

SYMBOLISM AND SPATIAL PATTERNING
IN FOUR SHORT STORIES
BY CHARLES G. D. ROBERTS

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Charles G. D. Roberts' reputation in Canada in this century has changed almost decade by decade into the shape currently required by critics. He was early regarded as the dignified founding father of a truly Canadian literature; then dismissed in the 1940s as hopelessly Victorian in style and attitude. He has been acclaimed in the 1960s, principally by Joseph Gold, as a philosopher and myth-maker of the first rank;¹ then in the 1970s defended by Robin Matthews in the terms of Canadian nationalism.² All of these attitudes are attempts to portray Roberts' work as a monolith either to be toppled in the interests of modernity or to be admired from afar. In this decade, monuments are sceptically regarded, and attempts are being made to document fully the lives of Canadian writers. The Roberts Collected Letters should soon appear; they will reveal more of Roberts the man than has been possible to know heretofore.

It is not only in personal reminiscences and letters that the human Roberts can be found. In his poetry and stories he is often an intensely personal and expressive writer. His distinctive way of seeing, especially his organization of landscape detail, his response to people and animals, his moods, fears, loves and hates are recorded throughout the work itself. In order to prove my point, I shall examine the symbolism in a group of visionary stories, all of which appeared in *Earth's Enigmas*. "The Stone Dog," "In the Accident Ward" and "The Barn on the Marsh" were included in the 1896 edition; "The Hill of Chastisement" was added to the 1903 edition.³

¹Joseph Gold, "The Precious Spark of Life," *Canadian Literature*, No. 26 (Autumn 1965), 22-32.

²Robin Matthews, "Charles G. D. Roberts and the Destruction of the Canadian Imagination," *Journal of Canadian Fiction*, I, 1 (Winter 1972), 47-56.

³The publishing history of Roberts' stories indicates that between 1887 and 1900, he wrote animal stories, historical romances, backwoods tales and visionary stories. The fashion for animal stories was set by Ernest Thompson Seton in 1898: from 1900 Roberts published only backwoods and animal stories. The vogue neatly coincided with one of the two types of tales he wrote supremely well. If that vogue had turned to the visionary and psychological, he would have supplied them to the public with equal facility and success.

These stories leave the same impression as do poems such as "The Herring Weir," "The Flight," "One Night," and "The Footpath": they record fear, fear of life in the form of sexual guilt, and most especially, fear of death. I shall examine how these fears are communicated through symbols and spatial patterning and, also, whether the fears are adequately resolved in the tone and form of the endings.

The four stories are autobiographical. In the "Prefatory Note" to the 1903 edition of *Earth's Enigmas*, Roberts writes:

Most of the stories in this collection attempt to present one or another of those problems of life or nature to which, as it appears to many of us, there is no adequate solution within sight. Others are the almost literal transcript of dreams which seemed to me to have a coherency, completeness and symbolic significance sufficiently marked to justify me in setting them down.⁴

And Pomeroy emphasizes that "The Stone Dog," "In the Accident Ward" and "The Hill of Chastisement" came from dreams. "The Barn on the Marsh" was based on an actual experience of Roberts' early youth, when he and his father discovered their neighbour hanged in his barn.⁵ I stress the fact of autobiography for two reasons: first, so that my reading of these works will not seem entirely fanciful; and, more importantly, because they are self-admittedly Roberts' own dreams and visions, organized into symbols and spatial patterns by his unconscious mind, we may come to recognize similarities in other works and so have a method by which to comprehend Roberts' work as the production of a man, rather than as some vague, grand, philosophical system.

In all the works under consideration we are presented with the startlingly similar spatial image of the path. The writer walks along it in fear and trembling. Its direction may be downward, to a nearly-sunken door in a wall, or along a mountain path from a cave; it may be upward, from a gate up a hill path; or it may be a level path leading past an old barn: each is essentially the same organization of space and experience. It is well known that we can see objects, plants, animals, and landscapes in terms of ourselves,

⁴Charles G. D. Roberts, "Prefatory Note" to *Earth's Enigmas* (Boston: L. C. Page and Co., 1910), p. 5.

⁵E. M. Pomeroy, *Sir Charles G. D. Roberts: A Biography* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1943), pp. 10-11, 140.

both our mental activities and our body parts. Depending on how this perceived correspondence is communicated, we term it pathetic fallacy, personification, or anthropomorphism. All have their basis in a projection outward from primary human sensation and experience into an identification with other aspects of the world. Some writers regard this process as being very primitive, that is, as something we do which preliterate people did in their attempts to order and explain their world.⁶ Roberts consistently uses this identification device, whether as metaphor (naked hills, dead cities, choked stairs) or as image, which, because of its physical associations, becomes symbolic. It is this usually barely-understood symbolism which gives his works their peculiar power. In these four stories, and in many of the other stories and poems, the path leads to, from, or past a doorway or gate which may be open or closed. This is the imagery of vagina and uterus; Roberts' most consistent effort is re-entry, his most consistent failure expulsion. Death is encountered on all of the paths. Such works attempt to exorcise, by veiling them in symbols, both the anxiety caused by realization that the path from the womb leads inevitably to the tomb, and the guilt occasioned by a desire to regain permanently the protected original environment. Guilt is increased by the intuition that what is desired is a return to pre-life, which, as it would obliterate individual consciousness, is an equivalent of death. The imaginative connection commonly made between sex and death, especially for the male in so far as he views the sexual act as an attempt to re-enter the womb and orgasm as a momentary metaphorical death, can mean that that guilt is thereby doubled and transferred to all sexual activity. Proof that Roberts is expressing such fears and desires must come from the works themselves.

"The Stone Dog" is the dream most consciously shaped into a perfectly unified story. It has all the proper ingredients of the horror tale: a rational, ordinary man is placed in a strangely disquieting setting; a local folk belief in buried treasure behind a locked door is related; there is an attempt to overcome irrational foreboding and to open the door; supernatural forces accompanied by the terrific storm intervene to prevent the treasure being discovered; and a return to the ordinary daylight world is experienced in which, however, traces and proofs of the terror remain.

The narrator finds himself alone at sunset in an unknown landscape which is "gray" and "desolate." He is filled with "a vague

⁶Otto Rank, *Art and Artist* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1932), pp. 230-231, 258.

apprehensiveness": the marshes give off a "sick metallic odor," the weeds smell disagreeably, there is a "chill, damp smell of mouldering stone-work," his eyes and ears are strained with watchfulness. Under these impressions and the "weird fantasies" which oppress him, he explores the fountain which supports the stone dog and its vicinity. The area is characterized by *débris*, weeds and a stagnant pool, and farther afield by "inexorable sterility." The dog appears to be sleeping, except that its half-open eyes seem to watch the approaches to the doorway in the wall. It is a realistic piece of sculpture:

In its gathered limbs, though relaxed and perfectly at rest, a capacity for swift and terrible action seemed to hold itself in reserve, and a breath almost appeared to come from the half-opened jaws . . .⁷

From the fountain, the narrator turns to the sunken doorway. Seven "steep narrow stairs of brick work" lead down to it, and the rusty iron doorhandle is "curiously wrought of two dragons intertwined neck and tail." We might well stop at this point to note that the dog, who watches the doorway and contains power in reserve, is an echo of Cerberus, the Greek guardian dog of the underworld; and that dragons in Eastern mythology are benevolent symbols of fertility, power and creativity, often figuring as the custodians of hidden treasure.⁸

The narrator is irresistibly attracted to this door, and intends to open it, although he has not yet heard about the treasure that is supposed to lie behind it. This, so far, is a picture of a man in conflict. He is afraid, yet wants to descend, force open and enter. As he grasps the handle, "a chill of terror crept tingling" through his frame. He decides to wait until the next day to try the door again; as he withdraws, he feels the dog's eyes "piercing" him.

He is, all the next morning, obsessed with "the spell of the dead outskirts, of the shadowless dead marshes, of that mysterious and inscrutable dog." He returns, playfully splashes water over the dog, and is reassured to see the drops rolling off the stone "like quicksilver." The area is still perceived as unhealthy: "a greenish mist steamed up, and seemed to poison the sunlight streaming through

⁷Roberts, "The Stone Dog," *Earth's Enigmas*, p. 247.

⁸Alexander Eliot, *Myths* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1976), pp. 180, 181.

it." "The twisting dragons of the doorhandle attracted me as I drew near." He descends the steps, hears the water of the fountain behind him cease murmuring, as it had the day before; a "chilly sweat" breaks out on him and he turns round suddenly to see the head of the dog turned directly toward him, "and its eyes, now wide open, flamed upon me with strange and awful whiteness." The narrator calms himself by returning to the fountain, where he finds the dog in its original position. Having persuaded himself that he is the victim of baseless fears, he turns for the third time to the locked door. Again, the sound of the fountain stops, but he steels himself, chips away at the soft stone with his knife, and jerks hard on the bolt which gives a little, with a clatter of falling stucco. But he is horrified and turns to find:

There, at the very top of the steps, crouched the dog, its head thrust down close to my face. The stone jaws were grinning apart. A most appalling menace was in the wide, white eyes. I know I tugged once more upon the bolt, for a great piece of the door and arch crumbled and came away; and I thought, as the head closed down, that I made a wild spring to get past the crouching form. Then reason and consciousness forsook me.

The demon-guardian of the place has done its work well.

The rest of the story consists of a partial rationalization of the experience. The narrator awakens in a "darkish, garlicky hut, with the morning sunlight streaming in the open door," and hears the history of the fountain and doorway from the muleteer who found him "lying, in a stupor, face down, across the basin of the fount, and directly beneath the jaws of the dog." A storm had come up in the night, and then an earthquake which toppled many old walls. The muleteer had gone back to the place at sunrise, hoping to find the reputed treasure revealed by the disturbance. But though the fountain and dog were untouched, the whole wall had fallen and buried the steps and doorway in masses of ruin. The narrator returns to his lodgings and though his clothing is not torn, only dusty, his shoulder is green and livid, "bruised on either side with deep prints of massive teeth."

Although the narrator has been returned to the daylight, rational world, the story does not negate what he believed he experienced. The terror the place inspires in the local people, the storm and earthquake which leave the stone dog intact, and the teeth marks in his flesh convince the narrator, so that he has "ceased to regard as necessarily absurd whatever I find it difficult to explain." This on the

one hand completes aesthetically the traditional horror story; on the other the dream experience organizes unconscious desires and fears into a symbolic whole. Roberts' intense desire to enter an old room, to find the buried treasure of fertility and creativity is in itself terrifying, and his effort to do so is prohibited by the guardian of that place. Such symbols as the stone dog are projections from Roberts' own mind. Within himself, a figure of great strength and ferocity lurks. The fear that this figure will literally tear him to pieces if he follows his urge to return to the womb or to the female principle has been confirmed by the dream. The story insists upon the reality of this unresolved personal conflict.

"In the Accident Ward" is a straightforward recounting of a dream and of waking. It lacks the artistic completeness of "The Stone Dog" or, indeed, of "The Barn on the Marsh" or "The Hill of Chastisement." "In the Accident Ward" is a slight piece, valuable only because it, too, uses certain symbols which are central to Roberts' work.

The parts of the story, dream and waking, are not well fused. It begins, like "The Stone Dog," with landscape description, but this beginning is brief. The use of landscape is symbolic rather than scene-setting. The grass is gray, "of a strange and dreadful pallor." The sky above the hill is also "gray and thick, with the color of a parched interminable twilight." The narrator stands in the middle of a "blood-red road of baked clay" and prepares to ascend the hill obliquely by a "narrow footpath, red as blood." Behind him the road descends into "a little blood-red hollow . . . crossed by an open gate." He looks back at this gate, through which he has emerged, and sees gray leopards and a small ape standing on tip-toe and eyeing him with a "dreadful curiosity." These beasts withdraw at an incomprehensible whispered word. As the dreamer looks to the summit of the hill, he sees, "cleaving the gasses in flight as swift as an arrow," a figure, all gray, being pursued by a tall and terrible second figure, who is the "Second Death." The fleeing ghost falls at the narrator's feet, clasping his knees in "awful fear." The dreamer himself no longer fears; he reaches out and grasps the pursuing horror by the throat.

I heard the being laugh, and the iron grip of my own strong and implacable fingers seemed to close with a keen agony upon my own throat, and a curtain seemed to fall over my eyes.⁹

⁹Roberts, "In the Accident Ward," *Earth's Enigmas*, p. 121.

This ends the dream section of the story. In it, we see an opposite spatial arrangement and movement from "The Stone Dog." The open-gated hollow has been passed through. The dreamer would be prevented from re-entering by the animals (recalling the function of the stone dog) but since he has no intention of trying, they are called off. He is left alone on the blood red path of life, gazing upward to the empty horizon across a sterile landscape of long gray grass. The figures which initially terrorize him are a ghost and Second Death. His attempt to kill Second Death turns into suicide, proving that such figures as the stone dog and Second Death are projections from the unconscious which cannot be destroyed. The movement in this dream is paranoid. Vicious animals behind, death ahead: after birth, there is grayness all around and uphill bloody struggle with the fear of death as a companion until the end. This dream documents not the birth trauma, not an attempt to return to the womb, but the agony of moving alone through an uncompromisingly bleak life at the mercy of self-destructive impulses.

The ending is both aesthetically and psychologically inadequate. The dreamer regains consciousness in an accident ward. The bandages, the sharp pain at his throat, the memory of the collision calm him. He allows the "terrible scene," that is, the dream, to slip from his grasp and hears the doctor say, "He'll sleep now for a couple of hours." The dream world has been vanquished by the reassuring facts of disaster and pain. The ending denies the dream's symbolic truth. It is impossible to know now whether the waking portion of the story was tacked on later, when Roberts came to prepare it for publication, or whether it is a direct account of the strange way the gradually-waking mind will attempt to make sense of what has gone before. In either case, it is apparent that Roberts found the dream's organization of setting and internal figures too frightening to accept.

The autobiographical "The Barn on the Marsh" is important because it repeats, in Roberts' waking life, the fears and symbols of his dreams. The tale begins when Roberts was seven years old. His father, the rector, delighted in gardening early in the morning and insisted on the child's participation.

Weeding, and especially such thorough, radical weeding as alone would satisfy the rector's conscience, was my detestation . . . But I never found courage to betray my lack of sympathy in all its iciness. The sight of the rector's enthusiasm filled me ever

with a sense of guilt, and I used to weed quite diligently, at times.¹⁰

Several points must be made briefly here. Roberts does not call his father "father" but "the rector," emphasizing the man's moral and spiritual function. He roots up and casts away evil growths in the garden: weeding satisfies the rector's conscience, not his aesthetic sense. His son is being taught to reject sin, shown 'the right way' through this metaphorical activity. And the son feels guilty: his father's approach to life is essentially antipathetic to him. Late in life, Roberts' dreams of his father always included their walking together in a garden or across a beautiful landscape (Pomeroy, pp. 339-40).

One morning, the rector, probably digging vigorously, breaks his hoe off at the handle. The driven and guilty child responds in this way:

I stopped work with alacrity, and gazed with commiserating interest, while I began wiping my muddy little fingers on my knickerbockers in bright anticipation of some new departure which should put a pause to the weeding.

The new departure is a trauma which permanently imprints itself and all the details which preceded it on the boy's mind. They go together to their neighbour's barn to repair the hoe, and find him just inside the barn door, hanging dead, his face distorted and purple.

The narrative now skips ahead to a time when Roberts is eighteen, a college student visiting his old neighbourhood on holiday. He has the habit of calling on friends who live two miles from the old rectory. They "possessed some strange charm which would never permit me to say good-night at anything like a seasonable hour." He takes the road across the marsh, where the old barn now stands, as a short-cut home. It was not a pleasant road in wet weather, "but good enough for me at all times in the frame of mind in which I found myself." This frame of mind was occasioned by, as we may guess, and Pomeroy confirms, the company of young women. They were the daughters of Sheriff Botsford.

In spite of his high spirits, the description of the landscape turns sombre. The road he walks is bordered on either side by a high rail fence; the Lombardy poplars are "ghostly and perishing"; the miles of "naked marsh" stretch away to the "lonely, shifting waters of the

¹⁰Roberts, "The Barn on the Marsh," *Earth's Enigmas*, p. 221.

Basin"; small black clouds "stream dizzily" across the moon's face; the barn "with its big doors opening toward the road" stands beyond the fence. Until this night, he has given only impersonal remembrance to associations the old barn has for him. On this occasion, Roberts is self-absorbed, "scarce noticing even the strange play of the moon-shadows over the marshes": just the right conditions for visions or visitations. A short way past the barn, he experiences a "creeping sensation" about his skin, and "a thrill of nervous apprehension" makes him stop suddenly and look behind. We have seen this pattern of behavior, this fear of something watching or lurking behind him, in both "The Stone Dog" and "In the Accident Ward": also, here again, he is on a path. Hanging in the opening of the barn doors, swaying almost imperceptibly in the wind, hangs the body of the neighbour.

The rest of the story details Roberts' inner struggle between horror and common sense. He approaches the apparition gradually. Peering through the fence rails only confirms that the neighbour, his every feature distinct and horrible in its distortion, indeed hangs there. Roberts climbs the fence, the clouds thicken over the face of the moon, the light fades rapidly. Sickened but resolute, he walks up to "the swaying thing" and touches it with his walking stick. It is a piece of wood and iron, some portion of a mowing-machine or reaper which had been repainted then hung up across the doorpole to dry. Roberts is relieved and leaves. But as he climbs the fence:

I gave a parting glance toward the yawning doorway of the barn on the marsh. There, as plain as before I had pierced the bubble, swung the body of my neighbour. And all the way home, though I would not turn my head, I felt it at my heels.

This story ends with a rational debunking of the vision. A piece of machinery, after all, not a man, hangs in the doorway. But the concluding sentences quoted above emphasize the difference between rational and irrational, factual truth and imaginative truth: for Roberts, the hanging man is an inescapable reality.

Pomeroy comments that this experience shows Roberts' subordination of imagination to reason as a prevailing characteristic throughout his entire life (p. 26). Her superficial interpretation overlooks both the ending and the story's symbolic organization. Roberts was self-absorbed in the sort of reverie which would recall all the childhood associations to the barn. Guiltily pleased that the rector

was thwarted by the broken hoe, the child had wiped his muddy hands on his trousers. The next sight he recalls is the hanging man. For children, irrational conjunctions of cause and effect order the universe. The hanged neighbour was hanged *because of* the child's guilty feelings: he was rehanged because Roberts was at that later moment experiencing a similar guilt associated with a desire for pleasure and silent defiance of the rector's admonitions to "weed" diligently. The fact that Roberts was returning from the Botsford girls demonstrates the way in which sexual guilt (which does not necessarily follow only sexual activity *per se*) can subsume all guilt. Also, as in the other stories under discussion, great emotional intensity is expressed in connection with this spatial patterning of road and doorway. The feminine image of open doors contains the image of guilt, the hanging man: this can draw Roberts away from the path and inspire uncomprehended fear as he goes on his way.

"The Hill of Chastisement" is another account of a dream. Unlike "In the Accident Ward" its impact is not weakened by a denying conclusion, and unlike "The Stone Dog" it is not shaped into a unified horror story. It is presented in itself, without comment; here, the symbols which express Roberts' unconscious fears are gathered together and summed up in devastating culmination.

It is night. The dreamer dwells in a cave-mouth, midway up the steep slope of a hill, doing penance for an unnamed sin. The scene is described in body metaphors. The hill, "naked and rocky," has "terrific ribs"; from the abyss comes a silently rolling smoke, "full-bosomed and in haste"; grinning faces flame through the smoke, as "the white faces of the drowned gleam up through a black water."¹¹ This is a vision of hell. The faces expect the narrator's rejection from the cave; they lie in wait. Frantically, he lashes himself "more fiercely with the knotted leather scourge," throws himself down with prayers and cries at "the low stone barrier which cut me off from the sanctuary of the inner cave."

Within this sanctuary sits an old man, "a saint":

... in a glory of clear and pure light, so penetrating that it revealed the secrets of my breast, yet so strictly reserved that no least beam of its whiteness escaped to pierce the dread of the outer gloom. He sat with grave head bowed continually over a book that shone like crystal, and his beard fell to his feet.

This figure in the womb-like sanctuary, with shining book and

¹¹Roberts, "The Hill of Chastisement," *Earth's Enigmas*, pp. 197, 198.

knowledge of the dreamer's guilt, is a re-appearance of the rector.

The narrator suddenly grows aware that he must go out to "tread the rough path which ran from the cave mouth, skirting the gulf of faces." This path encircles the hill, coming again to the cave from the other side. He knows that if he could return to the cave from that other side, "the holy eyes would lift and look upon me from the sanctuary of light." Here again is the symbol of the road of life, which it is necessary to travel in order to arrive at the peace and safety of the afterlife, associated with the cave or womb of prelife, where Roberts and his father will surely meet again.

The dreamer sets forth trembling, the gloom deepens and the thin laughter from the faces in the smoke grows shriller. He tries to run, but his hope becomes blotted out "under a sense of nameless desolation," for far across the smoke and faces he sees a peaceful evening country-side with secure cottages, their windows warm with the hearth-fire lights. As if the cottage walls were made of glass, his eyes pierce them to see within safety and love: his forsakenness overwhelms him. So far, this is a picture of terrorized guilt and despondency. Behind him forever are the safety of the womb, the forgiveness and love of the father; alone on a dark rocky path he is surrounded by mocking faces; in the distance he can see the peace and security of home life available to others but denied to him. He does not yet yield, but drags himself forward by the rough edges of the rocks, hearing "all the air full of the thin laughter of the faces." He comes upon a heap of stones with the base of a wooden pillar rising out of it. Believing it a hillside calvary, a last refuge of such lost ones as himself, his heart almost breaks with joy as he clings to the base of the wooden upright. The cruelly ironic conclusion deserves full quotation:

As I grasped my sanctuary, the air rang with loud laughter; the faces, coming out of the smoke, sprang wide-eyed and flaming close about me; a red flare shattered the darkness. Clutching importunately, I lifted up my eyes. My refuge was not a calvary. I saw it clear. It was a reeking gibbet.

Here again is the hanged man. As was hinted in "The Barn on the Marsh," the hanged neighbour, having first been associated with Roberts' guilt feelings, became a totally internalized figure, that part of him which was perpetually sinful and in fear of punishment.

"The Hill of Chastisement," incidentally, makes an imaginative association of Christ on the cross, dying for the sins of humanity,

with the common criminal hanged for his crime. Expecting forgiveness, the dreamer finds retribution. We may see in this a deep disbelief that the promises of Christianity have any power to ease the pain of rejection and regret or to prevent shameful death. Also, we may see here a comment on Roberts' father, and his father's faith, made in the light of hard psychological experience.

A full study of Roberts' use of symbolism has yet to be made. There is a remarkable coherency throughout the *oeuvre* of symbols, spatial patterning, movement through landscape, and themes of loss and death. A few poems which are similar in symbolic organization and meaning to the stories I have discussed are: "The Flight" (1880), a mysterious rendering of a woman's flight from murder up a mountain to join her company of witches and devils in the circle of torchlight; "One Night" (1880), a horrified recognition of death and evil as part of oneself followed by the suggestion of Christian redemption; "The Footpath" (1884), an association of a path which leads to an old house with a lost love; and "The Herring Weir" (1893), in which the black trail made by the cart leading from a house on the hill to the water's edge represents Roberts' paralyzed apprehension of certain death, both in the natural world and for himself. These examples can, no doubt, be multiplied. We may also suppose that the poems and stories which detail the fortuitous rescue of a child from imminent death represent the same feelings of helplessness and despair which have been temporarily denied by Roberts' insistence on a happy ending.

A happier dream, using much the same symbolism as the visionary stories, is recorded by Pomeroy as occurring late in Roberts' life. He used to tell this "humorous dream" as a joke on himself:

I was driving alone through a level land in a two-wheeled "sulky." Although it was broad daylight, the level landscape on either hand was a cold grey and the road we travelled a vivid red. (His dreams were always colourful.) Presently we came to a hill and the path led straight up, almost perpendicularly, to the top. The horse stopped, but I said, "The tracks go up this steep and where others go, we can go." So up went the horse as easily as a fly up a window-pane. We travelled the same grey land for a little while and then the track led perpendicularly down to a level some twenty-five or thirty feet lower. Again the horse stopped, but again I said, "Old fellow, others have gone this way. Where they have gone, we can go." He obediently went, and without any difficulty whatever we made the descent and

continued our journey through the same flat landscape. At length, however, we came to a perpendicular precipice of several thousand feet and looked over a wide and beautiful green country. Again the horse stopped. Again I said, "Where others have gone we can go." Still the horse balked and craned his neck over the precipice. Impatiently I said, "Come along. Let's get going," and flicked him gently with the whip. Instead of going, he turned squarely around between the shafts, stuck a huge gaunt head over the dash-board, eyed me sternly, and said, "No you don't, Charlie." Then I woke up. (Pomeroy p. 340)

The first thing we notice in "The Precipice Dream" is the similarity of the landscape to that in "In an Accident Ward." Here, he is not alone on the path: that symbol is no longer terrifying. The hostile animals of "The Stone Dog" and "In the Accident Ward" have been transformed into the friendly companion and helper, the horse. The self-flagellation of "The Hill of Chastisement" has been modified into "gentle" urging of an animal. Interestingly, the horse repeats the function of the dragons of "The Stone Dog." They symbolized fertility and creativity: the horse recalls Pegasus. Poets have long claimed the winged steed for their companion and said his second name was Inspiration. "In thoughts, in dreams, sufficiently fearless minds may ride the wide-plumed animal to any heights."¹² Roberts' horse does not much resemble Pegasus, we may say, being in the main a docile, agreeable creature. But at the precipice, Inspiration saves the poet from certain death. The "beautiful green country" stands in sharp contrast to the grey landscape and red path of the first part of the dream. It is an echo of the peaceful evening countryside seen from afar in "The Hill of Chastisement," representing something infinitely desirable and, still, infinitely unattainable. It is Heaven, haven: but he will have to die to reach it. This dream voices Roberts' acceptance that his time has not yet come.

This late dream is an assertion of the importance and life-giving powers of Roberts' creative activities. The hidden treasure of "The Stone Dog" has been found, the destructive inner figures harnessed, all re-incorporated into one benign force for self-preservation and continued creative power.

Far from being the philosopher and myth-maker who serenely stands apart from struggle, pain and death in the natural world,

¹²Eliot, p. 160.

accepting and artistically documenting, Roberts used his creative gifts to express, within the framework of natural history and consistent symbolism, his intense, moment-to-moment involvement with life. He was able to allay desolating fears of living and of death by expressing them. That Roberts' dreams accomplished this ordering for him is the best evidence we have to support a search for similar patterning in the wholly "made" or consciously contrived works.

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