

KINGDOM OF ABSENCE

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I AGREE WITH W. J. Keith, who recently edited the *Selected Poetry and Critical Prose* of Charles G. D. Roberts, that — with two exceptions, the early poem “The Tantramar Revisted” and the later “The Iceberg” — Roberts’ best poems are the descriptive lyrics, mostly in sonnet form, which appeared in *Songs of the Common Day*, with a few scattered here and there in the earlier *In Diverse Tones* and the later *The Book of the Native*.

The quiet, unostentatious tone of this descriptive poetry — the exploration and discovery of ‘what beauty clings/ In common forms’ — is something that Roberts can achieve and maintain with apparent ease. Here he avoids the simplistic on the one hand and the pseudo-profound on the other. . . . Once again, to call this poetry ‘descriptive’ implies no sense of limitation; indeed, his general avoidance here of anything that could be called a ‘criticism of life’ becomes a positive strength. . . . it is still possible to discern an intriguing reaching-out towards a profundity of outlook — the seeds of what might well grow into the individual vision of an unquestionably major poet. Roberts seems poised on the threshold of greatness. An astute contemporary reader of *Songs of the Common Day* might well have looked to Roberts’ next poetic volume for the revelation of his mature genius.¹

Reading through Roberts’ critical essays, particularly his Introduction to the anthology *Poems of Wild Life*, “Wordsworth’s Poetry” and “The Poetry of Nature” I wondered if the possible reason for his failure to achieve the promise of *Songs of the Common Day* is that he could not reconcile his critical theory with what he was in fact doing in the poems which we most admire. Roberts describes accurately his own temperamental preference in “The Poetry of Nature” when he says that the power in nature which moves us “may reside not less in a bleak pasture-lot than in a paradisaical close of bloom and verdure, not less in a roadside thistle-patch than in a peak that soars into the sunset. . . . it may work . . . through austerity or reticence or limitation or change.” He goes on to divide “the poetry of earth” into “That which deals with pure description, and that

which treats of nature in some one of its many relations with humanity.” The argument of his essay is that purely descriptive poetry is scarcely worthy the name, and that the true poetry of nature, as seen in Keats and Wordsworth, is to be found only when nature has passed through “the alembic of the heart,” when “man’s heart and the heart of nature . . . [are] closely involved.” He praises Byron, who found in nature “an expression of his hopes, his fears, his cravings, his despair”, Keats, “his soul aflame with the worship of beauty, . . . impassioned toward the manifestations of beauty in the world about him”.²

It is evident to anyone reading Roberts’ best poems that this Romantic view of the poetry of nature was suited neither to his temperament as it is revealed in his poems, nor to the landscapes to which he was drawn and in the midst of which he had grown. The more he removes himself and his temptation to relate or reflect, the more precise and objective and detailed his lines, the more we are moved. The two sonnets from *In Diverse Tones*, “The Potato Harvest” and “Tides”, communicate a clairvoyant sensitivity to the nuances of colour and sound in the landscape. There are human figures in the first poem, but they are seen from a distance, almost heard rather than seen:

Black on the ridge, against the lonely flush,
A cart, and stoop-necked oxen; ranged beside
Some barrels; and the day-worn harvest folk,
Here emptying their baskets, jar the hush
With hollow thunders; down the dusk hillside
Lumbers the wain; and day fades out like smoke.

There is more projection of human feelings into landscape in “Tides”: The ebb-tide “sighs” “Reluctant for the reed-beds”, “the winding channels grieve”. The restrained melancholy and the evocation of water, tides, even the specific line “ebbing in the night-watches swift away”, are very like Arnold, but the final line “And in parched channel still the shrunk stream mourns” has a grip and strength which is Roberts’ own, at his best.

Before discussing Roberts’ preoccupation with absence, I would like to look at some remarks in James Cappon’s essay “Roberts and the Influences of his Time”, published in 1905.³ Cappon is judicious in his appreciation of Roberts’ finest qualities, and agrees with Keith that “the deepest thing in his poetic passion and experience is his poetry of natural description.” He wrongly, I think, says that the basis of Roberts’ nature poetry was “a pure aestheticism” but aptly calls it impressionistic. His main criticism of Roberts as a poet is his apparent inability to deal with human life:

This narrow range of observational power is evident in the absence of any direct treatment of human life, of human as distinguished from naturalistic sentiment, . . .

Nor is the poetry of these sonnets likely to make any strong appeal to a more philosophically minded class of readers, . . . The sonnet sequence hardly leaves any strong unity of moral impression on our minds. There is a want of a basal note in Roberts in this respect which makes his poetry little more than a wavering impression taken from the surface of things and giving no comfort, no stay to the mind. . . . With all his gifts, then, Roberts evidently lacks two things. . . . He does not as a poet give us either a lively, vigorous presentation of life or a profound and critical interpretation of it.

It is certainly true, as Cappon says, that for one who wrote so much, the range of Roberts' poetry is narrow; but it seems to me that it is precisely the almost absence of human figures from the landscapes in the poems that makes them interesting. Of the sonnet "Mowing" Cappon remarks

But there is no mention of mowers; there is no human figure in the field. This artistic asceticism may be serviceable in obtaining a certain purity of impressionistic effect, . . . But for poetry at least the example of Millet is probably better than that of Rousseau, . . .

It seems to me, on the contrary, that the strength of the poem lies in the sense it conveys of mowing not as something which is done, but as a relentless process which happens. The mowing machine is in a sense an intrusion in nature, but the imagery links it to nature:

This is the voice of high midsummer's heat.
 The rasping vibrant clamour soars and shrills
 O'er all the meadowy range of shadeless hills,
 As if a host of giant cicadae beat
 The cymbals of their wings with tireless feet,
 Or brazen grasshoppers with triumphing note
 From the long swath proclaimed the fate that smote
 The clover and timothy-tops and meadowsweet.

The crying knives glide on; the green swath lies,
 And all noon long the sun, with chemic ray,
 Seals up each cordial essence in its cell,
 That in the dusky stalls, some winter's day,
 The spirit of June, here prisoned by his spell,
 May cheer the herds with pasture memories.

There is in these sonnets a range of times, seasons, vistas; but I get the impression that it was to "austerity and reticence" as he calls it in his essay that Roberts

responded most authentically. In "Burnt Lands" we find an early exploration of negation, the absence of things:

... such fields as these,
 Where comes no cheer of summer leaves and bees,
 And no shade mitigates the day's white scorn.
 These serious acres vast no groves adorn;
 But giant trunks, bleak shapes that once were trees,
 Tower naked, unassuaged of rain or breeze,
 Their stern grey isolation grimly borne.

In "The Winter Fields" he describes

Winds here, and sleet, and frost that bites like steel.
 The low bleak hill rounds under the low sky.
 Naked of flock and fold the fallows lie,
 Thin streaked with meagre drift.

I do not wish to suggest that Roberts wrote only about winter and the absence of things and people. Yet he seems most authentic when writing of these things. He is by temperament drawn to the bleak and the austere. Margaret Atwood's remark that "There is a sense in Canadian literature that the true and only season here is winter: the others are either preludes to it or mirages concealing it"⁴ is true of Roberts. Yet his emotional preference for stubble fields, deserted landscapes, grey sea and sky is often weakened by the poetic language in which it is expressed. His poem "The Stillness of the Frost" comes close to confronting his fascination with the negation of winter, though it is marred by the rhetoric of the closing lines. It is interesting that in its use of the negative it anticipates P. K. Page's poem "The Snowman":

Out of the frost-white wood comes winnowing through
 No wing; no homely call or cry is heard.
 Even the hope of life seems far deferred.
 The hard hills ache beneath their spectral hue.
 A dove-grey cloud, tender as tears or dew,
 From one lone hearth exhaling, hangs unstirred,
 Like the poised ghost of some unnamed great bird
 In the ineffable pallor of the blue.

P. K. Page's poem ends

And I could hear no sound
 As far as I could hear except a round
 Kind of an echo without end

rung like a hoop below them and above
 jarring the air they had no need of
 in a landscape without love.

Roberts, too, perceives the winter landscape like the world as it must have been, at the dawn of time, when it lay "cold,/ Unwaked to love".

These poems are only a handful among the hundreds that Roberts wrote; far more numerous are the fatuous and facile poems in which he fails to move aside, but rather places himself and his ideas in the landscape and the poem, and the result is usually the shallow rhetoric of what Roberts called "poems of aspiration".

IT SEEMS TO ME from a superficial acquaintance with Roberts' poetry that he possessed a modest talent for an easy mastery of verse form, and an acute and sensitive eye and ear, not for people but for landscape. The influences which led him to dissipate his poetic gifts were no doubt various but his central dilemma is one that is shared by all colonial writers. It is the problem of style in a context which has no indigenous literary tradition, and for which the only available models are old-world forms, not entirely appropriate to the novelty of experience in a new land. It takes a writer of genius, a Whitman or an Emily Dickinson, to solve the problem in a radical way, and as Cappon shrewdly says of Roberts' poetry, it "remains very much a pure literary tradition, the element of natural impulse in it being hardly strong enough to make original moulds for itself."

The continuing existence of this problem, even today, is both a challenge and a distraction to the writer, and one of the causes of the preoccupation with style and the tendency toward mannerism and eccentricity of style which is typical of North American literature at its best and its worst. Style, here, is never something given, it always has to be invented. But Roberts was a facile imitator, not, in poetry, an innovator. What he did best, descriptive poetry, he rated lowest and abandoned.

The strength and weakness of North American style has always been its reliance on the colloquial, either a sense of communal speech rhythms, or, as in the case of the contemporary Black Mountain poets and those they have influenced, the elevation of the idiosyncracies of an individual poet's breath and speech, to the basis of a system of poetics. The weakness of colonial style is, as I have said of Roberts, its often timid reliance on traditional models which belong to the poet linguistically but which are not appropriate to the novelty of experience in a new

setting. It is perhaps particularly unfortunate that Roberts and others in his time had or thought they had, not only a style but a philosophy of nature which it was hard to evade. Had he been writing from eighteenth century models it might have been more apparent that pastoral poetry as it was then written in England was absurdly inappropriate as a model for writing about his experience in the Canadian bush, and he might have invented something new. In fact, in his poetry he lacks strength, adventure, nerve; he is derivative. He did not turn to colloquial speech as the basis of a new style as, with mixed results, did Drummond. His uneasiness concerning what he was about in poetry — along with the presence of an eager market — turned his imagination toward the animal story in its various forms, a genre which both Keith and Margaret Atwood consider particularly Canadian, and in which Keith thinks Roberts made his most important contribution to Canadian literature. Here he could use his knowledge of the wilds unhampered by Romantic convention; here he could appear to disappear; and here, to judge by Keith's comparison between prose passages from the stories and similar passages from the poems, he found his strength. Keith says:

In his prose Roberts never pontificated. He made no attempt to impose his view of the world upon his readers. None the less we have been able to extract from the short stories a coherent position which may without undue pretentiousness be called a vision of nature. . . . I see the difference [between the prose and the poetry] as literary rather than philosophic. I prefer the prose because I believe it to attain a noticeably higher degree of artistic success than the poetry.⁵

There is one late poem, the title poem of *The Iceberg and Other Poems*, published in 1934, of which Keith says in his introduction to the *Selected Poems*:

Interestingly enough, 'The Iceberg' itself is one of the few pieces in which a relation to the animal stories can readily be seen. In tracing the cycle of an iceberg from its spawning 'A thousand miles due north/ Beyond Cape Chidley' to its final merging in the 'all-solvent sea' of warmer latitudes, Roberts offers in verse an equivalent to the kind of animal story I have called the representative chronicle — a story in which we are presented not with the unique adventure of a single individual but with a characteristic life-pattern. Moreover, Roberts has boldly employed the first-person narrative voice so that the poem expresses, as it were, the actions of a natural force harshly independent of man. [By strictly confining himself] . . . to an unemotional reporting of events, he succeeds in communicating a viewpoint that is frighteningly non-human.

Most of Roberts' late attempts at free-verse are pale imitations of Whitman; but in this remarkable poem he masters in his own way the irregular cadence of the

free-verse line, and embodies — in the speaker, the great iceberg — his fascination with the inhuman, the negative, which has been tracking him through his poetic career. Now he turns and faces it, the landscape which is without love or hate, which is, so far as human values go, absence, indifference:

Under the pallid dawning
 Of the lidless Arctic day
 Forever no life stirred.
 No wing of bird —
 Of ghostly owl low winnowing
 Or fleet-winged ptarmigan fleeing the pounce of death, —
 No foot of backward-glancing fox
 Half glimpsed, and vanishing like a breath, —
 No lean and gauntly stalking bear,
 Stalking its prey.
 Only the white sun, circling the white sky.

At the centre of the poem is a vision of the ocean — ecological, organic, indifferent to our concerns — and, in the midst of it, “the Alp afloat”, “A shape pearl-pale and monstrous”, which somehow becomes an organic part of it:

And now around me
 Life and the frigid waters all aswarm.
 The smooth wave creamed
 With tiny capelin and the small pale squid, —
 So pale the light struck through them.
 Gulls and gannets screamed
 Over the feast, and gorged themselves, and rose,
 A clamour of weaving wings, and hid
 Momently my face.
 The great bull whales
 With cavernous jaws agape,
 Scooped in the spoil, and slept,
 Their humped forms just awash, and rocking softly, —
 Or sounded down, down to the deeps, and nosed
 Along my ribbed and sunken roots,
 And in the green gloom scattered the pasturing cod.

The iceberg waits, in the fog, “greatly incurious and unconcerned”, as a ship approaches: it “towered, a dim immensity of doom”. The cataclysmic destruction of a great ship and its passengers is simply one incident among the others that mark the voyage of the iceberg from the Arctic north to the southern seas where

it becomes "A little glancing globe of cold" and then its "fragile, scintillating frame" merges "forever in the all-solvent sea".

In an essay published in 1886, "The Outlook for Literature"⁶, Roberts has written with perception about the problems of creating a literature in a new country. He is aware of the powerful potential subjects, particularly in the landscape:

These stern coasts, now thundered against by Atlantic storms, now wrapped in noiseless fogs, these overwhelming tides, these vast channels emptied of their streams, these weird reaches of flat and marsh and dike, should create a habit of openness to nature, . . . If environment is anything, our work can hardly prove tame.

These are the words of a man upon whom the landscape he knows has made a deep impression. Environment *is* something; indeed, in a country where so much had been left behind that social and cultural arrangements often seemed arbitrary, nature provided the only real imperative. But Roberts, though he wanted to write what he called "that characteristically modern verse which is kindled where the outposts of an elaborate and highly self-conscious civilisation come in contact with crude humanity and primitive nature"⁷ too often harkened to what he called "the voice from the drawing room" rather than the "voice of the wilderness". He sensed and shared what he perceived as his countrymen's apprehension lest they be seen as uncultured, unconventional, rugged. His achievement as a poet is uneven, flawed, very short of first rate, yet when he was able to forget the ambiguous burden of late Romantic preconceptions and lose himself in that landscape which he called "stern, overwhelming, vast, weird" his work did not prove tame.

NOTES

- ¹ Keith, W. J., Introduction to *Selected Poetry and Critical Prose* of Charles G. D. Roberts, ed. Keith, University of Toronto Press, 1974, pp. xxiv-xxv.
- ² Roberts, Charles G. D., "The Poetry of Nature" in Keith, *op. cit.*, pp. 276-281.
- ³ Cappon, James, "from *Roberts and the Influences of his Time*, 1905, in *Masks of Poetry*, ed. A. J. M. Smith, New Canadian Library, McClelland and Stewart, Ltd., pp. 45-54.
- ⁴ Atwood, Margaret, *Survival*, Anansi, Toronto, 1972, p. 49.
- ⁵ Keith, W. J., *Charles D. G. Roberts*, Copp Clark, 1969, pp. 106-107.
- ⁶ Roberts, Charles G. D., "The Outlook for Literature" in Keith, ed., *Selected Poetry and Critical Prose*, pp. 260-264.
- ⁷ Roberts, Charles G. D., "'Introduction' to *Poems of Wild Life*," in Keith, *op. cit.*, pp. 265-270.