

Tilting Point: New Poems 2012

by Peter Dale Scott

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Reviewed by James Reid

Former Canadian diplomat Peter Dale Scott received the Lannan Poetry Award in 2002, following publication of the final book of *Seculum*. This trilogy comprised *Coming to Jakarta: a poem about terror* (1988), *Listening to the Candle: a poem on impulse* (1992), and *Minding the Darkness: a poem for the year 2000* (2000). *Mosaic Orpheus* followed in 2009. John Peck, a poet with similarly wide-ranging contemporary concerns, reviewed *Orpheus* astutely in "Seeing Things as They Are," published in the *Notre Dame Review*, where he boldly described *Seculum* "one of the essential long poems of the past half century." How many other essential long poems have been published since 1960? Ezra Pound's Late Cantos? Peck's review appears at: http://ndreview.nd.edu/assets/35286/peck_review.

Initially, I thought that *Tilting Point* placed the concerns of Scott's earlier work in the elegiac light of a *summa poetica*. Was *Tilting Point* the beginning of an extended look back in more poetry yet to come? But Scott has just posted "Greek Theater: How Mario Savio Changed My Life," a poem in 46 tercets at a new website at <http://www.comingtojakarta.net/2013/02/28/greek-theater-a-poem/>. I was mistaken to speak of the light *elegiac*. "Greek Theater" has all the power, equanimity, and commitment of Scott's best work in *Seculum*.

In *Tilting Point*, "Homing: A Winter Poem" opens with a dedication to Tomas Tranströmer, and echoes both the heat and the wintry clarity of Tranströmer's work, especially in the first poem of his *Baltics* sequence, from *The Great Enigma*. The winter light in "Homing" opens and closes with the annual cycle of the arrival and departure of the tundra swans. Their flight and return enfold Scott's measured recollection of the necessity and course of his life's work, and the place to which it has brought him.

Tilting Point has also brought him to remembrance of friends past. "Not For Long" is dedicated to Czeslaw Milosz, the Polish poet and Nobel laureate, with whom Scott had a warm and sometimes troubled friendship. Casting aside memories of their deep disagreements, he addresses the shade of Milosz as, "Dear Czeslaw, I can only think of you / pushing ninety, with a glass of whiskey / in some airport." Here Scott also recalls a somewhat unjustly neglected poet, Denise Levertov, and her questioning poetry. Later in *Tilting Point*, he returns to the time he knew her in "Remembering Denise and People's Park." The poem resonates with the joy and grief, the hope and loss, and the clarity and confusion of a time that is all too often misrepresented.

Tilting Point also tackles present difficulties. Surely there are few other poets of Scott's stature who would compose a sympathetic poem with the title "To the Tea-Party Patriots A Berkeley Professor Says Hello!" I admit to dismissing Tea Party members as kooks, for their outfits alone. But Scott's compassion extends beyond getups that Tom Paine never wore, and to people most of us might avoid. In this poem, he agrees with the Tea Party, and John Birchers, that the United States has lost its way by consolidating more and more wealth and power with the very wealthy. For three decades, real income and standards of living have declined for everyone else. Scott disagrees with a number of the Tea Party solutions and warns them against the advice of some of their fellow travellers. Scott's "Hello!" exhibits an unusually inclusive compassion.

Scott's compassion for, interest in, and humility before different beliefs is evident throughout his work. The fifth section of *Mosaic Orpheus* is titled "Commuting to the Land of Medicine Buddha." Its humour is welcome and free of the danger of western false piety toward the east. In *Tilting Point*, Scott's appreciation "of a blue-eyed ajahn in saffron robes" is palpable. An *ajahn* is a Thai teacher-monk.

At 17 pages, "Changing North America" is the concluding and longest poem in *Tilting Point*. Its opening stanza may require some background. Soviet repression in Poland was so dangerous for dissidents that Poles developed a number of ways to discover whether someone was a good Pole or a Russian informant who might betray them. As Scott described in an article in *Brick* (Winter 2006), quoting the Polish writer Adam Michnik on the danger for dissidents in Poland: "We recognized each other through quotations from Milosz: without fear one could have a beer with someone who knew Milosz's poetry." "Changing North America" opens with this stanza:

Having helped initiate
the liberators of Poland
Czeslaw Milosz said to a Harvard audience
that in every era
the task of the *inspired* poet
is to *transcend his paltry ego*
and remind *the soul of the people*
of the open space ahead.

This stanza points to Milosz's belief, shared by Scott, that, "What is poetry which does not save nations or people?" Almost 2,000 years ago, Lu Ji (261303), who was also a poet and scholar like Milosz and Scott, seems to have referenced that question: "It can save teetering governments and weak armies; / it gives voice to the dying wind of human virtue." These and many other deep truths resonate in this collection, as they have throughout Scott's previous books of poetry and in several non-fiction books that shed new light on contemporary deep politics. Even in difficult times, is there a better choice than to remind ourselves of the open space ahead, and of the capacities of human virtue? 🙏

James Edward Reid publishes in *The Sarmatian Review*, *Pacific Rim Review of Books*, and *Vallum: new international poetics*. His reviews have appeared in *Communiqué Magazine*, *The Dance Current*, *The Globe and Mail Books*. Creative non-fiction has appeared in *Highgrader Magazine* and *Cirque* in Anchorage, Alaska. Poetry has appeared in *The Canadian Forum*, *The Sarmatian Review*, and *The Guardian*.