The Ambiguous Social Vision of F.R. Scott

by Wanda Campbell

In his article "The Road Back to Eden: The Poetry of F.R. Scott," Stephen Scobie points out that "Scott's outlook, in some of his most serious poems, is a profoundly ambiguous one."[1] To level the charge of ambiguity against Scott is not to condemn his work, but to insist upon a reevaluation of a poet long praised for his clarity of vision. Scott has been hailed by Louis Dudek as "the clearest poetic voice of this century in Canada," and by George Woodcock as "a man for all seasons." In the introduction to Scott's poetry in *An Anthology of Canadian Literature*, editors Russell Brown and Donna Bennett write: "In his poetry we can see the best aspects of modernism: a penetrating vision expressed in a spare and precise style" (347). In an article in *Poetry Canada Review* (Summer 1985), David O'Rourke writes: "Canadian poetry properly begins with A.J.M. Smith and F.R. Scott . . ." (8). Despite Desmond Pacey's early assessment of him as a "minor poet" in *Creative Writing in Canada* (1952), those who have questioned the high status accorded Scott among Canadian modernists have been in the minority. Clearly, the time has come to reconsider Scott's status within the canon. A necessary step in this process is an exploration of the ambiguity at the heart of his verse and an inquiry into its sources.

Some of the particularly ambivalent relationships that permeate Scott's poetry are the relationship between religion and science, the individual and the collective, language and liberty, and finally, the satiric target and the Utopian ideal. Glimpses of this ideal are scattered through several of Scott's poems which deal with paradise lost and found, but the most detailed and concrete formulation appears in "Mural," an early poem which lays the groundwork for his equivocal vision of an Edenic alternative. Though Scobie has pointed out that this poem, like so many of Scott's poems, is deeply ambiguous, most critics have chosen to see it as a satire. Even Scobie, despite his discoveries to the contrary, writes that "it is a fairly standard dystopia" (317). He writes that "Mural" could perhaps be seen as Scott's version of Lampman's "City of the End of Things" which is referred to in *The Blasted Pine* as a "powerful denunciation of a mechanical world" (160n) but it may, in fact, be closer to Lampman's "Land of Pallas," a portrait of a socialist society guided by wisdom. Though Scott may not have been familiar with this poem, he would almost certainly have read the works which inspired it, Thomas More's *Utopia* and William Morris' *News from Nowhere*. It will be argued that in his poem "Mural" Scott is portraying a utopian rather than a satiric vision. If a poem that has been consistently interpreted as dystopian is revealed to be utopian in the context of Scott's other poetry and its own intertextual echoes, then the accepted image of Scott as a poet of clear vision may also need to be reinterpreted.

In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye writes that satire's "moral norms are relatively clear, and it assumes standards against which the grotesque and absurd are measured" (223). This concept of a moral norm may no longer be in vogue, but it is one Scott claims as essential to satire in the Introduction to *The Blasted Pine* which he co-edited with A.J.M. Smith: "All satire, indeed, and most invective, is moral: it asserts or implies a standard of value" (xvi). In W.E. Collin's pioneering study *The White Savannahs*, the chapter on Scott is entitled "Pilgrim of the Absolute." For Scott, it is belief in an absolute that rescues satire from being merely destructive:

> Don't forget, when you satirize something you are

> contrasting the thing you satirize with its opposite
> which you would like to have instead. So you're really
> affirming the opposite values to those you're
> satirizing. (*Canadian Poetry* 2:66)

This notion of a utopian ideal allows the satiric needle not only to poke holes in an existing society, but to stitch together the vision of a new. In 1931, Scott wrote: "The modernist poet, like the socialist, has thought through present forms to a new and more suitable order. He is not concerned with destroying but with creating. . ." (*Canadian Forum* 11 (1931), 338). In trying to provide his own alternative to the existing society, Scott operates under the "utopian reflex" to which Marx refers: "the world has long dreamed of something of which it only has to become conscious in order to possess it in actuality."[2] Satire, then, is only satire because it is measured against an envisioned Eden. Scott writes: "The satire was the holding up of the existing society against standards one was formulating in one's mind for a more perfect society."[3]

In his note to "Mural" in *The Eye of the Needle* volume, Scott writes: "This is as near as I can get to a credible Utopia" (70n). This raises the complex question of authorial intention. In her work on narration and representation entitled *Unspeakable Sentences*, Ann Banfield explains that the irony of episodes "resides nowhere in them but is rather a way of reading their intentionality" (222), a comment that applies to satire which Frye has defined as "militant irony." There is no linguistic proof in Scott's comment that his intention is satiric, but critics have chosen to judge the poem according to their own prejudice. A look at the etymological background of the word "Utopia" does little to clarify Scott's intention. Does he mean *outopia* "nowhere," a word that implies no qualitative judgments, or *eutopia* "good place" which is unquestionably positive? One presumes that, like Thomas More, he meant to evoke both, particularly since the word "dystopia" had come into usage to define the opposite state. Scott does not claim perfection for his utopia but says simply that it is "as near as I could get. . . ." The society presented in "Mural" owes as much to the utopias of More and Morris, as it does to the dystopia of Huxley. If "Mural" is a satire in the tradition of Lampman's "City of the End of Things," as critics have claimed, its absence from the pages of *The Blasted Pine* is a surprising one.

"Mural" is not one of Scott's best poems, but it deserves analysis because it contains tentative explorations of many of the themes and ambiguities that reverberate through Scott's later poems. It is also significant as social vision because it was written in 1935, the year in which Scott travelled to Russia. In "Impressions of a Tour in the U.S.S.R." he writes:

> Just as people perish when there is no vision, so they
> live when there is vision. The Soviet Union has its
> vision. It sees a brave new world where there is no
> war, poverty or insecurity, and in which free and equal
> men and women live active and cultured lives.[4]

In 1935 Scott also participated in the writing of *Social Planning for Canada*, a book which maps the socialist future that was to become the platform of the Co -operative Commonwealth Federation. In its Preface, Scott addresses the social ills that appear in several of his poems that criticize the government, the corporations, and even the church of a complacent, often corrupt capitalist society:

> If socialism means a definite system or body of
> proposals, however, it also crystallizes a protest —
> against gross inequality of income and economic power,
> against poverty and thwarted and repressed human lives,

> against waste and inefficiency, against the inhumanity
> and social stupidity of exploitation and war. (vii)

All of these elements are explored in "Mural" and as such it must be taken seriously as Scott's private proposal for an alternative society. Of course, the ambiguity of the poem may be as much a reflection of the ambiguity of socialism as that of Scott's attitude. At the time Scott wrote "Mural" the harsh realities of Stalin's Russia were not widely known. "We have [since] learnt to be much more aware of the price that has to be paid — in material as well as spiritual coin — for certain basic social improvements."[5] Nonetheless, the poem deserves to be looked at line by line and word by word not only because it reveals a surprisingly rich intertextuality, but because it clearly demonstrates the strengths and inadequacies of Scott's poetics, as well as the ambiguities of his social vision.

Scott takes special care in choosing *le motjuste* for his titles because they invite the kind of wit and word play in which he delights, and "Mural" is no exception. It should come as no surprise, however, that this title partakes of the ambivalence that is present throughout the poem. As an adjective "mural" means "of, pertaining to, or resembling a wall" (OED). These implications of enclosure and limitation could relate to the technological "progress" which overshadows the poem. However, both Milton's Paradise and the heavenly city described in Revelations are enclosed by walls.

The primary meaning of "mural" is "a fresco or painting made directly on a wall" (OED). Scott's visits to the galleries and cathedrals of Europe and his marriage to painter Marion Dale in 1928 helped make him sensitive to the implications of art as metaphor. In his "mural" he paints a portrait of a new society. (Curiously, Thomas More gives the traveller who paints the wonders of his Utopia the name of Raphael. A contemporary of More's, Raphael was one of the greatest fresco painters of all time.) An extension of the idea of decoration on the wall suggests the writing on the wall which Daniel inter prets as a warning to the decadent King Belshazzar in chapter five of Daniel. "Your days are numbered, you have been weighed and found wanting, your kingdom will be divided" (Daniel 5:26). This function of warning is central to much distopian literature. An idea allied to that of inscription is that of epitaph, a possibility reinforced by the context of the poem's position in the two early collections in which it appeared. As D.M.R. Bentley has pointed out, Scott "organized his earlier volumes with an eye to relations of contrast and juxtaposition between pairs and groups of poems."[6] In *Overture*, Scott's first published collection, "Mural" faces three short poems collectively entitled "Epitaphs," which are also inscriptions on stones, brief biographies and warnings. In *The Eye of the Needle*, "Mural" follows "To Certain Friends" in which those whose "knowledge of how to use knowledge grows smaller and smaller" are chastised. These foreboding implications provide one context for reading the poem, but in that same collection "Mural" is followed by "Social Notes," stinging satiric portraits of poverty, exploitation and consumerism, social woes all apparently eliminated from the world of Scott's "Mural."

In the opening line of the poem "When shepherds cease to watch their flocks. . ." Scott uses a technique employed earlier in "The Canadian Authors Meet."[7] There, "Shall we gather at the river," a line from an American gospel song, is equated with "Shall we go round the mulberry bush," a line that echoes the mocking tone of Eliot's "Shall we go round the prickly pear." Scott's decision to parallel a hymn with a children's rhyme adds a dark ambiguity to his satiric voice. That same ambiguity accompanies the interpolation of an echo from a hymn or, in this case, a Christmas carol into the poem "Mural." No longer "While shepherds watch their flocks by night" it is "When shepherds *cease* to watch their flocks" (emphasis added). This opening line can be interpreted in several ways. It could signify the death of religion, paternity, and the pastoral ideal. However, the shepherd figure is not eliminated, only reassigned, suggesting the context of the Twenty-third Psalm, a framework that is reinforced by the use of the biblical "shall" throughout the poem, and the calm and ordered couplets of

iambic tetrameter, a meter often used in hymns. According to W.J. Keith, the rhetorical organization of the poem into a "when/then" structure may be derived from a long tradition of poems extending back into antiquity in which the "when" is followed by an impossibility, as in G.K. Chesteron's "The Donkey": "When fishes flew and forest walked." The pattern is also familiar from such hymns as "When the Role is Called up Yonder," and the "Vanity of vanities" passage in the closing chapter of Ecclesiastes. Once again, Scott is interpreting "the new scientific reality in terms of the older religious mythology," an imaginative device Dudek considers central to all of Scott's best poetry.[8]

Though Scott had abandoned traditional Christianity for the socialist humanism he expressed in his brief poem "Creed," the influence of his father and of the Christian Study group he joined at Oxford were to have a lasting effect on him.[9] Canon F.G. Scott's Anglo-Catholicism was marked by compassionate social activism and Scott often draws upon this inheritance to support and strengthen his social vision. However, Scott's willingness to appropriate the language and symbols of Christianity for his socialist purposes creates some disturbing ambiguities. Scott often uses the language of his religious past to explore his vision of a scientific future; after all, they both deal in miracles. In "Trans Canada" he speaks of an airplane of which "the sure wings / Are the everlasting arms of science" (*CP* 56). Dudek writes: "The phrase is in fact blasphemous, unless science is somehow a way to a revised view of religion, which I doubt that it is here" (37); curiously, he immediately dismisses the very interpretation which appears to reveal Scott's true intentions.

The opening lines of "Mural" introduce the reader to a world that resembles the laboratories of Huxley's *Brave New World*, and yet they can also be interpreted as futuristic equivalents to the agricultural husbandry so essential to More's *Utopia.* In "Mural" the eggs are laid "without the cluck of boasting hens," and Raphael tells his incredulous listeners that in Utopia, "they breed an enormous number of chickens by a marvelous method. Men hatch the eggs not hens, by keeping them in a warm place at an even temperature" (29-30). Other parallels between the two works appear too close to be accidental; Scott's "And from the cool assembly line / Come wormless fruits and vintage wines" and "honey drips in plastic cone . . ." parallels More's "They drink wine, apple or pear cider, or water, sometimes clear, but often mixed with honey or liquorish, of which they have an abundance" (30). The phrase "wormless fruits" also picks up the thread of biblical symbolism by suggesting that this world may, in fact, be paradise regained. In another of Scott's "Edenic" poems, Adam and Eve are expelled from paradise, but Eve claims "If we keep on using this knowledge / I think we'll be back" (*CP* 189). Is this the Eden to which man's knowledge has allowed him to return? "When all our food comes fresh and clean / From some unbreakable machine" suggests the sterile mechanized world of Huxley, but also foreshadows another of Scott's poems on the Edenic theme written in 1939 (in Scott's *Selected Poems*, this chronologically later poem is placed directly before "Mural" to facilitate comparison). Before the fall in "Paradise Lost," "The clean aimless worlds / Spun true and blind / Unseen and undisturbed by mind" (*CP* 49). This appears to be Scott's idea of Paradise, the natural world free of man's exploitation, the northern lake untouched by the small civilized foot.

No longer reliant on a "precious, prayed-for and uncertain" nature (*CP* 123), humanity, with the help of science, can assure proper nutrition to all. Despite the apparently ironic tone, "And vitamins by legal right / Are bedded in each measured bite" can be interpreted positively in the light of the "Social Note" entitled "Modern Medicine" in which Scott attacks the drug firm that "holds the monopoly" so people must pay or die (*CP 66*). In "Mural" the health that is the primary aim of More's Utopians becomes a legal right. The implementation of universal health care is also a central tenet of *Social Planning for Canada* which laid the groundwork for the CCF platform.

Science has also helped man to realize the Icarus dream haunting him since the beginning of time "And men in rockets leave the ground / To fly the pole with single bound." The image

fascinates Scott and reappears in several poems, most notably "Trans Canada" and the "Laurentian Shield." In the latter poem "the drone of the plane. . . / Fills all the emptiness with neighbourhood / And links our future over the vanished pole." Though the preceding lines describe the exploitation of the north, the description of the plane is a prelude to the "language of life" that will transform "this rock into children" (*CP* 58). As such, it is an image of triumph, regeneration and reconciliation, as in the later poem "No Curtain" in which the human race is "Forced by the atom and the jet / To cross the gulfs our hatreds set" (*CP* 111). However, the image is still ambiguous; Scott's use of the word "bound" in the "Mural" couplet implies unity, but also fetters and is reminiscent of Satan entering Paradise "at one slight bound" like a "Thief into God's Fold" (*Paradise Lost* 9: 181, 192).

These negative connotations are compounded by the direct reference to Aldous Huxley in the line that follows and to biological processes that resemble those of the "Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Center" that appears in *Brave New World* published in 1932. In her biography of Scott, Sandra Djwa notes that it was Smith's decision to publish a verse by Huxley "on a then unspeakable subject — "spermatozoa"" that resulted in the withdrawal of publication funds for the *Literary Supplement* of the *McGill Daily* in 1925, which in turn led to the creation of the *McGill Fortnightly Review* so essential to Scott's poetic career and, in fact, to Canadian literary history (87).

The line "And babies nuzzle buna taps" begs to be interpreted negatively. This line, apparently demonstrating a total rejection of maternal love and natural human relations, convinces critics that Scott could not have been serious in claiming to present "a credible Utopia." Here the "intentionality," to use Banfield's term, seems distinctly satiric. Yet, Scott's use of the word "unsterile" seems to indicate he is merely concerned with the cleanliness vital to a healthy society. "And man is parasite no more" swings the poem back to a clearly utopian stance, in bringing an end to man's exploitation of nature that darkens the central stanzas of "Laurentian Shield." According to the evolutionary process Scott explores in such poems as "Lakeshore" (*CP* 50), the beast is the father of the man; thus, the Miltonic hierarchy is subverted and man must develop a new respect for the creatures he has named. In Scott's poem "Sheep and cattle graze at will, / As decorations on the hill." The pastoral ideal is reinstated by science and the aesthetic beauty of the mural is now echoed in nature. The "zoo-like home" at first suggests enclosure and confinement, but this "home" is not a zoo, only "zoo-like" in that scarcity and threat have once more been removed from the garden. The rhymes "roam" and "home" provide two contrasting but positive images, the first of freedom and the second of haven.

"Geneticists control the genes . . ." carries us back to the laboratories of *Brave New World*. Yet, there is no indication that this bio-engineering is directed toward creating a caste system like the one in Huxley's novel, but could be interpreted instead as a symbol of reunification. Scott was always vocal in his support of ethnic minorities. Could this be an echo of the desire voiced by Duncan Campbell Scott a generation earlier, to answer the native question by interbreeding to build a great new race, here projected onto a world scale?

This description of how each "bridal pair" will be chosen, leads up to the turning point of the poem:

> Then, on the Eden air, shall come
> A gentle, low, electric hum,
> Apotheosis of the Wheel
> That cannot think and cannot feel,
> A lingering echo of the strife
> That crushed the old pre-technic life.

This crucial passage leading up to the poem's very first period demands a careful look. Dudek interprets the Wheel that governs Scott's "technologi cal utopia" as a symbol of man's lost humanity "which for Scott lies in the power to choose, and to choose good" (35). Scobie insists that the couplet on the Wheel "is the poem's most direct and unambiguous denunciation" (318) of a world that has destroyed "all human values" (317), as have the nightmare wheels of Lampman's poem. This intepretation is problematized by Scott's later vision of Paradise as "clean aimless worlds" spinning "true and blind / Unseen and undisturbed / By mind" (*CP* 49); absence of thought is presented in these lines from Scott's poem "Paradise Lost" as a positive value. [10]

The lingering presence of the wheel could be reminiscent of the machine museum in William Morris' *News From Nowhere*. This "biggish hall which contained a large collection of articles of manufacture and art from the last days of the machine period . . ." is preserved to remind people of the folly of allowing technology to supersede human creativity (366). Other than the fact that its hum is an electric one, there is nothing to indicate that the Wheel must be interpreted as a symbol of technology. Wheels are an element of the vision of judgement that appears to Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1:15-21). In Book VII *The Faerie Queen*, Edmund Spenser refers to "the ever-whirling wheel / Of Change, the which all mortal things doth sway" (7.6.1-2). Perhaps the members of "Mural" society have at last conquered mutability and death. A similar interpretation arises from an application of Eliot's use of wheel imagery, a comparison that is not inappropriate from what we know of Eliot's influence on Scott: "The early Eliot I liked because he had this satirical bent and also, I suppose, the greatest influence on me of any single poem was *The Waste Land*" (*Canadian Poetry* 19:93). In *Studies in T.S. Eliot*, M.K. Naik describes the symbolism of the wheel: "The Hindu *samsarachakra*, the terrible wheel of rebirth and death, of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, is a chariot wheel, a wheel that turns continuously" (93). Perhaps the Apotheosis of the Wheel is not technology at all, but rather the wheel of life and death which crushed "the old pre-technic life" before science intervened to deliver man from that terrible inevitable cycle.

Ultimately, however, the syntax and the ambiguous time frame make the passage undecidable. Is it the Wheel itself that shall come "on the Eden air or only its "gentle" hum? Is that hum the "lingering echo of the strife," or is it the Wheel's lack of mind that echoes the strife? Even if one were able to sort out the ambiguous tangle of syntactical relationships, the undecidability is reinforced by the positive lines that follow: "Then poverty shall be a word / Philologists alone have heard." In "Laurentian Shield" we are told that the land "will choose its language / When it has chosen its technic" (*CP* 58). This world must also choose a new vocabulary, one in which poverty is eliminated. But this is not a case of "history blown away" (*CP* 195) as in Scott's later poem "Regina 1967" in which the political vision that was born in hunger marches and strikes has drifted away like dust. The very fact that philologists exist guarantees the preservation of language and the liberty of knowing, a notion that is reinforced by the poem's position in *The Collected Poems* directly after "Archive" which concerns the preservation of the "odd detritus" of an age (*CP* 83). It is a relief to find lovers of words in a society that appears to be dominated by science.

Once poverty is eliminated, "The slightest want shall know its fill." This sounds at first like one of the maxims repeated by the soma-dazed citizens of *Brave New World*, but it nonetheless implies a positive state. This same ambiguity is present in the description of the "carefree lovers." Is this Huxleyan promiscuity, or people truly free of care? The "coloured symphonies" to which they listen "to prick their elongated bliss" suggest the "feelies" produced by Huxley's synthetic scent organs, but also reiterates the painterly theme of the title. This line is also an example of Scott's inability to resist a pun in the bawdy tradition of Shakespeare; after all, this is to be a pleasurable society. In Huxley's novel the old symphonies, like all the great monuments of culture, have been replaced by synthetic imitations:

He waved his hand; and it was though, with an invisible

> feather whisk, he had brushed away a little dust . . .
> Whisk and those specks of antique dirt called Athens
> and Rome, Jerusalem and the middle Kingdom — all were
> gone . . . Whisk, the cathedrals . . . Whisk, Passion; whisk,
> Requiem; whisk Symphony; whisk . . ." (39)

Scott also subordinates the "old music" to the new politics in his poem "Overture," written one year before "Mural." He insists that "the tissue of art is torn / With overtures of an era being born" (*CP* 87). This claim, which is contradicted elsewhere, does little to resolve the ambiguity which under mines the poems in which he asserts the ascendancy of the political over the artistic, the world crescendo over the Mozart crescendo. The whole premise of "Overture," the struggle between the individual artist and his "pretty" trinkets and the rising "power" of socialism, is partially subverted by the very existence of the poem which is itself "careful operatives in a row" (*CP* 87) with its rhyming couplets and symmetrical stanzas. The tension in the poem arises from Scott's use of a traditional poetic form to question the importance of art in the face of politics. Where does this place the role of music in the world of "Mural"? Despite the poem's title, the position of art in this new society is never made clear.

The positive hope that man will no longer be a parasite is reiterated in the couplet: "Man shall rise from dialled feast / Without the slaughter of a beast." The image also echoes More's *Utopia*, where the task of slaughter falls to criminals in the process of rehabilitation: "The citizens are not allowed to do the slaughtering. The Utopians think that slaughtering destroys the sense of compassion, the most distinctively human feeling of our nature" (39). Their aversion to killing extends to hunting, "the lowest kind of butcher work" (51), and to war which "they hate and detest as a thing manifestly brutal" (63). More also describes the purity of the air in Utopia: "They do not allow anything dirty or filthy to be brought into the city, to keep the air from becoming tainted with the stench and as a result infectious" (39). Perhaps *this* is the "air-conditioned air," the "Eden air," untainted by the smell of blood, healthy and pure. The first feast in Eden, according to Milton, was also without the slaughter of a beast; Eve prepares a banquet for the visiting angel from the succulent fruits of the garden, and presumably the first animals to be slain are those God kills for skins to cover Adam and Eve's shame. Even among the beasts, violence is a direct result of the fall: "Beast now with Beast gan war, and Fowl with Fowl, / And Fish with Fish; to graze the Herb all leaving, / Devour'd each other" (*Paradise Lost* 10:710-12).

At last Paradise has been regained, and man has made the long journey back to Eden, back before Cain and the "long tale of bone and blood" which Scott describes in his poem "Paradise Lost" (*CP* 49). Man's conscience now "smooth as metal plate / Shall magnify his stainless state." The apparent pun on stainless steel suggests a certain robotic quality, a possible result of the bioengineering mentioned in the first half of the poem, and also recalls Lampman's description of the inhabitants of the City of the End of Things:

> They are not flesh, they are not bone,
> They see not with the human eye,
> And from their iron lips is blown
> A dreadful and monotonous cry. (180)

Metal, here, is connected with all things mechanized, terrible and ugly. However, Scott's couplet assumes a whole new aspect when placed in the context of Yeats' "Byzantium" poems; Scott acknowledges his debt to Yeats on at least one occasion (*Canadian Poetry* 4:77). In Yeats' "Byzantium" metal carries none of the negative connotations Lampman employs, but is, instead, the prized element in the "artifice of eternity."[11] The golden bird of Byzantium, finely crafted "in the glory of changeless metal," is free from all the human "complexities of mire or blood" (Yeats 281). The purified self is delivered from death,

violence and desire. The earlier line in Scott's poem: "Now desire shall culminate in skill," takes on new significance in this Yeatsian context. No longer "sick with desire / And fastened to a dying animal" (Yeats 218), man can turn his attention to higher things; "His bloodless background shall be blest / With a prolonged, inventive rest." In the City of the End of Things "the inhuman music lifts and falls / Where no thing rests and no man is," but here rest is not only possible, but creative.

The "pre-technic" age governed by death and need has been replaced by the technic age. The word "technic" assumes certain connotations because of its use in words such as "technical" and "technology" which we perceive as antithetical to human creativity, but the original Greek root simply means "art." Though scientific invention for its own sake is discouraged in the Utopias of More and Morris, useful work and artistic endeavour are enthusiastically pursued. As Dick says to his Guest in *News From Nowhere*: "You see, Guest, this is not an age of inventions. The last epoch did all that for us" (357). The human race can now turn its attention to creating a socialist community of peace and equality: "All violence streamlined into zeal / For one colossal commonweal." The communal vision advocated in the final line of Scott's poem connects "Mural" with the socialist communities of More and Morris, rather than the society in Brave New World where, despite the motto of "COMMUNITY, IDENTITY, STABILITY" (1), materialism and competition are rampant. Scott has not chosen "common wealth," perhaps because embedded within it is the "wealth" that is the anathema of his social vision, but rather the old fashioned "commonweal," which implies the welfare and prosperity of all, outside of monetary considerations. Scobie points out that the "weal" of the last line is an echo of the earlier "Wheel," and suggests that the individual is crushed under the "colossal" community that allows no room for the unpredictability and passion which are the raw ingredients of art. One of the citizens of Brave New World decides a society must have "madness and violence" for art to flourish. Scobie suggests that the difficulty in Utopia-building has always been that "the two concepts — human dignity and freedom on the one hand, humanity's material well-being on the other — appear to be mutually exclusive" (318) or as King James I of England said, "I will govern according to the common weal, but not according to the common will."

The question of individual freedom in a community dedicated to common goals is one that has troubled most Utopian writers and Scott is no exception. Several of his poems concern the relation of the individual to the collective, the role of self in a socialist society. In "Archive" Scott admits sadly that "The personal pronoun does not count in this tale" (*CP* 83). Scott is repeatedly faced with the artist/artisan dilemma of socialism. The artisan is dedicated to the good of the whole community; the artist, on the other hand, tends to be solipsistic and subjective. Is there a place for the individual artistic vision within a socialist community focused on equality? Intent upon defending his own uniqueness as an artist, Scott attempts to answer this question in the poem "My Amoeba is Unaware":

> I proclaim equal rights for the parts, the wonder
> of interdependence, the worth
> of the cellular proletariate whose ceaseless labour
> builds the cathedrals of eyes and hands. I honour
> the encyclopaedia of pseudopodia. The I of the self
> is no less in them than in the entire colony, for individuality
> lies beneath collectivity. (*CP* 124)

During the worst years of the Depression, it must have seemed imperative to find a way out of poverty and pain, even at the expense of certain privileges. "Mural" is a poem about overcoming death and regaining a paradise of sorts. For Milton, regaining paradise required Christ's death. Here the process is effected not through the shedding of one man's blood, but through the efforts of a whole community to abstain from violence, with the aid of science. In his foreword to the 1946 edition of *Brave New World* Huxley wrote:

> If I were now to rewrite the book, I would offer the Savage a third alternative. Between the utopian and the primitive horns of his dilemma would lie the possibility of sanity . . . In this community economics would be decentralist and Henry-Georgian, politics Kropotkinesque and co-operative. Science and technology would be used as though, like the Sabbath, they have been made for man, not (as at present and still more so in the Brave New World) as though man were to be adapted and enslaved to them. (ix-x)

In a 1971 interview Scott said "I'm still a believer in the constant necessity of attempting to find the reasonable solution"(*Canadian Poetry* 2:58). "Mural" is an early attempt to find such a solution. Scott appears to be saying that, with the help of science, we can at last surmount the "fury and the mire of human veins" (Yeats 280), though his message is ultimately ambiguous.

Unfortunately, this is the case for much that Scott wrote. Though he publicly insisted on the necessity of making clear choices, he seemed unable to make them in his own poems. He never decides upon the status of religion in relation to science, or the individual to the collective, or art to politics, but instead tries to have it both ways by compounding the symbolic structures and vocabularies of separate worlds. The blurring of various contrary symbolic and linguistic structures creates a zone of undecidability in many of Scott's poems which makes it extremely difficult for the reader to know where Scott stands. Is he really outside the Establishment, a voice crying in the wilderness as he claims to be, or is he, in fact, at its center? There is, of course, the third alternative of having a foot in both camps, a condition he comically describes in "The Problem":

> I long to tread the realms of Art
> Yet cling to ways prosaic.
> My spirit is torn apart
> As priest and worldly laic. (*CP* 243)

Perhaps Scott himself does not know where he stands. Djwa's biography reveals that, in contrast to those he worked to help, Scott led a relatively privileged life. The phrase she uses to describe him, "Sir Galahad in socialist armour" (122), is fraught with irony. Scott's Oxford training and his attachment to European culture and attitudes contributed to his aristocratic air. D.G. Jones recalls:

> He looked like a member of the Establishment, he acted like a member of the Establishment — even if in his own eyes he was just a poor little rebel being lambasted by the *Montreal Star* as a dirty communist who should disappear from the world . . . . (*Brick* 30 (1987), 43)

Part of his confusion lies in his ambivalence to his own art. Though he repeatedly claimed poetry as his true vocation, a busy round of public activities left little time for pursuing the long apprenticeship of the living word and the seeing eye.

According to Elizabeth Brewster, this dialectic between the "eye" and the "I," between vision and self-reflexivity, permeates Scott's poetry.[12] The epigraph that provides a title for Scott's second collection of poetry *Events and Signals* emphasizes the act of seeing: "Between the event and the observer there must pass a signal — a wave, an impulse, or perhaps a ray of light." The significance of this signal is the critical (in both senses of the

word) act of interpretation and illumination. Like the Romantics, Scott believed the poet's vision both blends with what it sees and transforms it: "Yet it changes what it holds in the knowledge of its gaze" (*CP* 167). This double act of vision becomes particularly important in the context of social commentary. The activities of Scott's public life certainly put him in a position to observe the ills of Canadian society, and his indignation at social injustice caused him to turn to satiric poetry (*Canadian Poetry* 19:96); yet his poems often reveal a social vision that is sadly blurred.

The fact that Scott had a false eye seems to be one of those small biographical details just waiting to be interpreted as an ironic gloss on his work. P.K. Page speaks of Scott's way of disguising his defect:

> He was, incidentally, a conjuror of a modest kind — capable of sleight of hand — and there was something of the conjuror in his manner and behaviour. Conjurors distract you with words or hand movements, so that you never look at the thing they wish to conceal. It occurs to me now that some of Frank's physical mannerisms may have originated in order to prevent people being aware of his false eye. (*Brick* 30 (1987), 36)

One is tempted to consider whether Scott may have doubted his own vision, and devised verbal tricks of punning and wit to disguise his own deficiency. Scott's deep attachment to the potential of words is evident in his skilled use of them in each of his three roles as lawyer, teacher, and poet, just as many of his poems are evidence that his legal mind thrives on order. He takes great pleasure in word-play, wit, and his own skill at the game. However, there is nothing more detrimental to vision than the "eye" being charmed by its own perceptiveness and skill. This is reflected in Scott's frequent lack of sensitivity to the limitations and potential of language and form which is glaringly evident in his explanation of why he chose to use the sonnet form for "Company Meeting" (*CP* 253):

> I wanted to see if you could use the sonnet form for a satirical thing but of course you can use the sonnet form for anything if you put your mind to it. As a matter of fact, you can use practically any form for anything. (*Canadian Poetry* 2:72)

Scott fails to acknowledge that the choice of form is integral to meaning. His attachment to linguistic tricks and the formalities of his Victorian training often cause him to take liberties with poetics, putting medium at odds with message. Critics have also questioned the effectiveness of Scott's authorita tive tone that borders on self-righteousness. F.W. Watt comments upon this quality which Irving Layton has called Scott's "preachiness".

> Not all readers, even those in third parties, will find his voice entirely empathetic; it has its godlike, arrogant tones, it allows little room for subtle resonances, differing judgments or ambivalent feeling. Readers may feel that it sometimes goes beyond (or falls short of) making us *see*, and is pressing us to *do*, as it were from above.[13]

Unfortunately, on many occasions Scott cannot resist being clever at the expense of discernment. The objective eye is defeated by the subjective ego, with results that are less than ideal. Robin Skelton writes:

> The satirical poems of F.R. Scott, though much praised, seem to me too often to lack the hunger after the

> ideal, which animates the best satirists, whether of the radical or other persuasion. There is more cleverness than vehemence about them.[14]

This lack is not as apparent in *The Collected Poems* as it was in the earlier collections, because Scott and his editors have wisely chosen to omit misdirected and inferior works.

Perhaps Scott's satiric poetry is often ambiguous and ineffective because his utopian standard is also equivocal, as a close look at "Mural" reveals; a compass cannot function without a polar absolute. It may be unfair to expect consistency within a text, but Scott's ambiguities seem to emerge out of his partial vision and uneven gifts rather than from within the art itself. Throughout his life, he was a divided man, and his poetry pays a price for this ambivalence. Despite his love of language and moments of insight, Scott never gave himself fully to his art; he failed to develop a clear eye and an unwavering needle. The brushstrokes of his mural may be bold, but the landscape is obscure. This diminishes his importance for those seeking to chart a new course across Canada's poetic terrain.

Notes

1. Stephen Scobie, "The Road Back to Eden: The Poetry of FR. Scott." *Queen's Quarterly.* 79 (1972), 314. All further references appear in the text. [back]

2. Karl Marx, *Marxism and Art: Essays Classic and Contemporary.* Ed. Maynard Solomon. (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1979), 58. [back]

3. F.R. Scott, "The Poet in Quebec Today." *The McGill Movement: A.J.M. Smith, F.R. Scott and Leo Kennedy.* Ed. Peter Stevens. (Toronto: Ryerson, 1969), 52. [back]

4. F.R. Scott, "Impressions of Tour of the U.S.S.R." *The Canadian Forum.* 15 (1935), 384. Note, even here, Scott's ambiguous use of the phrase "brave new world." Apparently, he speaks with Miranda in *The Tempest* saying, "O brave new world, That has such people in it" (5.1.183-84), but after Huxley the phrase could never again be innocent of irony. [back]

5. I am indebted to Professor W.J. Keith for his insights, and for drawing my attention to the ambiguity of socialism as it is reflected in Scott's poem. [back]

6. D.M.R. Bentley, "Review Articles: The Wide, the Shining Country of F.R. Scott." *Dalhousie Review.* 62 (1982), 157. [back]

7. F.R. Scott, *The Collected Poems of F.R. Scott.* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1981). Unless otherwise noted, all further references are to this collection. [back]

8. Louis Dudek, "Polar Opposites in F.R. Scott's Poetry." *On F.R. Scott.* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1987), 37. Dudek argues convincingly for an opposition between science and religion in Scott's poetry, but his argument breaks down when he equates socialism with science: "The counter-effort for Scott is science, and with it socialism, for socialism has much in common with a scientific mentality." This conclusion is unsound,

particularly in the light of J.S. Woodsworth's efforts to infuse the Marxist blueprint for the C.C.F. with Christian content. See Djwa, 141. [back]

9. Sandra Djwa, *The Politics of the Imagination: A Life of F.R. Scott.* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1987), 51. Djwa traces the influence of Scott's religious background, noting: "As Scott strove to reconcile the conflicting strands of his evolving personality, he arrived at one clear realization: the social order was unjust, and a Christian was obliged to improve it." [back]

10. Scobie also suggests a possible cross reference between the "ether air" of "Last Rites" and the "Eden air" of "Mural". "Last Rites" was written more than a decade later but the connection is interesting in that Scott's poem about the death of his father also deals with the confrontation between science and religion, machines and mystery, life and death. In both poems there is the potential for these "warring creeds" to merge. [back]

11. William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats.* (London: Papermac, 1985), 218. All further references are to this collection. [back]

12. Elizabeth Brewster, "The I of the Observer: The Poetry of F.R. Scott." *Canadian Literature.* 79 (1978) 23-30. [back]

13. F.W. Watt, "The Poetry of Social Protest," *On F.R. Scott.* (Kingston: McGill-Queens UP, 1983), 63. [back]

14. Robin Skelton. "A Poet of the Middle Slopes," *The McGill Movement.* Ed. Peter Stevens. (Toronto: Ryerson, 1969), 81. [back]