

## Between Tradition and Counter-Tradition: The Poems of A.J.M. Smith and F.R. Scott in *The Canadian Mercury* (1928-29)

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Article abstract

The contents of *The Canadian Mercury* (1928-29), especially the poems of A.J.M. Smith and F.R. Scott, embody the kind of struggle with which an emerging strain of vitalizing modernism attempts to counter a prevailing strain of late Canadian Romanticism. Both Smith and Scott decry excessive description and precious diction, but their attempts to depart from the Romantic aesthetic are only partly successful. Because they represent an early attempt to establish a new poetry but still manifest some structural and aesthetic elements of Romanticism, the poems of Smith and Scott exemplify *The Canadian Mercury's* transitional poetics: between the dominant tradition in early twentieth-century Canadian poetry and the modernism that would replace it.

# Between Tradition and Counter-Tradition: The Poems of A.J.M. Smith and F.R. Scott in *The Canadian Mercury* (1928-29)

ALAN RICHARDS

PUBLISHED IN SEVEN ISSUES between December 1928 and June 1929, the contents of *The Canadian Mercury* disclose the emergence of a modernist aesthetic that was trying to counter a prevailing but lifeless strain of the Romantic tradition in Canada, and which would influence Canadian poetry in the middle decades of the twentieth century. In 1982, Ken Norris, in his essay "The Beginnings of Canadian Modernism," contended that small magazines became "the breeding ground" for modernism's influence in Canadian literature (57). Earlier, Frank Davey had suggested, in *Louis Dudek and Raymond Souster* (1980), that literary modernism first materializes in Canada in the work of A.J.M. Smith (1902-1980) and F.R. Scott (1899-1985) who, in 1925, founded and co-edited the *McGill Fortnightly Review* (160). Brian Trehearne makes clear, however, in his study of the origins of Canadian modernist poetry, *Aestheticism and the Canadian Modernists* (1989), that the *McGill Fortnightly Review* gave voice to undergraduate students and, in particular, to their satirical criticism of Sir Arthur Currie and the administration of McGill University (234); it was not a "vehicle in which a number of brave young Modernists published their defiance of the Victorian literary scene" (233). In 1928, Smith, Scott, and Leo Kennedy (b. 1907) launched *The Canadian Mercury*. Established at a crucial moment in the formation of the McGill group of poets,<sup>1</sup> and thus of a significant strain of Canadian modernism, *The Canadian Mercury* documents a transition between poetic traditions. Canadian modernist poetry is not born in this magazine, but its head is emerging. The magazine's contents disclose a moment in

which a new aesthetic struggles to find its modernist breath while yet entangled in a Romantic umbilical cord against which it protests.

The magazine published early poems by Smith, Scott, Kennedy, Klein, and Robert Finch (1900-1995).<sup>2</sup> Created as a monthly journal of "Literature and Opinion," *The Canadian Mercury's* purpose, according to its opening editorial, was to replace "the state of amiable mediocrity and insipidity" in which Canadian literature "languishe[d]" with a poetic spirit the McGill poets understood as having already emerged in Britain and the United States, and which they believed was "at last beginning to brood upon our literary chaos" in Canada. That spirit would, the editorial predicted, generate a new type of literature, "reflecting, as modern Canadian painting has begun to do, a unique experience of nature and life" (Editorial 3).

Smith had already identified features of this new aesthetic in "Contemporary Poetry," an essay published in 1926 in the *McGill Fortnightly Review*. He wanted a poetry that would displace the lingering vestiges of Victorian Romanticism, respond to the rapid technological changes of the early decades of the twentieth century, and acknowledge changing philosophical, religious, and scientific ideas. He called for direct and concrete perceptions and, appropriating words of Harriet Munroe, editor of *Poetry*, a poetry of "absolute simplicity and sincerity" (31). The McGill poets would not eschew conventional form, metre, or rhyme, but their awareness of modernism's early experiments and developments would generate new forms, irregular rhythms, colloquial diction, and a sparse style. It is the struggles of this emerging aesthetic to free itself from late Canadian Romanticism that we see in *The Canadian Mercury*. On the editorial page, placed below the magazine's title, is its colophon: a beefy, helmeted Mercury, thumbing his nose and accompanied by a vaguely female spirit. It signifies a moment of transition from what the magazine's editors regarded as an outworn aesthetic.

The tradition of Victorian Romanticism that dominated English Canadian poetry at the beginning of the twentieth century had been established by Kate Crawford (1850-1887), William Wilfred Campbell (1858-1918), Charles G.D. Roberts (1860-1943), Archibald Lampman (1861-1899), Duncan Campbell Scott (1862-1947), and Marjorie Pickthall (1883-1922). What was prevailing when *The Canadian Mercury* was established, however, was an enervated version of this aesthetic represented by such figures as Wilson MacDonald (1880-1967) and Bliss

Carman (1861-1929), both of whom enjoyed widespread popularity early in the twentieth century.

MacDonald, who produced more than a dozen volumes of poetry and who made reading tours as late as the 1960s, was a belated and poor imitator of Romanticism. In "Wanted — Canadian Criticism," an essay published in 1928 in the *Canadian Forum*, Smith called MacDonald a good poet who was "praised for the wrong things" and who enjoyed "the sort of popularity that appears to be at the command of any poet who hammers a vigorous rhythm out of an abundant assortment of french and indian placenames [*sic*]" (600). MacDonald's poems, such as those in *A Flagon of Beauty*, published in 1931, two years after *The Canadian Mercury's* short-lived existence, do not aestheticize the world or create new concepts of beauty. Rather, they recollect vague landscapes in a quest to uncover a beauty the poet is privileged to discern. There is colour and a Romantic sense of musicality — the "swan-moving curves of the seas" and "wind-wandered leagues of the wild" ("A Flagon" 13, 14) — but it is a decayed Romanticism that has no doubts about the reality it apprehends, or about its own expression of that reality.

In the final issue of *The Canadian Mercury*, Scott reviewed Carman's *Wild Garden* (1929). Attacking a volume of the kind of poetry the McGill poets wanted to displace, Scott discloses qualities they sought. "Carman's technique and form," he argues, are "undiluted 1880; he appears impervious to change" ("Wild Garden" 140). In 1913, F.S. Flint (1885-1960) — and, behind him, Ezra Pound (1885-1972) — had called, in a statement in *Poetry*, for a poetics that included a "direct treatment of the thing," an avoidance of words that do not "contribute to the presentation," and the rhythm of the musical phrase rather than that of the metronome ("Imagism" 199). Scott regards Carman's poems as the antithesis of such poetry. Carman "has no conception of rhythm, but only metrical accuracy," he asserts; "So bound is he by discarded rules of scansion that if he wishes to use the word 'jesting' and another syllable is required, he writes 'a-jesting'," ("Wild Garden" 140). Taking up Smith's programme, Scott criticizes Carman's use of precious diction; "joyance, wondrous, beauteous, [and] lovesome" are, he argues, the kind of "'poetical words' so beloved of Victorian minor poets," adding that "there is not an idea, a metaphor, an adjective" in Carman's volume "that did not have the last drop of emotional content squeezed out of it before the beginning of this century" (140). Scott makes *Wild Garden* a metonymy

for an aesthetic tradition as antiquated in the era of art deco furniture as a Victorian antimacassar. It is an aesthetic in which the broadening of poetic subject matter by the Romantics and their innovative use of language, subjectivity, and prosody have been reduced to reiterations of conventional ethical and religious ideals and to an outpouring of supposed emotions.

That the poetry of *The Canadian Mercury* is still caught up in this aesthetic is evident in contributions by writers no longer remembered. In the third issue, for example, Ivan McNeil's short lyric, "Remembering Ishtar" (1929), exemplifies the "amiable mediocrity and insipidity" protested in the journal's first editorial.<sup>3</sup> "In nakedness," apparently, "is god-head understood," and so McNeil's speaker announces his intention to "walk naked on the hills to-night" with "god-wisdom and a god's delight" (lines 1-4). In so doing, he intends to become "one with the sea-slug and the elephant," "kiss trees," and free a "muffled body" haunted by dreams "of bare skies" (5-8). "I shall touch god-head in my nakedness," he asserts, and "cup infinity in quiet hands" (11-12). The poem is a faint echo of the aphorism with which William Blake (1757-1827) had begun his "Auguries of Innocence" (1803):

To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
 And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,  
 Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
 And Eternity in an hour. (1-4)

McNeil's quiet hands may weave the cross-rhymed quatrains of iambic pentameter that poets from Blake to Roberts had used effectively, but gone is the power of Romanticism. There is only a vague expression that a furtive nudity can achieve an auto-erotic harmony with a nature that embodies the divine. Neither this image nor a putative unity with a sea slug and an elephant, inhabiting the landscape and line 5, approximate the kind of meditation prompted by a description of a natural setting so well achieved by the Romantics and their Augustan precursors, and exemplified by Roberts's "Tantramar Revisited" (1883). Perhaps the editors of *The Canadian Mercury* read McNeil's poem as a parody of MacDonald and Carmen, and as a whimsical mockery of middle-class Canadians who clung to Victorian prudery. Or the new magazine was short of contributions.

It is not the slight poems of McNeil and other contributors to *The Canadian Mercury* that will birth the McGill movement's new kind of

poetry but those of Klein and Kennedy and, especially, of Smith and Scott. Seven poems by Smith and Scott in *The Canadian Mercury* exemplify the kind of struggle with which their strain of a vitalizing modernism emerges from the deadwood of late Canadian Romanticism.

Included in the first issue of *The Canadian Mercury* is Smith's "Proud Parable," which he had published two years earlier in the *McGill Fortnightly Review*.<sup>4</sup> Smith may have included "Proud Parable" in the new magazine's first issue because, though placed modestly on page 15, it was already a parable, and one that Smith would take pride in, about the new kind of poetry *The Canadian Mercury* intended to generate. Smith would revise it in 1932 as "Like an Old Proud King in a Parable" and place it as the first poem in three volumes of his poetry, *Collected Poems* (1962), *Poems New and Collected* (1967), and *The Classic Shade* (1978). John Ferns, in his study, *A.J.M. Smith* (1979), calls "Like an Old Proud King in a Parable" Smith's "signature poem" and suggests it both defines the situation of Canadian poets in the 1920s and exemplifies Smith's quest "to thin Canadian nature poetry down to a new purity and toughness, avoiding descriptive excess" (31). By 1932, however, *The Canadian Mercury* had ceased publication and Canadian poets were no longer in the situation they had faced in the 1920s. New magazines created in the 1940s and 1950s would demonstrate that the poetry Smith sought to establish in "Like a Proud Old King in a Parable" had itself become the dominant tradition and was being challenged by new counter-traditions. In 1928, "Proud Parable" is both enclosed within the poetry Smith wanted to move away from and able to open the way for his later poetry.

Echoes of Yeats haunt Smith's poem. "A bitter King" throws away his crown (lines 1-3) as did kings in Yeats's poem, "He Remembers Forgotten Beauty" (4-5). Yeats's "Sad Shepherd" travelled alone in an unsympathetic landscape on a futile quest to recover the lost Arcady of "The Song of the Happy Shepherd," and Smith's king wanders "a solitude of wind and rain" (7). Yeats's poems, published in 1899, twenty-seven years before Smith's poem appeared in the *McGill Fortnightly Review*, lament art's transitory quality and mourn the twilight of an old aesthetic; their grief heralds modernism's dawn. It is not grief, however, that Smith voices in "The Proud Parable" but anger that an insipid Romanticism still exists. Ian MacLaren, in his essay, "The Yeatsian Presence in A.J.M. Smith's 'Like an Old Proud King in a Parable'" (1979), argues that the final version of this poem describes a poet who, "deluded by the trappings of

poetical convention being imposed upon him,” gets rid of “the gilt crown, the hollow sceptre, the doting but ultimately tyrannical queen,” or, in other words, “oppressively emotional poetry” (62). Already in “Proud Parable,” however, as modernism enters its twilight in Europe, Smith’s bitter king abandons an enervated aesthetic in search of a voice for a Canada asserting itself in the decades after the First World War.

Like Shakespeare’s *Lear*, Smith’s king is not alone in the wind and the rain. The unseen narrator of the first stanza comes out in the second and, in the first person, expresses his own desire for “such an angry heart” (line 11). Edgar wants to keep *Lear* company in the storm, but Smith’s speaker wants to move on. *Lear* pushes Edgar back into a cave’s shelter, but Smith’s speaker displaces the king, eulogizes him as the “Divine Unsatisfied,” and tries to author the kind of poetry another Canadian poet, W.W. Ross (1894-1966), would call for in 1930, a poetry that produces “something of the sharper tang of Canada” (15). “Proud Parable” begins to shape the hard, impersonal aesthetic with which Smith wants to replace the vacuous and ornamental poetry — the “hollow sceptre and gilt crown” — represented in the work of MacDonald and the later Carman.

“Proud Parable” defines Smith’s emerging aesthetic in terms of what it should not be but, like his king, Smith is unsatisfied. He will follow his own directives and revise the poem, breaking the two even stanzas of “Proud Parable” into the four uneven ones of “Like an Old Proud King.” Smith will prune the speaker’s desire for an austere pride and bring it into sharper focus. In the revised poem, the king will strip the “doting queen” of her capitalized title, abandon her and the “fawning courtier,” and establish a site for a new aesthetic. He will reduce the ineffable divinity to a prime precursor against which sons rebel but often end up imitating:

Let me, I beseech thee, Father, die  
 From this fat royal life, and lie  
 As naked as a bridegroom by his bride,  
 And let that girl be the cold goddess Pride:

And I will sing to the barren rock  
 Your difficult, lonely music, heart,  
 Like an old proud king in a parable.

(“Like an Old Proud King” 11-17)

In 1926, Smith has yet to resolve an abstract image and archaically ordered phrase, “a lying of Pride with Pride” (“Proud Parable” 14), into a

spare, erotic image: “naked as a bridegroom by his bride” (“Like an Old Proud King” 13). Smith’s revisions will draw attention away from the nature of the landscape to the nature of a new Canadian poetry. The revised poem will exemplify a poetry that, as Smith would write in “A Rejected Preface” (1936), recreates an object “as precisely and vividly and simply as possible” (172). Unfinished, and still marred by elements of a poetry Smith and his colleagues protest, “Proud Parable” nevertheless opens the way to “Like an Old Proud King in a Parable.” The “strength in blood and bone” (line 17) of the closing line anticipates, too, the final version of “The Lonely Land” (1929):

This is the beauty  
of strength  
broken by strength  
and still strong. (“The Lonely Land” 35-38)

*The Canadian Mercury* published two more of Smith’s early poems, “Good Friday” (March 1929) and “The Circle” (April-May 1929). Revised slightly, both would later be reprinted.

After describing Christ’s crucifixion, the speaker in “Good Friday” meditates on the fear evoked in those who witness the event and, by implication, in those who think about it as they read the poem. The speaker pities Christ: “His face was a faded flower / Drooping and lost” (7-8). The poem, however, displaces pity and constructs Christ’s death as a sublime, or aestheticized, moment of frightening beauty. In 1994, Anne Compton, calling Smith a “Canadian Metaphysical,” suggested that Smith’s poem is modelled on Donne’s “Good Friday, 1613”; both poems, she argued, imagine the effect of the scene on those who witness it (see 126-27). In Donne’s poem, the speaker’s reflections generate a consciousness of his own sinfulness; Smith’s poem, with its emphasis on fear, achieves another effect.

A comparison of the imagery of both poems discloses the aesthetic struggling to emerge in Smith’s poems. Donne had given his own poem a subtitle, “Riding Westward,” with which he builds an elaborate metaphysical conceit. He creates a chiaroscuro that contrasts the westerly setting of the sun, into which the speaker rides, with Christ’s death behind him, in the east, the direction of the sun’s daily resurrection. The speaker hopes Christ’s restored image and resurrected grace will purify him of his “deformity.” Donne, one of the poets who are the subject of Smith’s doc-



toral dissertation, "Studies in the Metaphysical Poets" (1931), fuses together the concept of a terrible and powerful grace with emotions of shame, grief, hope, and joy.<sup>5</sup>

Like Donne's poem, Smith's "Good Friday" is an expression of Christian devotion, but it is simpler and moves towards the aesthetic of "The Lonely Land" with its beauty "broken by strength / and still strong." Its opening line, in the language of English devotional poetry, refers to Christ's cross as a "tree" and, like the king in the first line of "Proud Parable," it is a "bitter" object. Ascribing affect to external reality, an example of what John Ruskin (1819-1900) had denounced as pathetic fallacy, Smith begins his poem in a magazine committed to generating a modernist poetic with the kind of language Scott's editorial will soon denounce as "so beloved of Victorian minor poets" ("Wild Garden" 140). References in the fourth stanza to the landscape are not modified by affective or descriptive adjectives; instead, creating a sparse background against which Christ is crucified, they advance a leaner poetry.

The first stanza alludes to an event in Mark's gospel narrative in which, caught with his disciples on the Sea of Galilee, Christ stills a storm. In the authorized version of the Bible, with which Smith would have been familiar, "the wind ceased, and there was great calm" (Mark 4.39). Against this backdrop, Smith suggests Christ wielded a sublime power by refusing to exercise his power. Smith's Christ, "had he willed" it (2), could have overpowered natural elements and, presumably, his executioners, but this he chooses not to do. In Mark's narrative, although the storm is calmed, Jesus's companions are not; indeed, they are described as "exceedingly" fearful (4.40-41). In Smith's poem, however, Christ chooses not to still "the tumult / Of the fading sky" (17-18); who, asks the speaker rhetorically, would not fear a power so great it does not have to demonstrate itself?

In the fourth stanza, the poem alludes to a second incident in Mark's gospel. Countering their admiration of the temple in Jerusalem that Herod had had rebuilt, Jesus tells his disciples that "there shall not be left one stone upon another that shall not be thrown down" (13.2). His opponents will read these words as a claim to a power to destroy the temple and the social and religious order it grounded, and they will call for his execution (15.58). With Jesus's words, however, Mark begins an apocalyptic discourse about "wars and the rumours of wars" (13.7) and a catastrophe of cosmic proportions: "the stars that are in heaven shall fall

and the powers that are in heaven shall be shaken" (13.25). It is to this apocalyptic catastrophe that Smith alludes. "Who then was not afraid" of a dying figure who, "with a cry," could have shattered and rebuilt the universe — had he so willed? It is Christ's power to surrender the exercise of such terrifying divine power and die "as man" that becomes the miracle Smith's speaker finds both "difficult" to understand and terrifying. Rewriting Christ's crucifixion, Smith echoes the "terrible beauty" Yeats saw born in the Easter deaths of the Irish Rebellion ("Easter 1916" 80).

Theologically, Smith's lyric reflects the Christ who, in poetic verses by Paul, abdicates power and submits to "the death of the cross" (Phil. 2:8). Aesthetically, however, Smith's figure is related to the king in "Proud Parable" who renounces the trappings of a dominant but hollow aesthetic and willingly enters "a solitude of wind and rain." Smith's fusion of the emotion of fear with the thoughts of death transform "Good Friday" into a symbolist parable of a modernist aesthetic, an aesthetic aptly expressed by Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) in the first of his "Duino Elegies" (1923):

For beauty's nothing  
but the beginning of terror, which we are just able to endure,  
and we are so awed because it serenely disdains  
to annihilate. Every angel is terrifying. (4-7)

Smith's aesthetic struggle is not without setback. In "The Circle," with its six cross-rhymed quatrains of iambic tetrameter, Smith takes up the traditional form of the ballad and develops a conventional poetic theme, the cycle of natural seasons. The poem barely manages to avoid clichéd and undefined landscapes with its "faded berries" (7), "crocuses among the grass" (20), and other specific objects set in motion with appropriate verbs: a tree "sways and dips" (3) and there is "drifting snow" (10). Smith's seasons, however, are neither meteorological nor biological phenomena but aesthetic experiences. They are sensuous, Wordsworthian moments: "the oozing summer drips" (21) in the final stanza, for example, into "heavy days of slow delight" (22). The haze of autumn in the second stanza becomes, in the third, a sensuous "winter mist / Of amethyst and drifting snow" (9-10) that "dances solemnly and slow" (12).

"The Circle" is in the Victorian tradition of Roberts's contemplative poem "The Mowing" (1890), in which the sun seals the "spirit of June" into the hay which will, in winter, "cheer the herds with pasture memories" (10-14), and of Lampman's sensuous pleasure in "Heat" (1888):

I think some blessed power  
 Hath brought me wandering idly here:  
 In the full flower of this hour  
 My thoughts grow keen and clear. (45-48)

Smith's poem begins with summer, and returns to it in the closing stanza after moving through autumn, winter, and spring, creating the circle that is its subject. The last stanza repeats the first, with a few changes. Summer "drips" as it did in the opening line, but now it also oozes (21). The wind's cries at the beginning the poem are replaced with "heavy days of slow delight" (22), and the bird, which sang and flew, returns, "poised for flight" (24). Like a wheel in motion, or the changing river of Heraclitus, life in Smith's poem simultaneously continues and changes.

Autumn and spring are transitional moments; the single stanzas accorded them bridge the opening and closing stanzas of summer, and the two in the middle describe winter. In a distant echo of the topographical poetry of "Lines Written Among the Euganean Hills" (1818) by Percy Shelley (1792-1822) and of Roberts's "Tantramar Revisited," the first of these middle stanzas describes a wintry setting and the second meditates on the speaker's emotional state. Like the silenced brook and waterfall, he "cannot call" (14), and his breath is only a ghostly substance, a bare hint of existence. The bird perched aloft at the end of the poem, "poised for flight," is the circle's zenith, and the wintry "quietude" the speaker "share[s] / With earth and sky" its nadir (15-16). The tension between rest and motion, to which the word "poised" alludes (24), suggests that the speaker himself anticipates the approach of another autumn and a transition back to winter. Images of continuity and change in nature bring together an idea and a related feeling; the circle becomes a symbol fusing the concept of mutability with experiences of delight and solitude and, unlike McNeil's poem, of a genuine feeling of unity with a Canadian landscape.

Smith's poems in *The Canadian Mercury* contribute to the magazine's creation of a transition between, on the one hand, the tradition of late Romanticism that dominates Canadian poetry during the first three decades of the twentieth century and, on the other, an emerging strain of modernism that will displace that tradition. "The Circle" invokes the cycle of seasons to signify a joyful experience of life's mutability, "Good Friday" celebrates human transitory experience, even that of death, and "Proud Parable" begins to create a symbol for a new aesthetic. Sandra Djwa suggests, in her essay "A New Soil and a Sharp Sun" (1977), that

such symbolism gave Canadian poets a language with which to evoke Canadian landscape (15). The modernism of Smith's poems in *The Canadian Mercury* is, however, only an aesthetic-in-process; these poems are still marked by the very kind of poetry the magazine rejects. In Scott's review of Carman's poetry, we can imagine a subtext that criticizes Smith. Although, in "Wanted — Canadian Criticism," Smith had rejected the prevailing aesthetic, in his poems in *The Canadian Mercury* he does not entirely succeed in flinging aside the vestiges of that aesthetic.

The magazine included four of Scott's own poems. The first issue (December 1928), in addition to Smith's "Proud Parable," also contained Scott's "Vagrant." Two more of Scott's poems were published in the third issue (February 1929), "Old Song" and "Spring Flame," while the final issue (June 1929) included "March Field." How do these poems measure against expectations for a new kind of poetry?

Even a glance at its layout on the page reveals "Vagrant" to be a different kind of poem than Smith's. The rhyming couplets that constitute its eight stanzas are a traditional element but, like Pound's famous Imagist couplet, "In a Station of the Metro" (1916), they are also vehicles for a modernist aesthetic. Fragments of experience and ideas placed impressionistically in unpunctuated sentences, spatial punctuation, and the absence of capitalization shape "Vagrant" both figuratively and typographically. A solitary, lower case "i" highlights the stanza's image of a dot in the sky, almost anticipating the techniques of twentieth-century concrete poetry, and sardonically deflates the vagrant's vaulting individuality. Scott's diction is formal rather than colloquial, but it is contemporary and not archaic.

Scott's subject is an urban wanderer. He does not accompany Smith's king on the rain-soaked granite of the Canadian Shield. Nor is he the vagrant of Carman's poems such as "The Vagabonds" (1895), at home in rollicking rhythms and expressions of the beauty of nature's sounds and colours. Alone, Scott's vagrant is "content" in an urban landscape, although the closing line that expresses this contentment smirks with the satirical voice Scott was so capable of in other poems. The vagrant's lust — his sexual desire as well as his wanderlust — is "incomplete" (10), but unlike Smith's pastoral king, his dissatisfaction leads not to a heroic demand for "a strength in blood and bone," but to resignation. Having "fled beyond the outer star" (1), he finds himself an insignificant "last dot in the sky" (12) and, at the poem's end, is "virginal" (15)

and “content to live in montreal” (16). Unlike McNeil’s speaker, Scott’s does not cup infinity in his hands and find himself bonding with the world around him; making infinity “his own,” he finds himself alone.

Although Scott’s figure does not yearn for Carman’s outdoor vagabondia, this urban vagrant struggles against prevailing social conventions; he wanders beyond “the final vestiges of form” into “spaces where no systems are” (2) and that are “beyond the last accepted norm” (4). Neither a traditional respect for the past nor a shrewd regard for the future concern him: “the present seemed the only tense” (8). Scott’s urban vagrant’s struggles with the “accepted norm” point to the social commentary with which much of his subsequent poetry will be concerned. At the same time, this is a figure who, without a crown to throw away, ventures where Smith’s proud figure has not yet gone. In “Vagrant,” Scott constructs a solipsistic, alienated individual who makes his home in a city that, if not yet cosmopolitan in the 1920s, is part of the cosmos. This poem embodies the poetry championed by the journal in which it is published, even as it gently pokes fun at that poetry.

In contrast to “Vagrant,” “Spring Flame” reflects established poetic conventions. In “The Circle,” Smith describes the seasons of the landscape in order to voice a modernist anxiety concerning changing continuities; Scott’s poem eroticizes the landscape. Spring is a feminine power who fires the woods with a flame of desire. As Trehearne points out, a number of poems, including “Spring Flame” and “March Field,” disclose Scott’s marked tendency to construct the Canadian landscape erotically. Trehearne locates this tendency in Decadence, one of the transitional currents flowing between Romanticism and modernism (169). In “Spring Flame,” although he seems to be trying to create a post-Romantic Canadian landscape, Scott employs elements that belonged to the flaccid poetry against which *The Canadian Mercury* protests. The poem’s structure echoes that of the traditional ballad, each quatrain consisting of alternating short and longer lines of which the second and fourth rhyme. The association of a female figure with an element of nature, and of spring’s arrival with the arousal of “old fire” in the “blood,” are hardly elements that make poetry new. The diction is antiquated. The woman arrives “like to,” rather than “like,” a burning arrowhead in the dark (2-4), and a second figure “spake,” rather than “spoke,” to her (7). The trees in the final stanza are sentient beings who “knew the bond” that links them together and positions them in relation to the two figures. Except for a descrip-

tion of the other person as one who has "no fear / By a wood" (5-6) both figures are undefined. The vague allusions to spring's arrival, a flaming energy, and a natural bond exemplify the nebulous Canadian Romanticism Scott will soon decry in his review of Carman, the "final vestiges" of which *The Canadian Mercury*, as transient as Scott's vagrant, had tried to remove.

If the central image in "Spring Flame" echoes the traditions of a late Canadian Romanticism, "Old Song" constructs an older tradition with which to nourish a new kind of poetry. It does so not by looking to Blake or Donne but to the geology of central Canada. Simple diction and short lines of partial rhymes, and the absence of capitalization and punctuation, underscore the austere imagery of its "elemental song" (5) and appropriate Imagism's direct treatment of the landscape. As it does, for example, in "Laurentian Shield" (1945) and "Trees In Ice" (1931), Scott's economical language in "Old Song" expresses a new perspective of Canadian landscape in sharp images of small details, and in a glimpse of a river's "silent flowing" (4). These are not the kind of evocative descriptions of such poets as Roberts and Lampman, and the landscape is neither eroticized nor constructed as an embodiment of inflated emotions. Instead, Scott juxtaposes granite rock, an awareness of human fragility, and the concept of an ageless and relentless land. In Scott's vision, Djwa argues, "the land is associated with timeless process," but humanity, "like the leaves, is seen as transitory, evanescent, a brief interval in the continuing processes of nature" (11).

The leaves are ambiguously described as "fretting" (12). Does this adjective refer to an emotion or to an aesthetic activity? If the leaves are to be perceived as being anxious, Scott's poem perpetuates another instance of late Canadian Romanticism's preference for pathetic fallacy. Perhaps, however, the word "fretting" creates a metaphor. Turning the fingerboard ridges of a string instrument into a verb, Scott transforms leaves into part of an instrument to accompany the river's primeval singing. Scott has transplanted Coleridge's aeolian harp into the Laurentians, an indigenous environment for the new poetry of the McGill movement and an older influence than the Romanticism that generated the poetry that *The Canadian Mercury* wants to uproot. Formed of melted glacial water, the river establishes a continuity between the "long aeons" (9) of geological time and the sounds of the river flowing, in the present moment of the speaker's experience, over granite. A remnant of that primor-

dial period, the rock provides the river with its throat and lips (see 14-15). The rock and leaves of central Canada become an instrument through which an ancient, indigenous music is recovered and given voice.

Scott's movement into modernism stumbled in "Spring Flame," and it stumbles again in "March Field," a poem that replays elements from late Canadian Romanticism and paradoxically creates a lifeless field in the moment when the transition from winter to spring begins. Capitalized lines and formal punctuation return, signifying a retreat from Scott's play with a new kind of prosody. The focus of the poem is a narrow one spatially, temporally, and figuratively. It does not envision the geological time of "Old Song," and averts its gaze from the all-encompassing "earth and sky, with brook and fall" of Smith's "The Circle." Instead, it focuses on a small element, part of a ploughed field that, as the winter's snow cover starts to melt, becomes exposed. The description is economical; the snow is "old," the stubble "round" and "rigid" (1, 12). Scott seems to be appropriating elements of Impressionism to create an austere image that is neither blurred nor softened by pathetic fallacy.

Scott's construction of images using both adjectives and alliteration, however, violates Flint and Pound's requirements for a new poetry. The movement from "folded snow" to "dark furrow" in the first stanza, and from "blunt brown hills" loosened by "a warm wind" (9-10) to the "cold loam" in which "no seed stirs" (11, 13), echo traditions of the topographical poem. At the same time, "March Field" reflects the influence of modernism's experiments with free verse in which the rhythms of natural speech, rather than what Scott calls, in his review of Carman, "discarded rules of scansion" (3), shape the poem's lines and direct attention immediately to its primary image. The half rhymes of "loam" and "stem" (11, 12) audibly heighten the visual image of the soil as a "bare room" (14) where seed awaits germination.

The poem points ambiguously to a moment between the final disappearance of traces of winter and the growth of a field of grain. The field has been cultivated; its furrows suggest winter wheat or rye has already been seeded, "Yet no seed stirs" (13). This is not, however, a static picture; contrasting actions germinate a distinct tension. The black earth in the first stanza is "thrust forth" (13) as the old snow "shrinks" (2); in the second, the wind, like a gardener, is "loosening" (10) the soil around "rigid root and stem" (12). Smith's changing seasons in "The Circle" delight in life's mutability. Scott's poem does not

kindle an awareness of the transitory quality of life; instead, it generates an unresolved tension.

Smith's poems in the early *McGill Fortnightly Review*, argues Trehearne, disclose "the degree to which Smith was *not* sure of his modern voice" and, therefore, the role of this magazine in the development of modernism in Canada was a limited one (240). We hear uncertain voices in *The Canadian Mercury*, but we also hear a strain of modernism that, though undeveloped, is emerging. It is tempting to read "March Field," placed in the final issue of *The Canadian Mercury*, as a commentary on the magazine's failure. Like the poetry of Carman that Scott criticizes in the same issue, the magazine's poems have not yet broken through the furrows of an exhausted version of Romanticism. Spring has not yet arrived in "March Field," although in this Canadian poem April might not become Eliot's cruel month. In the pages of *The Canadian Mercury*, the counter-tradition of the McGill movement's austere modernism is not yet flowing, but it is already "inevitable" (8). The sudden frost of the economic downturn in 1929 kills *The Canadian Mercury*, but in 1936 Smith and Scott will edit *New Provinces*, the first anthology of Canadian modernist poetry. New literary journals sprout up in the 1940s and 1950s, demonstrating that the modernism emerging in *The Canadian Mercury* not only flourished but grew influential enough to be both modified and displaced with other varieties of poetry.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> At the core of this group were A.J.M. Smith, F.R. Scott, Leo Kennedy, and A.M. Klein (1909-1972).

<sup>2</sup> Norris provides a concise summary of the magazine's contents in his discussion in *The Little Magazine in Canada* (17-19). In *Aestheticism and the Canadian Modernists*, Trehearne argues the modernism of Smith's poetry was more heavily influenced by Aestheticism than by the high modernism of Yeats, Pound, and Eliot, and Scott's by Decadence. His chapter on Smith provides a helpful critique both of Smith's poetry in the *McGill Fortnightly Review* and of its mythical role in the development of Canadian modernist poetry.

<sup>3</sup> McNeil's poem, together with those of Smith and Scott that were published in *The Canadian Mercury*, are reproduced in an appendix to this article.

<sup>4</sup> Smith would revise a number of poems, including "The Lonely Land," that were originally published in the *McGill Fortnightly Review*, freeing them from their late Romantic traces.

<sup>5</sup> This fusion of affect and idea is the heart of a theory of symbolism Smith articulated in an essay in the *McGill Fortnightly Review* in 1925, "Symbolism in Poetry."



APPENDIX: POEMS FROM *THE CANADIAN MERCURY**Remembering Ishtar (1929)*

Ivan McNeil

In nakedness is god-head understood —  
 I shall walk naked on the hills to-night,  
 With stars like bubbles in my started blood,  
 Knowing god-wisdom and a god's delight.

One with the sea-slug and the elephant,  
 I shall kiss trees and press with strange surmise  
 Upon outcast immensities that haunt  
 This muffled body's dreaming of bare skies.

Fate wars in vain on unconditioned flesh —  
 Unbounded by the dark of high lands.  
 I shall touch god-head in my nakedness,  
 And cup infinity in quiet hands.

*Proud Parable*

A.J.M. Smith

A bitter King in anger to be gone  
 From fawning courtier and doting Queen  
 Flung hollow sceptre and gilt crown away  
 And took a staff and started out alone  
 And wandered on for many a night and day,  
 And came, at length, half dead, half mad with pain,  
 Into a solitude of wind and rain,  
 And slept alone there, so old writers say,  
 With only his Pride for a counterpane.

O kingly One! Divine Unsatisfied!  
 Grant that I, too, with such an angry heart,  
 And in simplicity, may turn aside  
 From any love or fellowship or art  
 That is not a lying of Pride with Pride,

That is not colder than a rain-wet stone,  
Sharper than winds that make the raw face smart,  
And has not such a strength in blood and bone  
As nerved the Spartan spearman when he died.

*Good Friday*  
A.J.M. Smith

This day upon the bitter tree  
Died One who had he willed  
Could have dried up the wise sea  
And the wind stilled.

And when at the ninth hour  
He surrendered the ghost  
His face was a faded flower  
Drooping and lost.

Who then was not afraid?  
Who turned not stony eyes  
Away from the face of the dead,  
Of the wise?  
Of him who with a cry

Could shatter if he willed  
The sea and earth and sky  
and them re-build,

Who chose amid the tumult  
Of the fading sky  
A miracle more difficult:  
As man to die.

*The Circle*  
A.J.M. Smith

Over me the summer drips,  
Over me the wind cries;

A tree above me sways and dips,  
A bird above me sings and flies.

Insensibly the season slips  
From coloured days to paler days,  
With faded berries on my lips,  
And in my eyes an autumn haze

That thickens to a wintry mist  
Of amethyst and drifting snow,  
Of drifting snow and amethyst  
That dances solemnly and slow.

My breath gores ghostly on the air:  
I move my lips, but cannot call,  
Nor break the quietude I share  
With earth and sky, with brook and fall.

Silent, enraptured, I remain:  
The many-coloured seasons pass:  
Now April sunshine, April rain,  
Lights crocuses among the grass;

And now the oozing summer drips  
Through heavy days of slow delight:  
The tree above me sways and dips,  
The bird above is poised for flight.

*Vagrant*  
F.R. Scott

he fled beyond the outer star  
to spaces where no systems are

beyond the last accepted norm  
the final vestiges of form

the compass of his mind astute  
to find a polar absolute

patrolled a mute circumference  
the present seemed the only tense

interminably trod his feet  
even his lust was incomplete

and he the last dot in the sky  
did but accentuate an i

infinity became his own  
in fact he found he was alone

now you may see him virginal  
content to live in montreal

*Spring Flame*  
F. R. Scott

Through the glowing dark  
She came  
Like to an arrow-head  
Of flame.

One of no fear  
By a wood  
Spake to the old fire  
In her blood.

And the brimming trees  
Knew the bond  
Between them and those two  
On the ground.

*Old Song*  
F.R. Scott

far voices  
and fretting leaves  
this music the hillside gives  
but in the silent flowing river  
an elemental song  
for ever

a deep calling  
of no mind  
out of long aeons  
when dust was blind  
and ice hid sound

only a moving  
with no note  
granite lips  
a stone throat.

*March Field*  
F.R. Scott

Now the old folded snow  
Shrinks from black earth.  
Now is thrust forth  
Heavy and still  
The field's dark furrow.  
Not yet the flowing  
The mound-stirring  
Not yet the inevitable flow.  
There is a warm wind, stealing  
From blunt brown hills, loosening  
Sod and cold loam  
Round rigid root and stem.

Yet no seed stirs  
In this bare room  
Under the hollow sky.

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