

**"THE POETRY OF EARTH":
A NOTE ON ROBERTS' SONNETS**

by
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In 1905 James Cappon wrote of Charles G. D. Roberts' poetry of nature description, "Its value lies wholly in the gleaming and glancing surface which it brings before the reader's eye."¹ Cappon remarked further, speaking specifically of *Songs of the Common Day* (1893), that "the sonnet sequence hardly leaves any strong unity of impression on our minds."² Critics since that time have generally followed Cappon, admiring Roberts' nature poetry yet implying that its significance lies solely in its value as objective description. Desmond Pacey, for example, in his Introduction to *Selected Poems of Sir Charles G. D. Roberts* endorses Cappon as "by far the most acute critic of Roberts' poetry."³ Yet Cappon's remarks seem contrary to Roberts' own view of what nature poetry should do, according to his essay "The Poetry of Nature," published in 1896, three years after the sonnet sequence:

Nature-poetry is not mere description of landscape in metrical form, but the expression of one or another of many vital relationships between external nature and 'the deep heart of man.' It may touch the subtlest chords of human emotion and imagination not less masterfully than the verse which sets out to be a direct transcript from life. The most inaccessible truths are apt to be revealed by indirection.⁴

¹James Cappon, *Roberts and the Influences of His Time*, 2nd ed. 1905 (rpt. Ottawa: Tecumseh Press, 1975), 21.

²*Ibid.*, 26.

³Desmond Pacey, Introduction to *Selected Poems of Sir Charles G. D. Roberts* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1955), xiv.

⁴Charles G. D. Roberts, "The Poetry of Nature," *Selected Poetry and Critical Prose*, W. J. Keith ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 281. This essay was first published in *Forum*, New York, December 1897.

Roberts here gives every indication that in his own nature poetry he would seek to go beyond objective description of the New Brunswick landscape. It is my view that in fact he does so, that if we look closely at the nature sonnets, their structure and the elements of which they are composed, we shall see that they do have a significance beyond their "gleaming and glancing surface," and are, in fact, the poems through which Roberts most successfully explores his central concerns.

Thematically and structurally many of the sonnets published in *Songs of the Common Day* may be seen as a continuation from the earlier "Tantramar Revisited,"⁵ a key poem in the Roberts canon in which Roberts uses landscape to reflect upon the theme of the transitory versus the permanent. Here he employs many anapests and much repetition to evoke, in rhythm and sound, a sense of the eternal and the changeless in a particular setting: "Summers and summers have come, and gone with the flight of the swallow / Sunshine and thunder have been, storm, and winter, and frost." In this poem Roberts juxtaposes the past with the present, and superimposes the permanent upon the transitory. The permanence for which the speaker longs is echoed in the slow, monotonous rhythm and insistent repetition of words and phrases. These act in opposition to the flux of time and evanescence of all experience. Finally, it is the poem itself which ultimately, while giving voice to his longing for permanence and awareness of mutability, transcends time. As the concluding lines of the poem return to the beginning, thus coming full circle, they suggest an endless cyclic pattern, another aspect of the permanence for which the speaker longs.

In *Songs of the Common Day*, Roberts continues to employ images from the New Brunswick landscape as the objective correlative through which he expresses his poetic intuitions. While most obviously descriptive of common scenes of rural life, the sonnets, like "Tantramar Revisited," have wider implications. In "The Winter Fields," for example, concrete image and precise diction are effectively employed to portray the harshness and bleakness of winter:

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. The gusts reveal
By fits the dim grey snakes of fence, that steal

⁵"Tantramar Revisited" was first published in *The Week*, 20 December 1883 under the title "Westmoreland Revisited."

Through the white dusk. The hill-foot poplars sigh,
 While storm and death with winter trample by,
 And the iron fields ring sharp, and blind lights reel.⁶

Yet in the last three lines of the sestet which follows, Roberts juxtaposes this despairing, empty wasteland with its opposite, concluding the sonnet with a recollection of the hidden life, the "germ of ecstasy" which "lurks" beneath the frozen ground, which ". . . waits on summer, till the rain / Whisper in April and the crocus come." This sonnet, then, is not solely descriptive, but combines description with reflection, as the bleak winter scene triggers thoughts of spring and summer, and the cold, death-like setting is seen to contain intimations of rebirth. In this poem Roberts employs antithesis — a structural device which characterizes many of his sonnets — to oppose winter to summer, present to future, death to life.

"The Mowing" presents a similar seasonal antithesis, but in reverse order. The poem first focuses on the intensity of midsummer heat, primarily through effective use of auditory imagery. Then the observer is brought to a contemplation of winter through the very act he is describing, the mowing of hay, in itself a preparation for winter:

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. (100)

The movement in the poem is from present to future, from the intense heat of midsummer to the dusky stalls of winter. But with the words "The spirit of June, here prisoned by his spell, / May cheer the herds with pasture memories," the poem reverts to the present, which then will be the recollected past. The motion is cyclic. It should be noted that again Roberts places winter and summer in immediate juxtaposition: ". . . some winter's day / The spirit of June . . .," and suggests a further

⁶Roberts, *Selected Poetry and Critical Prose*, 105. All subsequent quotations from the sonnets are from this edition.

contrast between the dusky, enclosed winter stalls and the sunny, open pastures. As in "The Winter Fields," contemplation of an immediate scene mirrors forth its opposite. These two sonnets end on a hopeful note. There is a sense of expectation as spring and rebirth are anticipated amid the deathlike setting of "The Winter Fields," and an apprehension of permanence within the flux of change in the summer-winter-summer cycle of "The Mowing."

In other sonnets, such as "The Salt Flats" and "Tides" antithesis again is the structural device through which a preoccupation with the effects of time is voiced. In "The Salt Flats" the contrast between past and present is established in the first two lines: "Here clove the keels of centuries ago / Where now unvisited the flats lie bare." The contrast between the grandeur of the past and the desolate, dreary scene of the present, with its "brackish pools" and "wastes of hard and meagre weeds," is continued throughout the poem:

Here clove the keels of centuries ago
 Where now unvisited the flats lie bare.
 Here seethed the sweep of journeying waters, where
No more the tumbling flats of Fundy flow,
And only in the samphire pipes creep slow
 The salty currents of the sap. The air
 Hums desolately with wings that seaward fare,
Over the lonely reaches beating low.

The wastes of hard and meagre weeds are thronged
With murmurs of a past that time has wronged;
 And ghosts of many an ancient memory
Dwell by the brackish pools and ditches blind,
In these low-lying pastures of the wind,
 These marshes pale and meadows by the sea. (99)

Once again, as in "Tantramar Revisited," the central concern is mutability. Even nature, itself, is portrayed as having been "wronged" by time. Past is contrasted to present, and reflection is interwoven with description as the present scene is viewed and the past recalled.

In an earlier sonnet, "Tides," published in *In Divers Tones* (1886), the ebbing of the tide is again a central image, now utilized both to suggest impermanence and to image forth its opposite, the permanence inherent in nature's cycles:

Through the still dusk how sighs the ebb-tide out,
 Reluctant for the reed-beds! Down the sands
 It washes. Hark! Beyond the wan gray strand's
Low limits how the winding channels grieve

Aware the evasive waters soon will leave
 Them void amid the waste of desolate lands,
 Where shadowless to the sky the marsh expands,
 And the noon heats must scar them, and the drought.

Yet soon for them the solacing tide returns
 To quench their thirst of longing. Ah, not so
 Works the stern law our tides of life obey!
 Ebbing in the night-watches swift away,
 Scarce know ere fled forever is the flow;
 And in parched channel still the shrunk stream mourns. (59)

The octet describes the ebbing tide at nightfall. The sestet associates this tide with the tide of man's life, also ebbing. In nature, despite the fact that "the winding channels grieve /Aware the evasive waters soon will leave / Them void amid the waste of desolate lands," the loss is temporary. Unlike the cyclic tide of the sea, the tide of man's life passes on irrevocably. In nature's cycles, then, permanence can be seen even within the change itself, whereas in man's life there is only transience. By contemplating the timeless natural cycle, man becomes more conscious of his own mortality and the evanescence of his own experience. Once again, antithesis is central to meaning, and again there is a transition from description of the present to contemplation of the future and then a further transition to the analogy with man's life.

"The Salt Flats" and "Tides" both end on a less optimistic note than the preceding sonnets. "Tides" concludes on a note of regret at the inevitably fleeting nature of human experience, and "The Salt Flats" in similar vein nostalgically views a nature which "time has wronged."

The sense of permanence conveyed by seasonal cycles, the hopefulness born of nature's rebirth in spring, the mutability observed in man's own life and in the natural setting — these are all aspects of Roberts' central concern which are explored in his nature poetry. His reaction is ambivalent — at times hopeful and optimistic, at other times regretful, despondent, or nostalgic; for he views in the natural setting both aspects of change and aspects of permanence. "In September" is another example of a sonnet in which the seasons are utilized to voice a preoccupation with mutability:

This windy, bright September afternoon
 My heart is wide awake, yet full of dreams.
 The air, alive with hushed confusion, teems
 With scent of grain-fields, and a mystic rune,
 Foreboding of the fall of Summer soon,
 Keeps swelling and subsiding; till there seems
 O'er all the world of valleys, hills, and streams,
 Only the wind's inexplicable tune.

My heart is full of dreams, yet wide awake.
 I lie and watch the topmost tossing boughs
 Of tall elms, pale against the vaulted blue;
 But even now some yellowing branches shake,
 Some hue of death the living green endows: —
 If beauty flies, fain would I vanish too. (48)

Once more life and death are juxtaposed as the speaker observes the first signs foreboding the end of summer: "But even now some yellowing branches shake, / Some hue of death the living green endows." In somewhat different fashion, "In an Old Barn" juxtaposes winter and summer; the warmth of the barn and scent of clover create an illusion of summer which contrasts with the harsh reality of winter beyond the walls:

the cattle in their shadowed stalls,
 Nose-deep in clover fodder's meadowy scent,
 Forget the snows that whelm their pasture streams,
 The frost that bites the world beyond the walls.
 Warm housed, they dream of summer, . . . (106)

In tone and over-all effect, "The Clearing" recalls "The Winter Fields." A pervasive sense of despair, suffering, and death is evoked through a combination of concrete description and allusion to pain and disfigurement:

Stumps, and harsh rocks, and prostrate trunks all charred,
 And gnarled roots naked to the sun and rain, —
 They seem in their grim stillness to complain,
 And by their plaint the evening peace is jarred.
 These ragged acres fire and the axe have scarred,
 And many summers not assuaged their pain.
 In vain the pink and saffron light, in vain
 The pale dew on the hillocks stripped and marred! (101)

As with "The Winter Fields," a ray of hope is introduced in the sestet with the appearance of the brilliant gold and crimson of new growth:

But here and there the waste is touched with cheer
 Where spreads the fire-weed like a crimson flood
 And venturous plumes of gold-rod appear. (102)

As with "The Winter Fields" a despairing tone is transmuted into a more hopeful one when the bleak death-like setting is seen to contain within it intimations of rebirth.

The central theme posed by Roberts is the dilemma of permanence versus transience, the search for the enduring within a world of change, and for life in the midst of death. Thus it is not surprising that antithesis is the device upon which so many of the poems are structured. Roberts also utilizes antithesis effectively later in his animal stories. In "In the Deep of the Grass," for example, he successfully juxtaposes the world above the grasstops with the world below, a drowsy tranquil scene with sudden violent action, and frivolous play with cruel attack. And in this story, as in many of the sonnets, Roberts constructs a cyclical movement in which there is a transition from a peaceful scene to one of violent struggle, then back to drowsy tranquillity. Alec Lucas has pointed to the cyclic aspect of time as a unifying theme of Roberts' animal stories,⁷ and we have seen this to be central to much of his poetry as well.

In "The Poetry of Nature" Roberts says that "the poetry of earth or, in other words, the quality which makes for poetry in external nature, is that power in external nature which moves us by suggestion, which excites in us emotion, imagination, or poignant association, which plays upon the tense-strings of our sympathies with the fingers of memory or desire." "This power," Roberts points out, "may reside not less in a road-side thistle patch than in a peak that soars into the sunset It may use the most common scenes, the most familiar facts and forms, as the vehicle of its most penetrating and illuminating message."⁸ In his sonnets Roberts, himself, has used "the most common scenes" — the ebbing tide, an old barn, a winter field, a clearing, a corn field — to convey in carefully structured form his own most significant perceptions and reactions to reality. As has been said of the animal stories, the nature sonnets, too, gave Roberts "a way to catch within the transitory, something of the permanent in nature, the constant theme of all he wrote about."⁹ Roberts' sonnets combine concrete imagery descriptive of the New Brunswick landscape and the seasonal cycles with reflection, recollection, and emotional expression to articulate his preoccupation with mutability and his search for the enduring and for a sense of continuity within a world of flux.

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⁷Alec Lucas, *Literary History of Canada*, gen. ed. Carl F. Klinck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 315.

⁸Roberts, 276.

⁹Alec Lucas, Introduction to *The Last Barrier and Other Stories* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, New Canadian Library edition, 1958), x.