to be a deliberate move away from the Judaic-Christian mode of expression to one which, while suggesting core Judaic-Christian understandings, separates itself from all its terminology and visible organization. It is as if Scott were trying freshly to lay hold of the essence of his creation, his being, his life in this world and in whatever comes after. In "The Height of Land" he affirms a real experience of life unseen, larger than his life, of which his life is a real part. He seems to be saying, further, that such experience is human life at its fullest and highest expression. At least he posits this tentatively, in the form of a question lacking clear supporting punctuation, not being completely sure "whether there be demonstration there" ("The Fragment of a Letter," l. 46) or not:

O Life is intuition the measure of knowledge  
And do I stand with heart entranced and burning  
At the zenith of our wisdom when I feel  
The long light flow, the long wind pause, the deep  
Influx of spirit, of which no man may tell  
The Secret, golden and inappellable?  
(11. 152-57)

It seems fair to judge from the placement of the foregoing passage and from the repetition of the key words "golden and inappellable" that this is the essential position Scott has reached in this poem. However, as always, definition is elusive, swathed in an ambiguous meaning of "long" attached to "light flow" and "wind," the clearest expression of the source of the experience being "deep / Influx of spirit." But, for helpful comparison, characteristics of the basic experience in "The Height of Land" recur elsewhere in the poetry. In "Rapids at Night," "The Fragment of a Letter," the horn section of "Lines in Memory of Edmund Morris," and the listening section of "The Piper of Arll" (ll. 25-32, especially ll. 41-56), the experience is also conveyed as being a definitely felt awareness of present, unseen, larger life which comes suddenly, by flashes, or at least perceptibly to a listening, still soul. It is given freely, in no way brought on by the listener whose open, still attitude serves merely as the means for him to perceive what is there. Also recurring, and very important for the reader to notice, is the basic dynamic tension given large emphasis in "The Height of Land" in the contrasting sections three and four. In "Lines in Memory of Edmund Morris," this tension appears more dramatically in the imagery of wounds following on the initial departure from nature's law:

Her lips with a wound were aquiver,  
 His heart with a sword was sundered,  
 For life was changed forever  
 When he gave her the horn to blow.  
 (ll. 170-74)

And in "Rapids at Night" the height-depth imagery dramatizes the sadness of this separation of life from its original purpose, as is emphasized by the light of the law as opposed to the darkness of the unknowing, the uncertainty, the separation:

Above curves the great dome of darkness,  
 Scored with the limitless lines of the stars and the planets;  
 Like the strong palm of God,  
 Veined with the ancient laws,  
 Holding a human heart that sleeps,  
 Wild with rushing dreams and deep with the sadness,  
 That dwells at the core of all things. (ll. 30-36)

## II

I have been speaking of the experience itself in its compelling and fulfilling aspect, trying to establish some sense of the transcendent base in Scott's work. I should like to turn my attention now to some of the formal aspects of the poetry by which it is communicated. In addition to various general means by which Scott objectifies his vision<sup>2</sup> are other recognizable formal characteristics of the central experience. An outstanding one is the symbolic overtones attached to the elements of nature — of air and its variant wind; of sun, dawn, sunset, morning, night, moon; of light and dark; of earth, uplands, inland, outland; of water in its forms as springs, sea, ocean; of shore, wood, trees; and so on. Generally speaking, these function freely within the poetry as positive symbols of natural life, taking on more specialized connotations as context demands. For example, "sun" usually generates a sense of openness to nature's design and law, as in:

I remember well a day,  
 When the sunlight had free play,  
 When you worked in happy stress,  
 .....  
 When you sang your inconsequent rhymes  
 Sprung from a careless fountain:  
 .....  
 Foolish,—but life was all,  
 And under the skillful fingers  
 Contours came at your call—  
 Art grows and time lingers;—  
 (Lines in Memory of Edmund Morris,  
 11. 131-33, 140-41, 146-49)

In another use, in "The Water Lily," the sun primarily serves its conventional function as male life principle, while in "Powassan's Drum" its yet different role is seen to be in one sense subordinate, powerless in the face of disorder answerable only by storm. A similar apparent powerlessness is seen in "The Eagle Speaks":

---

<sup>2</sup>These include the skillful use of such ordinary means as concrete imagery, especially that of terrestrial nature; seemingly omnipresent paradox and oxymoron; symbol and allegory; the repetition of significant words like "half," "strange," and "native"; and a sensitive creation of appropriate rhythm, rhyme, colour, and sound — in a word, texture.

close under the sun  
We'll fly, and you shall look up at him  
And he shall feel impotent in the heavens  
When he hears us scream and taunt him.  
(11. 6-9)

So, although it serves in all these cases as a positive symbol of life ordered in nature's design, the sun's role is defined by the structure of the particular poem. Again, variation of usual meaning is seen in "The Height of Land" in the use of the word "bright":

And here, where we can think, on the bright uplands  
Where the air is clear, we deeply brood on life  
Until the tempest parts. (11. 77-79)

In this example "bright" is used in the service of right order according to nature. In section four the same word contrasts sharply in its use as the light from destructive fire:

It had left the portage-height  
A tangle of slanted spruces burned to the roots,  
Covered still with patches of bright fire  
Smoking with incense of the fragrant resin  
That even then began to thin and lessen  
Into the gloom and glimmer of ruin,  
(11. 108-13)

A few lines on the effect of this destructive tendency in man is aptly presented in an allusion to Icarus which uses "bright" negatively:

They shall be after the race of men  
And mourn for them who snared their fiery pinions,  
Entangled in the meshes of bright words.  
(11. 117-19)

Such a use of "bright" is skilful, illustrating in small detail the large lines of paradox drawn in sections three and four — showing symbolically to what depth and thoroughness both good and evil combine in human nature. "Fragrance" (l. 111), "meshes," "entangled," and fire itself, often in positive contexts in Scott's work, are here negative. The problem of discernment is thus subtly posed as an adjunct to the experience. In truth the complete meaning of the experience is vague. But such meaning has to be vague, for it is so in actuality. Thus, while Scott's poetry generally uses the various

elements of nature and their associated qualifiers like light and dark with the force of natural law, use is always discriminating and functional. In addition to the symbolic overtones just discussed are other formal signs of the central experience, of which three recur often enough to be called typical. Cold, the natural occurrence of dawn, and the diction of magic are all frequent earmarks of this experience.

In Scott cold seems to be repeatedly employed in the service of reason to suggest freedom from distortion through subjectivity or emotionalism. Such perverters of truth are natural and insidious dangers to which any writing is susceptible; hence, personal experience of the kind explored in "The Height of Land" is by its nature inherently vulnerable to such attack. Whether by accident of the poet's birthplace, or by conscious choice, cold seems especially effective in Scott's poetry; through its associative force as used, for example, in "cold reason," "cold fact," it functions frequently to emphasize objectivity of judgment. This produces two complementary effects in the poetry.

The first effect is to deepen the impact of the northern presence, the Canadian environment, so as to achieve an emphasis on elemental reality, fundamental truth. The presence of so many poems of European or general setting which yet focus on the same concerns as the poems with Canadian settings certainly lends weight to this possibility. Northrop Frye's comments on the Anglo-Saxon quality of Canadian settings seem pertinent here:

What the poet sees in Canada, therefore, is very different from what the politician or businessman sees, and different again from what his European contemporaries see. He may be a younger man than Yeats or Eliot, but he has to deal with a poetic and imaginative environment for which, to find any parallel in England, we should have to go back to a period earlier than Chaucer. In certain Old English poems, notably "The Wanderer" and "The Seafarer," there is a feeling which seems to a modern reader more Canadian than English: a feeling of the melancholy of a thinly-settled country under a bleak northern sky, of the terrible isolation of the creative mind in such a country, of resigning oneself to hardship and loneliness as the only means of attaining, if not serenity, at least a kind of rigid calm. It is a feeling which in later centuries becomes rare, though there is something of it in some romantic poems, such as Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci."<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup>Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), pp. 146-47.

Scott's emphasis is not Frye's; his is more the exhilaration and elemental quality of the Anglo-Saxon poems mentioned, poems, it is interesting to note, which belong to the pagan body of Old English poetry rather than to the Christian works. And the loneliness so frequently sounded in Scott is usually that deep, personal awareness that cannot be shared because it concerns only the individual — it is the experience of which we have been speaking; it is the loneliness sought in "Ode for the Keats' Centenary." It is not surprising that Scott, like Keats, singles out the thrall which the elemental unconscious life exerts on the wandering soul in "The Sea-Witch" (*"The Circle of Affection"*).<sup>4</sup> Engagement with one's unconscious nature exacts strict loyalty and a high price in terms of priorities. Scott seems to observe these priorities in "Fragment of an Ode to Canada," where, in that section of the poem devoted to detailed description, he begins with the following lines containing the significant words "where nothing haps":

Land of the glacial, lonely mountain ranges,  
Where nothing haps save vast Aeonian changes,  
The slow moraine, the avalanche's wings,  
Summer and Sun,—the elemental things,  
Pulses of Awe,—Winter and Night and the lightnings.  
(11. 7-11)

So the cold of our northern land is apt setting for sharing the central experience. In a deliberate contrast between ordinary life and that which he is experiencing the speaker of "The Height of Land" affirms this:

Upon one hand  
The lonely north enlaced with lakes and streams,  
And the enormous targe of Hudson Bay,  
Glimmering all night  
In the cold arctic light;  
On the other hand  
The crowded southern land  
With all the welter of the lives of men.  
(11. 41-48)

In the cold setting of "The Height of Land," that which is always present becomes perceptible to the speaker for a short time. An

---

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Victor White, O. P., *God and the Unconscious*, 2nd ed. (1952; rpt. Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1961), p. 57.

explicit treatment of how cold can be used to effect the realization of what is present, an analogue of the action of the creative influence of the unseen on the individual soul, appears in "Mist and Frost":

Millions of essences,  
Fairy-like presences  
Formless as yet,  
(11. 13-15)

on which frost will come—

Just a degree of it,  
Nought can we see of it  
Only its power  
(11. 22-24)

—bringing to awareness what is already there:

But in the heart of it  
Every least part of it  
Blooms with the charm,  
Star-shape and frondage  
Broken from bondage  
Forged into form.  
(11. 43-48)

Through cold, hardship, suffering — through anything natural which is opposed to warm comfort — the ultimate basic design in nature and in man is refined and realized, brought into perceptible existence. Cold seems to operate similarly in other instances: "Frost Magic" concerns the revelation of the speaker's inmost heart, "The Wolf" confronts death, and "In Snow-Time" explicitly speaks of the experience we have observed in "The Height of Land." In the following quotation from "In Snow-Time," protection from distortion is achieved in the respectful and secure knowledge effected in the speaker through the central experience. The cold reality, immortal, is the same power which designed pristine creation and is still unblemished despite man's unnatural choices:

But here a peace deeper than peace is furled,  
Enshrined and chalice'd from the changeful hour;  
The snow is still, yet lives in its own light,  
Here is the peace which brooded day and night,  
Before the heart of men with its wild power  
Had ever spurned or trampled the great world.  
(11. 9-14)



objectivity it serves is important to the articulation of the central experience and forms an ironic counterpart to any charge of vagueness.

Another recurrent sign of the central experience is the natural occurrence of dawn. The objectification I have been observing is seen again in "The Height of Land" in the final section, where it is implied that the crystallizing of the experience, the poem, is part of an ever-present process:

How often in the autumn of the world  
Shall the crystal shrine of dawning be rebuilt  
With deeper meaning! (11. 123-25)

"The crystal shrine of dawning." The elemental quality is here in "crystal" and "dawning," as is the religious aspect of new insight in the objectification of dawn as a shrine. In itself "dawning" implies an experience related to that described in "The Height of Land," an experience which touches the soul deeply, bringing forth new insight into life. The speaker sees that this new life is Love:

Shall he base his flight  
Upon a more compelling law than Love  
As Life's atonement; shall the vision  
Of noble deed and noble thought immingled  
Seem as uncouth to him as the pictograph  
Scratched on the cave side by the cave-dweller  
To us of the Christ-time? (11. 129-35)

Thus, semantically, the intermingling of noble deed and noble thought is the action or the effect of love. In section three the speaker has already seen that such interpenetration constitutes the essence of life. Life is, he says,

A Something to be guided by ideals—  
That in themselves are simple and serene—  
Of noble deed to foster noble thought,  
And noble thought to image noble deed,  
Till deed and thought shall interpenetrate.  
(11. 81-85)

Thus, Life is active Love (1. 130). In section five, then, the speaker sees the continuing process of growth in love or in some other basic means of unity as being the thrust of the whole process of dawn. (Also present, but so lightly that it is easily missed, is a rare and

explicit equation of this manner of living with Christianity.) Furthermore, in somewhat similar terms as those used in section five — “miracle pre-eminent,” “matchless,” “prelusive light,” “crystal dawn,” “thrill,” “shrine” — “Lines in Memory of Edmund Morris” carries the description of dawn on into twilight, here symbolic of later life, when truth is still being newly disclosed to the listening person; the passage is one in which images of art and music signify a deeper apprehension of the unseen:

How often have we seen the even  
Melt into the liquidity of twilight,  
With passages of Titian splendour,  
Pellucid preludes, exquisitely tender,  
Where vanish and revive, thro' veils of the ashes of roses,  
The crystal forms the breathless sky discloses.

(11. 74-79)

Here indeed we see water, sun and sky “bound in a leaguer of beauty” (“Morning at Paramé,” 1. 7)!

Many of the quotations that I have already used describe the central experience in the diction of magic. “The Height of Land” calls it a “spell” (11. 51, 58, 71), and the speaker asks if he stands “with heart entranced” (1. 153) when he feels it. A shaman mediates in “Powassan’s Drum,” the ship in “The Piper of Arl” has fairy lights (1. 27) and magic sails (1. 105), the speaker’s insight in “Leaves” is called “a fairy jar” (1. 55), and the notes blown by Eliza were magic notes (“Lines in Memory of Edmund Morris,” 1. 163). “By the Willow Spring” derives much of its uncanny mood from a concentration of such diction: “charmed spirit” (1. 20), “touched with faery from her fatal birth” (1. 27), “led by fancy” (1. 70), “the magic pool” (1. 82), “the liquid spell (1. 135), and so on; and this poem recounts the spiritual journey of one who is treated as specially drawn by the unseen from the time of her birth. As mentioned before, such diction may well have been employed by Scott to offset direct Christian reference, to push the context back to pre-Christian days. It functions primarily as a means of conveying mystery in its more eerie aspects as part of the central experience, a related topic outside the scope of this article.

## III

To this point I have attempted to convey something of the compelling and fulfilling quality of consciousness deriving from the unseen world in Scott, particularly as it appears in "The Height of Land." While doing this I have examined some characteristic formal indicators which show that allusion is being made to this fundamental experience. I should now like to touch on its effect in personal life. It is useful to see something of the attitude of wonder generated, the difficulty encountered in discerning good from evil, the comparative security enjoyed throughout the rest of life if the memory is kept alive. Furthermore, as life proceeds, the same experience not only permeates and influences life — it is renewed as long as the sensitive or listening attitude is maintained, but is perceived differently. "The Fragment of a Letter" and "In the Rocky Mountains" from *The Green Cloister* illustrate these points.

"The Fragment of a Letter" is full of compelling presence — unseen, changing in manifestation, deeply obscure to the intellect. As in "The Height of Land" ("Thought reawakens . . .," l. 71) the intellect is asleep, as it were, and the deepest level of the apprehension

Is not the peak of knowledge, but the tone  
Of feeling . . . (11. 42-43).

The experience, then, is a gift given, "Us to ourselves" (l. 40), intense, full living in the moment:

'Tis winged impromptu and the occasion strange  
That gives to beauty its full power and range.  
(11. 37-38)

"The Fragment of a Letter" differs from "The Height of Land" mainly in its closer focussing on the event as felt, but from a perspective distanced by time. The fact that two human beings had similar responses (known from the tone of the poem, the harmony of the couplets that only dissolve into alternate rhyme in approaching the sharing of the deep experience and in the summation of the personal effect) establishes the validity of the occurrence while preserving the personal character of the happening. The four sections present: (1) the listening, open attitude of the participants, the stillness in nature; (2) the presence of both good and evil and the

difficulty of discernment; the eventual hearing of nature's voice through water, breeze, bird; (3) in a shift from description to exposition, an interpretation of the experience, that is, its articulation or formulation; and (4) the memory of the happening.

The stance of the participants as shown in section one is remarkable for the attitude displayed. In the double emphasis of "all" (1. 1) in accent and rhyme, we see that the present event is one of many like occurrences, yet the speaker remains filled with wonder. One might fairly call his attitude reverent. Truly a listening attitude, it is open to whatever comes, sensitive to indications of change (1. 11), not clinging to passing beauty (11. 8-9), all the while

Not knowing whether we were led by air  
Or by secret impulse of the lake.  
(11. 4-5)

The supernatural yet interchangeable functions of air and water are worth noting, especially in consideration of their use in section two, of the function of the thrush (11. 34, 39), of "the spirit air" (1. 45). Such varying manifestation tends to place the power of the unseen, the divinity if you like, in nature in general.

The basic tension in Scott's work is conveyed in this poem in section two, appearing as difficulty of discernment of the good, and is caught even in the initial words, "We neared a shadowy island" (1. 16). The intense awareness of living in two worlds, of staying yet going, is impressionistically developed through "shore" and "threshold," words of boundary, another favourite Scott image: "The shore whereon our tents were pitched" (1. 12), "Upon the liquid threshold of the wood" (1. 21). In this section the real looks illusory; the beautiful seems in the power of evil. Sounds out of context are real, have echoes; the familiar fire produces a ghost. Here the uncertain air mentioned in section one (1. 4) shows paradoxical strength:

Where we were moored by pressure of the breeze,  
That barely chafed our bark canoe. (11. 31-32)

The fragility and darkness of the situation are surely vague in terms of reason, but the feeling seems to be precisely embodied. At the end of section two, the slight awareness of transcendent presence in the delicate indication of a religious element, supported by the elemental quality and diction of magic in "The enchanted water

joined an antiphonal rune / In labials and liquids with the rocky shoal," intensifies in the bird image (11. 33, 34-36).

Scott uses the bird symbol to impart fairly consistent meanings. The thrush — "music-memored" ("The Dame Regnant," 1. 238), "timorous eremite" ("The End of the Day," 1. 16), "the wood-seer" ("Under Stars," *The Green Cloister*, 1.5) — seems always associated in meaning with the deep inner experience. In the following example from "A Voice and the Dusk" we see this in a context which includes the word "maze" (or "tangle" in other poems) to communicate difficulty of discernment:

A thrush is hidden in a maze  
Of cedar buds and tamarac bloom,  
He throws his rapid flexile phrase,  
A flash of emeralds in the gloom.  
(11. 13-16)

The vesper-sparrow, the lark, the swallow, the wood peewee, the vireo are also used in this capacity; but because of their winging flight, they, as well as the generalized bird, become in addition symbols of the soul's flight to its perfection, to its highest "height of land," its song being its joyful response to its call to fulfillment:

Going, going, all the glory growing,  
See it stir and flutter; that is singing, hark!  
Singing in the caverns of the primal dark.

What is in the making, what immortal plan  
Draws to its unfolding? 'Tis the Soul of man.

See it mount and hover, singing as it goes,  
Battling with the darkness, nourished by its woes,  
(*"Improvisation on An Old Song,"* 11. 23-25, 27-28, 30-31)

Last rustled up a winged lad with wells  
Of bubbling laughter in his irised eyes.  
(*"A Masque,"* 11. 55-56)

So the old world, hanging long in the sun,  
And deep enriched with effort and with love,  
Shall, in the motions of maturity,  
Wither and part, and the kernel of it all  
Escape, a lovely wraith of spirit, to latitudes  
Where the appearance, throated like a bird,  
Winged with fire and bodied all with passion,  
Shall flame with presage, not of tears, but joy.  
(*"Lines in Memory of Edmund Morris,"* 11. 275-82)

In section two of "The Fragment of a Letter," we have two examples of the bird image. The breeze

... barely chafed our bark canoe, and stole  
Like a wing-flutter through the hazel-trees.  
(11. 32-33)

The effect here is a warning of experience to come. In the second instance—

Hidden above there, half asleep, a thrush  
Spoke a few silver words upon the hush,—  
Then paused self-charmed to silence  
(11. 34-36)

— the effect is a double one of sign and signification. What is announced, that is, partial self-awareness that is compelling and fulfilling, is accomplished in the speaker and his companion, as section three affirms.

Apart from "souls" (1. 41), there is little that is explicit in the remaining two sections, or in those already discussed, to show that the action in the poem is supernatural. Most of this impact is generated through figurative language, through the respectful tone, and through the mood of wonder. Like the Great Moon (1. 15), the souls of the participants are filled with still fire — given, as its fire is. The night of the universe is the night or obscurity in the soul, and the voice of the thrush is the movement of beauty (1. 38) within, beauty consonant with that of all natural creation, nature (1. 39).

In the perception of this movement of beauty and the recognition of its kind, the human being is in close touch with himself. (How near to the surface is "I am the Lord that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give thee this land to possess it"! [Genesis 15: 7]) Section four employs the image of the magic space (or, as the title poem of Scott's first collection calls it, the magic house) to figure the soul. It is in this space that, as implied in section five of "The Height of Land" and in this poem in line 1 and in section three, the succeeding new insights of the continuing process are preserved: "Where fragile thoughts are irrefragible." (1. 58). We have here, apparently, two steps that lie beyond the experience of

A gleam,—not a thought,  
Before the image is caught,  
Sullied or blurred



"In the Rocky Mountains," a composite of seven poems, deals with the same experience but, in the words of "The Fragment of a Letter," through re-entering the crystal door (ll. 63, 64), through dwelling in the magic space (l. 56). The perspective is that of a soul already deeply attracted by unseen reality, already charmed by beauty known, but beauty larger, removed, seemingly inaccessible while being part of the person. The mountains, like the speaker on the height of land, possess the "ineffable light" (l. 61), yet only on the heights, on the peaks. In the second, third, and fourth poems the mountain is a correlative of the soul, living in a kind of death, lonely in the thick obscurity, yet paradoxically joyful, at one with all the inward fire in the earth, an exuberant work of art created by nature:

Beauty born of pressure and fire,  
When the molten heart of earth  
Fixed its wild desire  
In thy granite melody.  
(ll. 46-49)

What is of particular note at this point is the beautiful union of the material with the immaterial achieved in concrete form. A mountain of rock "Marching to a soundless cadence" (l. 38), its "still line of beauty in the blue" (l. 45), can scarcely be called vague. This is one example of Scott's perfect achievement of what his poetry in general attempts to communicate.

In *The Green Cloister*, the unseen is often experienced as being removed from the person. But the terms are recognizable and remarkably similar in imagery to "The Height of Land" and "Lines in Memory of Edmund Morris"; for example:

O light that trembled first upon the mountains,  
Radiant and pure,  
Even when all the peaks are dark with midnight,  
Tremble but still endure.  
("In the Rocky Mountains," ll. 5-8)

This light is "lovely" (l. 1), a word used in distanced perspective with the meaning understood in "The Height of Land" ("a more compelling law than Love / As Life's atonement," ll. 130-31) and, more similarly, in "Lines in Memory of Edmund Morris":

The urgency of the one creative breath,—  
All in the dim twilight—say of morning,

Where the florescence of the light and dew  
Haloes and hallows with a crown adorning  
The brows of life with love; herein the clue,  
The love of life—yea, and the peerless love  
Of things not seen. . . . (11. 206-12)

In "In the Rocky Mountains" a renewal of the first transcendent experience as described in "The Height of Land" exhibits the same peace, wonder, fulfillment, compelling attraction — but, notably, with the freshness of first encounter:

The mountains hold the sky,  
Their own unconquered realm of air  
In changeless majesty,  
Bearing serene and unaware,  
The ancient message, fresh unfurled,  
Of beauty, fallen on the world  
From vanished tempest:—Lo!  
In the remote arid tranquil height  
Burning with pure and lonely light  
The glory of the snow. (11. 90-99)

Knowing more purely, experiencing more of the essence, the "unstained beauty" ("The Fragment of a Letter," 1. 60), is a higher, sweeter tone of feeling than just knowing. We are engaged with process again, and it is important to note the thrust of the process, that is, the symbolic meaning of the word "stars": the goal envisioned through the basic experience produces in the journey a deep peace where eternity intersects with time. It is expressed this way in "Under Stars" in *The Green Cloister*:

Caught in the dew-drop surface of the mere,  
The pure, high stars pursue their primal courses,  
Dwarfed to pale points of fire their ancient forces;  
Where the curved shore-line, trembling silver clear,  
Meets the dark mountain shadow, the wood-seer,  
The hermit thrush, draws from its limpid sources,  
Alien to all our passions and remorse,  
The song that has no yearning and no fear.  
Time thus enchanted, Fate can make no move.  
My heart has mirrored on this matchless night  
The highest things that men have ever thought;  
And through the tranquil silence it has caught  
The terrene song of some celestial sprite,  
Floating in mingled moods of death and love.

In *The Poems of Duncan Campbell Scott* distance is not yet an outstanding feature of the inner experience, so that in "Ecstasy" the star symbolism is incorporated into the self-exhortation:

The shore-lark soars to his topmost flight,  
Sings at the height where 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!

Dynamic light and its natural effect in the human soul, joy — these, in the terms of "Ecstasy," have been the subject of this article. Only because the soul is fulfilled as it encounters its deep identity of being does it feel such joy. And only because of interior compulsion, the irresistible drawing power of the source of its being, does the listening soul come to know something of its fulfillment. In such an encounter, dark to the senses but bright to the heart, we find the origin, the beginning, of the religious journey shared in Duncan Campbell Scott's poetry.

*University of New Brunswick*