

Roberts' "Tantramar Revisited" and Lanier's "The Marshes of Glynn"

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Although the possible debt of Charles G. D. Roberts' "Tantramar Revisited" to Longfellow's *Evangeline* (1947) has been discussed by several critics, including Desmond Pacey, William Strong, and David Jackel,¹ the similarity between the Canadian poem and Sidney Lanier's "The Marshes of Glynn" has not, so far as I am aware, been remarked.

In his 1933 address on "Canadian Poetry in its Relation to the Poetry of England and America" Roberts observes . . . that late nineteenth-century Canadian poetry "owes something . . . to that very great American poet, Sidney Lanier."² Despite its hyperbole, this remark, delivered in the context of a discussion of the influence of various American writers on the Confederation poets, suggests that Roberts was familiar with and, indeed, influenced by Lanier during the first of his two periods of extensive poetic activity, the period which produced the "Tantramar Revisited." Now "The Marshes of Glynn" was first published anonymously in *A Masque of Poets* (Boston, 1878) where it was singled out for praise, probably by William Dean Howells, in the *Atlantic* for March, 1879. Roberts might have encountered the poem in *A Masque of Poets* and might even have seen the *Atlantic's* description of it as a "fine Swinburnian study . . . in which the poet has bettered, in some passages, his master's instructions."³ But in view of Roberts' admiration for Longfellow (he sent the American poet a copy of his *Orion and Other Poems* in

¹See respectively *Essays in Canadian Criticism, 1938-1968* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1969), p. 192, "Charles G. D. Roberts' 'The Tantramar Revisited,'" *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews*, No. 3 (Fall/Winter, 1978), 27, and "Roberts' 'Tantramar Revisited': Another View," *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews*, No. 5 (Fall/Winter, 1979), 42-43.

²*Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews*, No. 3 (Fall/Winter, 1978), 82.

³Quoted in Charles R. Anderson, "Introduction," *Poems and Poem Outlines*, Vol. I of *The Centennial Edition of the Works of Sidney Lanier* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1945), lxiv. The publishing history of Lanier's poem and the text are in this volume, hereafter cited as *The Centennial Edition*.

1880,⁴ it is more likely that he would have encountered "The Marshes of Glynn" in Longfellow's anthology entitled *Poems of Places. America. Southern States* (Boston, 1879) where it is attributed to Lanier. In any event, for the "Tantramar Revisited" to "owe something" to "The Marshes of Glynn," Lanier's poem has to have been read by Roberts in either *A Masque of Poets* or *Poems of Places* for its next appearance, in a slightly revised form in the *Poems of Sidney Lanier*, published in New York in 1884, post-dates by a year the publication of Roberts' poem, under its original title of "Westmorland Revisited," in *The Week* of December 20, 1883.

Of course, there is no need to insist on an influence operating from "The Marshes of Glynn" to "Tantramar Revisited." The similarity between certain passages in the two poems may be entirely due to the fact that both poets were intimately familiar with the marshlands which they describe (Lanier with the marshes of Glynn County near Brunswick on the coast of Georgia, Roberts with the Tantramar marshes on the Bay of Fundy in New Brunswick) and that both poets seem to have sensed the appropriateness of what Lanier calls "the long roll of dactyls"⁵ as a vehicle for the description of such seascapes. These factors, together with a keen interest in classical metres which the two poets shared, may account for the striking similarity between the following passages from "The Marshes of Glynn" and "Tantramar Revisited." Here is Lanier:

Sinuous southward and sinuous northward the shimmering
band
Of the sand-beach fastens the fringe of the marsh to the folds
of the land.
Inward and outward to northward and southward the beach-
lines linger and curl
As a silver-wrought garment that clings to and follows the firm
sweet limbs of a girl.
Vanishing, swerving, evermore curving again into sight,
Softly the sand-beach wavers away to a dim gray looping of
light.
And what if behind me to westward the wall of the woods
stands high?
The world lies east: how ample, the marsh and the sea and
the sky!

⁴See E. M. Pomeroy, *Sir Charles G. D. Roberts; A Biography* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1943), pp. 38-39.

⁵See *The Centennial Edition*, I, lxii.

A league and a league of marsh-grass, waist-high, broad in
 the blade,
 Green, and all of a height, and unflecked with a light or a
 shade,
 Stretch leisurely off, in a pleasant plain,
 To the terminal blue of the main.⁶

And now Roberts:

Skirting the sunbright uplands stretches a riband of meadows,
 Shorn of the labouring grass, bulwarked well from the sea,
 Fenced on its seaward border with long clay dikes from the
 turbid
 Surge and flow of the tides vexing the Westmoreland shores.
 Yonder, toward the left, lie broad the Westmoreland marshes,—
 Miles on miles they extend, level, and grassy, and dim,
 Clear from the long red sweep of flats to the sky in the distance,
 Save for the outlying heights, green-rampired Cumberland Point;
 Miles on miles outrolled, and the river-channels divide them,—
 Miles on miles of green, barred by the hurtling gusts.⁷

The similar locales and falling rhythms of these two passages are not the only elements that they share. There are similarities of metaphor — both poets, Lanier blatantly, Roberts subtly, depicting their seascapes in terms of women's clothing — and of repetitive patterning — Lanier's "A league and a league. . . .," Roberts' "Miles on miles . . ." — which could be adduced to provide internal evidence of the influence of the American poem on the Canadian.

Without denying the possibility of such an influence, and even granting that it does exist, there is something to be gained from noticing that "The Marshes of Glynn" and "Tantramar Revisited," though similar in certain ways, differ in one crucial respect, namely that the American poem reveals the influence of Whitman in its technique but, by contrast, the Canadian one is an adaptation of the "classical elegiac metre."⁸ In other words, Lanier's poem is aligned with the "radical tradition"⁹ of American poetry with its democratic vistas and liberal individualism while "Tantramar Revisited," like "The Pipes of Pan" which is also written in what Roberts himself

⁶*Ibid.*, 120.

⁷*Selected Poetry and Critical Prose*, ed. with an Introduction by W. J. Keith (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), 51-52.

⁸Jackel, 45.

⁹Edwin Fussell, *Lucifer in Harness: American Metre, Metaphor, and Diction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 6f.

thought of as "rigid Ovidian elegiac metre,"¹⁰ aligns itself with the classical, European tradition. It was that alignment which led Roberts to resign from the editorship of Goldwin Smith's *Week* soon after publishing "Westmorland Revisited" in its pages. Thus the observation that "Tantramar Revisited," whatever its relation to Lanier's "The Marshes of Glynn," is at base a Romantic return poem in the tradition of Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," is both literary and cultural in its implications.

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¹⁰"Prefatory Note" to his *Selected Poems* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1936), p. vii.

¹¹Cf. Jackel, 52-55.