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PREFACE

Rummagings 16: Duncan Campbell Scott's Review of *The Ninth Vibration, and Other Stories* by L. Adams Beck

Immediately following "Poetry and Progress" in Leslie Ritchie's extremely valuable two volume edition of Duncan Campbell Scott's *Addresses, Essays, and Reviews* is a brief and laudatory review of *The Ninth Vibration, and Other Stories* (1922), a collection of "Oriental tales"¹ by L. Adams Beck, that appeared in the *Canadian Bookman* in December 1922. Although roundly and condescendingly dismissed by Desmond Pacey in the *Literary History of Canada* and, until recently, largely ignored by scholars of Canadian literature, Beck is praised by Scott as a "gifted author" whose "tales are...told by a master of Eastern cult—by a master-mind that has brooded long on the subtle mysteries of the orient, by a master-heart whose tenderness is strong enough to interpret that ancient and most mysterious life" (*Addresses* 1:320).² "It is...cheering to know that such work is being produced here," he concludes;

Work that is important and authoritative, and we welcome it not only because of these facts but because it introduces a new atmosphere and therefore makes for variety. We know it to be a competent and beautiful book and we are neither glad nor sorry that there is nothing specially Canadian about it. We know that it is a real addition to our literature and that is all we are concerned with.

From Scott's regal "we" and magisterial tone it is apparent that Beck's collection is being endorsed by one of the reigning kings of Canadian literature—the author or editor of several volumes of poetry and prose, a senior figure in the Federal Civil Service, and the President of the Royal Society of Canada.

Born Elizabeth Louisa Moresby in England in or around 1862, Beck settled in Victoria, B.C. in 1919 and died in Japan in 1932. Before settling in Victoria, she travelled extensively in the so-called "near" and "far" East, where she acquired first-hand knowledge of eastern religions (especially Buddhism and Hinduism) and the eastern landscapes in which the pieces

in *The Ninth Vibration, and Other Stories* are set. Between 1919 and her death, she published three more collections of short stories, numerous novels, and a variety of works of non-fiction, including *The Story of Oriental Philosophy* (1925) and *The Way of Power: Studies in the Occult* (1927), the title page of which identifies her as “E. Barrington,” the pseudonym that she used for her historical romances.³ Several of Beck’s novels and collections of short stories were reprinted more than once during her lifetime and in the following decades, and several of them, including *The Ninth Vibration, and Other Stories* are available today in print form and as audio books, a contemporaneous and enduring popularity that Pacey scornfully cites as “an example of how readily the Canadian reading public could [and can?] mistake grandiosity for greatness” (qtd. in *Addresses* 2:601).

A major, if not the major, reason that Moresby’s “Eastern cult” books continue to be read is that they are regarded by many as “speculative fiction,” but their popularity and acclaim during and immediately after her lifetime were due in large measure to Theosophy, which by then had spread widely in Canada, Britain, and the United States. Moreover, as Forrest D. Pass has recently shown in great detail in a fine article in this journal, “Theosophical Orientalism” (62) was a major component of British Columbia’s literary culture when Beck lived there, partly because of the perception that on Canada’s Pacific rim the West abuts on the East both geographically and philosophically. That Scott was aware of the strong presence of Theosophy in British Columbia in the nineteen twenties seems more than likely, for he had several friends and acquaintances there and, in fact, visited Victoria in the summer of 1920 and Vancouver in the summer of 1922.

What is certain is that by the fall of 1922—some two months before the publication of Scott’s review of *The Ninth Vibration, and Other Stories*—he and Moresby knew one another. In a letter dated October 1922, she thanks him copiously for his “generous gift to [her]” and returns the two books that he sent with it, expressing her regret (probably in response to a request for help in selecting poems for exclusion from his *Complete Poems* [1926]) that she has been unable to identify weak pieces in *The Magic House, and Other Poems* (1893) because she “think[s] them all...beautiful.⁴ In the same letter she singles out “The Little Milliner” and “Josephine Labrose” in *In the Village of Viger* for special praise. Of *The Magic House, and Other Poems* she writes that it has “something of [Walter] de la Mare...but more human—wiser. He is a bit in the twilight weaving nocturnal spells about the roofs of a sleeping village, but you can face the dawn;” and of *In the Village of Viger*: “[t]he...stories are very wonderful to me

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because they are almost in monochrome yet you get so much result. It makes me fear that I carry too many colours on my palette.” The letter goes on to say that “[w]e [perhaps the Victoria branch of the Canadian Authors Association] have done three of your things [poems] at our readings,” and it concludes by sending her “love” and her husband’s “kind regards” to Scott and his wife. The two letters that follow in November and December 1922 are brief but similarly affectionate, and chiefly remarkable in the present context for their expressions of “*delight*” with Scott’s review of *The Ninth Vibration, and Other Stories* and, in response to the review’s expression of uncertainty “as to whether the stories are original or legends,” confirmation that they are “all absolutely original except for one,” “Fire of Beauty,” which is “based on historical fact.”⁵ The third letter ends with the hope that her novel *The Key of Dreams: A Romance of the Orient* and the “Xmas wishes...and love” that come with it arrive “safely.” By the end of 1922, Scott not only knew Moresby well and valued her literary judgement, but he was also exposed through her fiction, if through no other channels, to the “ancient and mysterious life” that he calls “Eastern cult.”

Although Scott praises “The Ninth Vibration” and the other lengthy piece (“The Interpreter: A Romance of the East”) that follows it in Beck’s collection, he judges the other six stories “more important”: “[t]he ninth [Vibration] is a supreme state of mind or soul...[that] prevails and elevates the whole book,” but in the six shorter stories

we have, without any intrusion, the pure product of the East. Here is no tax on our credibility, for the tales although marvelous and dream-like in their beauty are of one weave, consistently of one invention, and we seem to be overhearing some oriental story-teller, oblivious of all our western follies, entertaining a circle of his own people, entertaining and fascinating us as well.

Scott then identifies the strengths of four of the six stories but elides the other two, including the one—“How Great Is the Glory of Kwannon!”—that has an intriguing intertextual relationship with a poem that he would write in the fall of 1934 (McDougall 25) and publish the following year in *The Green Cloister: Later Poems*: “At Gull Lake: August, 1810.”

There has been a good deal of scholarly work done on “At Gull Lake: August, 1810,” most of it emphasizing naturally enough the perception and depiction of its central character Keejigo, the “daughter of Launay / The Normandy hunter / And Oshawan of the Sauteaux” who is prompted by inner racial conflict to twice abandon her Sauteaux husband for a Scottish fur trader. It is a decision for which she suffers horribly: her husband “Blind[s] her...[and] / Destroy[s] her beauty with fire,” his old wives

throw her “over...[a] bank / Like a dead dog,” and she returns “no more to the camps of her people.”⁶ No doubt the poem will remain of primary interest in the context of Scott’s so-called Indian poems, his views of Native peoples, and his activities as a bureaucrat in the Department of Indian Affairs, but other aspects of it come into view when it is seen in relation to “How Great Is the Glory of Kwannon!”

The relationship between the poem and the story is evident in several correspondences between their settings, their characters, and their narrative designs. The story is set in motion by a meeting on a winter night when “the moon...[is] full” between a Japanese Emperor and a “Blind Recluse,” who explains that “through...[his] blind eyes” he is able to “feel the moon illuminating...[the] forest by night and the sun by day” (274, 276). Seasonal and diurnal cycles also provide a background in the poem, albeit within the extreme fluctuations of weather on the “rolling prairie” where Gull Lake is located. In the poem as well as the story, however, the principal female characters are named for a natural phenomenon—Tsunu for “the Morning Dew” that “shines in stillness” (279) and Keejigo for the “star of the morning”—and both women are blind and ugly, but, whereas Keejigo’s eyes are “Blinded” and her “beauty” “Destroyed” by her enraged husband, Tsunu is born “homely and blinded” (yet, as the “Recluse” explains, she is as “beautiful as the night, crowned with moon and stars for him who has eyes to see” (285, 280). Both women are given lyrics that are set off from the body of the text, and the story draws to a close with a “prayer to the Lady of Pity” (Kwannon)—“Grant me, I pray, / One dew drop from Thy willow spray, / And in the double Lotos keep / My hidden heart asleep” (289)—that resonates with the final stanza of Keejigo’s meditation on the Scottish fur trader:

Take the flower in your hand,
The wind in your nostrils;
I am here my beloved;
Release the captive
Heal the wound under the feathers.⁷

At the heart of both entreaties is an appeal for the inner peace that comes with release from contradiction and discordance.

For the Emperor that inner peace comes after he has seen a vision inspired by a song in which Tsunu states that “[t]he Eternal way lies before him” and observes that “[t]he night advances...[and] the moon shines bright”:

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what his Majesty beheld was this. The evening had come on and the moon was rising. It was the full glory of spring, and the flowers sprang thick as stars upon the grass, and among them lotos flowers...white and shining with the luminance of pearl, and upon such one of these was seated an incarnate Holiness, looking upward with joined hands. In the trees were the voices of the mystic Birds that are the utterance of the Blessed One, proclaiming in harmony the Five Virtues, the Five powers, the Seven Steps ascending to perfect illumination, the noble Eight fold Path, and all the Laws...Then enlightenment entered as his eyes...and suddenly he beheld the Maiden crowned and robed and terrible in beauty...(285-86).

The climactic lines of “At Gull Lake: August, 1810” are also visionary, but now the moon represents, not mystical enlightenment, but the transcendence sought by Keejigo:

The setting sun struck the retreating cloud
With a rainbow, not an arc but a column
Built with the glory of seven metals;
Beyond in the purple deeps of the vortex
Fell the quivering vines of the lightning.
The wind withdrew the veil from the shrine of the moon,
She rose changing her dusky shade for the glow
Of the prairie lily, till free of all blemish of colour
She came to her Zenith without a cloud or a star,
A lovely perfection, snow-pure in the heaven of midnight.
After the beauty of terror the beauty of peace.

When “the radiance and the vision were withdrawn and only the moon looked over the trees,” the Emperor sent for the “Recluse” but finds that he has “departed and none...[knows] where” (286-87). In the poem, it is Keejigo that has disappeared, never to return: “Only the midnight moon knew where she felt her way, / Only the leaves of autumn, the snows of winter / Knew where she lay.”

Whether or not Scott had “How Great Is the Glory of Kwannon!” consciously in mind or close at hand, when he wrote “At Gull Lake: August, 1810” cannot be known, but the story may well have stuck in his thoughts and helped to shape the poem, especially its concluding verse paragraphs. Certainly the intertextual relationship between “How Great Is the Glory of Kwannon!” and “At Gull Lake: August, 1810” serves to emphasize the visionary, not to say mystical, element of the poem and thus align it with Scott’s more obviously philosophical poems such as “The Height of Land” (1916), “Meditation at Perugia” (1916), and “Chioistro Verde” (1935).

Notes

- 1 Desmond Pacey uses this phrase in the *Literary History of Canada* (qtd. in Ritchie 2:601) in expressing astonishment that Scott would review *The Ninth Vibration, and Other Stories*.
- 2 All quotations from Scott's review are taken from the text in Ritchie 1:320-21, which has been checked for accuracy against the original and in one instance corrected.
- 3 Moresby also used the pseudonym Louisa Moresby. Several of her other books are related in setting and subject matter to *The Ninth Vibration, and Other Stories*, including (as a sampling) *The Perfume of the Rainbow and Other Stories* (1923), *The Way of Stars: A Romance of Reincarnation* (1925), *The House of Fulfilment: The Romance of a Soul* (1927) and *The Openers of the Gate: Stories of the Occult* (1930). Among her historical romances are *The Divine Lady: A Romance of Nelson and Emma Hamilton* (1924), *The Empress of Hearts: A Romance of Marie Antoinette* (1928) and *The Laughing Queen: A Romance of Cleopatra* (1929).
- 4 Moresby's letters to Scott are in the Aylen Paper in the National Library and Archives in Ottawa. Unfortunately, his letters to her do not appear to have survived.
- 5 In the second letter, dated 15 November, Moresby expresses "delight" that Scott likes "The Ladies"—That is, *The Ladies: A Shining Constellation of Wit and Beauty* (1922), a collection of pieces on such women as Elizabeth Pepys, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, and Fanny Burney.
- 6 All quotations from "At Gull Lake: August, 1810" are taken from the text in *The Green Cloister* 54-58.
- 7 See Leon Slonim's "D.C. Scott's 'At Gull Lake: August 1810'" for the source of the poem in an incident described by Alexander Henry in *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest* (1897). It is notable that in Henry's account, it is her husband that calls her "'beloved'" and that he "'spoil[s] her face'" but does not blind her (qtd. in Slonim 142-43). The incident in Henry was for Scott a point of departure for very different territory.

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