

## REMEMBERING IT ALL WELL: "THE TANTRAMAR REVISITED"

TRACY WARE

The distinctive excellence of Wordsworth's poetry is something so high, so ennobling, so renovating to the spirit, that it can be regarded as nothing short of a calamity for one to acquire a preconception which will seal him against its influence . . . Wordsworth's peculiar province is that border-land wherein Nature and the heart of Man act and react upon each other. His vision is occupied not so much with Nature as with the relations between Nature and his inmost self.

—Charles G.D. Roberts<sup>1</sup>

"Tintern Abbey," perhaps the best-loved and the most frequently-quoted of Wordsworth's poems, has been extremely influential: it is the prototypical Romantic return poem, the progenitor of that genre in which the poet returns to a familiar landscape, there to confront life's apparent discontinuities, and to assess the present in terms of the past. The return poem, which is related to the tradition of topographical poetry, involves the poet in a quest for continuity, embodied in the physical journey implicit in the poem's immediate past. Roberts was particularly fond of this genre, writing such fine examples of it as the "Epistle to W. Bliss Carman," "In the Afternoon," and, of course, "The Tantramar Revisited." Accordingly, it is not surprising that he praises "Tintern Abbey" at length in "The Poetry of Nature" (1897):

The "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" are, at first glance, chiefly descriptive; but their actual function is to convey to a restless age, troubled with small cares seen in too close perspective, the large, contemplative wisdom which seemed to Wordsworth the message of the scene which moved him.

---

Note: I am indebted to D.M.R. Bentley and R.M. Stingle for their comments on an earlier version of this paper.

1. "Wordsworth's Poetry," rpt. from *Poems of Wordsworth*, ed. J.E. Wetherell (Toronto: W.J. Gage and Company, 1892) in Charles G.D. Roberts, *Selected Poetry and Critical Prose*, ed. and introd. W.J. Keith (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1974), pp. 274-75. Unless otherwise noted, subsequent citations from Roberts will be from Keith's edition, and will appear in the text.

In such poetry, "complex almost beyond the possibilities of analysis," Wordsworth becomes, for Roberts, "the high-priest in nature's temple, interpreting the mysteries" (Roberts, p. 280). In these words, and in "Wordsworth's Poetry," from which my epigraph comes, Roberts acknowledges that Wordsworth is an important influence on Roberts' own poetry, as he is on so much of nineteenth-century Canadian nature poetry.

The Wordsworthian influence on "The Tantramar Revisited" has been mentioned by Milton Wilson, Tom Marshall, and D.M.R. Bentley, but has not been discussed in detail.<sup>2</sup> Otherwise "The Tantramar Revisited" has been more extensively and profitably studied than any other Confederation poem. Helpful comments on the poem are to be found in the work of such important writers as Archibald Lampman, James Cappon, Desmond Pacey, Northrop Frye, W.J. Keith, and D.G. Jones. Recently, two fine articles have appeared by William Strong and David Jackel. Besides offering new interpretations of the poem, these articles serve as useful summaries of the insights of previous critics. Such full studies, all too rare in the often footnote-free world of Canadian letters, are particularly suited to this poem, for, as Strong maintains, "Part of the enduring appeal of 'The Tantramar Revisited' resides in the fact that it does not allow for any simple resolution of its themes."<sup>3</sup> One hundred years after its first publication in *The Week*, "The Tantramar Revisited" is now perceived more clearly than ever as, in Pacey's words, "undoubtedly one of the best poems ever written in Canada."<sup>4</sup>

Despite Roberts' own account of "the rigid Ovidian elegiac metre" of the poem (Roberts, p. 302), "The Tantramar Revisited" has occasionally been regarded as derivative of Longfellow's *Evangeline*. In the most influential of these views, Cappon refers to Roberts' versification

2. Wilson, "Recent Canadian Verse," rpt. from *Queen's Quarterly* (1959) in *Contexts of Canadian Criticism*, ed. and introd. Eli Mandel (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1971; rpt. 1977), p. 200; Marshall, "Mountaineers and Swimmers," *Canadian Literature*, 72 (Spring 1977), 21; Bentley, "Roberts' 'Tantramar Revisited' and Lanier's 'The Marshes of Glynn,'" *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 5, No. 2 (Fall 1980), 319. Bentley has a more extensive discussion of the matter in "The Poetics of Roberts' Tantramar Space," delivered at the Roberts Conference in New Brunswick, October 30, 1982, and forthcoming in the volume of proceedings.

3. "Charles G.D. Roberts' 'The Tantramar Revisited,'" *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews*, 3 (Fall / Winter 1978), 34. Subsequent citations from this article will appear in the text.

4. *Creative Writing in Canada: A Short History of English-Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1952), p. 42. "The Tantramar Revisited" appears in *The Week*, 1, No. 3 (December 20, 1883), 38, where it was entitled "Westmoreland Revisited."

as "the not very pure form of the modern hexameter" as used by Longfellow, adding that Arnold and Clough are also possible influences.<sup>5</sup> Now there are two reasons why Longfellow's influence on "The Tantramar Revisited" can, at most, have been slight: one, unlike Roberts' lyrical meditation, *Evangeline* is a narrative romance, the sheer size of which involves it in utterly different technical problems; two, as Jackel demonstrates, Roberts' irregular metre bears little resemblance to Longfellow's regular hexameters.<sup>6</sup> While one may agree, with Strong, that Roberts alludes to *Evangeline* through the use of hexameters and the maritime setting, and that the allusion "adds historical depth and resonance" to the poem (Strong, 27), one cannot argue from this that "The Tantramar Revisited" is in any profound sense derivative of *Evangeline*. Longfellow's Classical models are also Roberts' models, as Roberts himself stated. Be all this as it may, it seems clear that the elegiac metre is a fitting vehicle for Roberts' elegiac concerns, although it was generally used in Classical love poetry. That metre, as Coleridge's "The Ovidian Elegiac Metre" (translated from Schiller) emphasizes, embodies a rising and falling rhythm, an ebb and flow, making it suitable for the Tantramar:

In the hexameter rises the fountain's silvery column;  
In the pentameter, aye, falling in the melody back.<sup>7</sup>

This metre is also suited to the speaker's mood, for, as Lampman observes, "There is a certain passionate stress in it, which makes it specially applicable to descriptive writing of an emotionally meditative and reminiscent character."<sup>8</sup> Meditation and reminiscence, of course, are integral to the Romantic return poem.

The problem with Roberts' own account of his poem's metre,

---

5. Charles G.D. Roberts and *The Influence of His Times* (1905; rpt. Ottawa: Tecumseh Press, 1975), p. 18.

6. "Roberts' 'Tantramar Revisited': Another View," *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews*, 5 (Fall / Winter 1979), 43. Subsequent citations from this article will appear in the text.

7. Cited in Abbie Findlay Potts, *The Elegiac Mode: Poetic Form in Wordsworth and Other Elegists* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 27. Harry A. Woodworth, in a perceptive early article on Roberts, quotes Coleridge's lines, adding, "Surely this is the measure that most fittingly tells the story of the rising and ebbing of the tides of Tantramar"; see "Roberts' Poetry of the Tantramar," *Anniversary Number of the Chignecto Post and Borderer* [Sackville, New Brunswick], Sept. 1895, 2.

8. "Two Canadian Poets: A Lecture, 1891," in *Masks of Poetry: Canadian Critics on Canadian Verse*, ed. and introd. A.J.M. Smith (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1962), p. 33.

however, is that the metre is not "rigid" at all. As Jackel argues, the Classical metre, unlike Roberts', is quantitative. Even the opening lines of "The Tantramar Revisited" contain a number of incomplete feet. And the lines are still incomplete even "if we argue that Roberts has adapted quantitative measure to English poetry in the customary fashion, by substituting accented syllables for long ones and unaccented for short" (Jackel, 44). Jackel's sensible solution to the problem deserves to be quoted at length:

Roberts' control of the rhythm of his lines deserves high praise, and it is on *rhythm* rather than *metre* that our attention should be focused. The poet has *adapted*, not attempted to copy, the classical elegiac measure: he has employed six stressed syllables in each line, and retained the couplet effect by alternating unstressed and stressed syllables in his line endings.

The metrical norm is dactylic, but with frequent variation used "to accelerate or retard the movement of each line" as Roberts deems necessary (Jackel, 45). It is unnecessary, however, to agree with Jackel that it is a disservice to Roberts to associate his verse "with anything written by Swinburne" (Jackel, 46). Jackel's dismissal of Swinburne, based on the criticisms of T.S. Eliot and Yvor Winters, is true neither to the current reassessment of Swinburne nor to Roberts' own view. We know that the young Roberts was, in his own words, "drunk with the music" of Swinburne, among others. Swinburne's Hellenism and his metrical experimentation had a considerable influence on Roberts' own practice. That influence may extend to "The Tantramar Revisited," even if, as Bentley has suggested, it is only to serve as a point of departure.<sup>9</sup>

Neither Swinburne's influence, however, nor the influence of Tennyson notice by Strong (Strong, 30), manifest themselves in the generic identity of the poem. "The Tantramar Revisited" is a return poem, as is stressed by the use of the phrase "well I remember" at four points in the poem. Critics of the poem have not recognized that the Tantramar is as much remembered as it is perceived. The speaker, who would "rather remember than see," never does "go down to the marsh-land";

---

9. In the "Tantramar Space" paper, Bentley discusses the possible influence of Swinburne's "Evening on the Broads" and "By the North Sea." Roberts' account of Swinburne is from his 1933 lecture, "Canadian Poetry in its Relation to the Poetry of England and America," introd. D.M.R. Bentley, *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews*, 3 (Fall / Winter 1978), 80.

instead, he chooses to "Muse and recall far off" (Roberts, 11. 61-62). As in much eighteenth-century topographical poetry, the speaker is situated at a height, in a position from which he can perceive a general prospect, but not the specific details visible only at a closer inspection. In the same way that the opening line, "Summers and summers have come, and gone with the flight of the swallow," gives the sense of the progression of a large period of time, the fourfold use of the incantatory phrase "miles on miles" gives the sense of considerable distance.<sup>10</sup> When this phrase is last used to open the second section of the poem, the sense of vast distance conveyed by its repetition is further underscored by the panoramic perspective of bay, hills, and villages so distant as to appear as gleams, dim flashes of light: "Miles on miles beyond the tawny bay is Minudie. / There are the low blue hills; villages gleam at their feet" (Roberts, 11. 25-26). It is therefore unlikely that, at this distance, the speaker is observing anything other than the vague outline of a scene that he describes in such rich detail. What he describes is what he vividly remembers. Because of the conclusion of the poem, it is impossible to say whether and to what extent time has altered the landscape before him. It is also irrelevant, for the speaker's problem derives from his own mind, not from the local fishing and farming industries.

The net-reels that the speaker proceeds to describe (and that have received some critical comment) are also as much remembered as perceived. He says that he can "see them" (Roberts, 1. 37), but from "miles on miles" away he could not see them as exactly as he describes them. As Jackel notes, the description is based on the speaker's "prior experience in the landscape," and it "is largely a description not of the observed landscape but of the landscape as it will be" when the day progresses (Jackel, 47). Gradually the attention shifts from the present to an anticipated future:

Now at this season they swing in the long strong wind,  
thro' the lonesome  
Golden afternoon, shunned by the foraging gulls.  
Near about sunset the crane will journey homeward  
above them;  
Round them, under the moon, all the calm night long,

---

10. Frye notes that the phrase has "some incantatory power" for Roberts; see the 1968 "Conclusion to a *Literary History of Canada*" (1965), rpt. in his *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), p. 223.

Winnowing soft grey wings of marsh-owls wander and  
 wander,  
 Now to the broad, lit marsh, now to the dusk of the  
 dike.

(Roberts, 11. 39-44)

Time passes even in the act of imagination, and as it does so it elicits a sadness ("lonesome, shunned") that prompts the speaker to an almost morbid love of the "calm night," with its "soft grey wings of marsh-owls." In an effective contrast, we then move from these heavily alliterative and densely euphonious lines to the following more quickly flowing lines of the coming of dawn:

Soon, thro' their dew-wet frames, in the live keen  
 freshness of morning,  
 Out of the teeth of the dawn blows back the awakening  
 wind.  
 Then, as the blue day mounts, and the low-shot shafts  
 of the sunlight  
 Glance from the tide to the shore, gossamers jewelled  
 with dew  
 Sparkle and wave, where late sea-spoiling fathoms  
 of drift-net  
 Myriad-meshed, uploomed sombrely over the land.

(Roberts, 11. 45-50)

Again the speaker is imagining, on the basis of his memories; he is not observing. And despite the sense of the dawn's vitality so stirringly evoked here in such phrases as "the live keen freshness of morning," "the awakening wind," despite even the beauty of the description of the dew on the net, the section, as Strong argues, "closes on an ominous image" (Strong, 33). I would assign that line's sombreness, which Strong assigns to "the darker side of the Tantramar landscape," to the speaker's spiritual darkness.

Ultimately, it is unnecessary to distinguish the inner from the outer in "The Tantramar Revisited," for the landscape so vividly described is also necessarily a mental one. Roberts, true to his own argument in "The Poetry of Nature," and to Wordsworth's in "Tintern Abbey," gives a significance to Tantramar nature by passing it through "the alembic of his heart" (Roberts, p. 277). An awareness of the importance of memory in the poem makes us more appreciative of the psychological significance of the landscape. In addition, the speaker's memory is so intrusive as to make it impossible to know where memory ends and observation begins. This blurring of boundaries makes the distinction

invidious. Once this is realized, and once the accuracy of description that Pacey praises in the poem is granted,<sup>11</sup> it becomes evident that there is little difference between the past and the present. The presence of change in the natural world is recognized—indeed, the alternation of day and night, the ebb and flow of the tide, and the cycle of the seasons receive considerable stress in the poem—but there is a principle of permanence amidst this change. Any particular day or season is transient in terms of the course of the year, but the transient moments progress according to an inexorable order. As Ower argues, Roberts' imagery suggests that "at least in nature there is stasis and order amid apparent flux."<sup>12</sup> Relative to man, nature seems to be immutable, or at least less mutable. This contrast is part of Wordsworth's legacy: in "Tintern Abbey" the development occurs in the speaker and his sister, while nature has undergone no significant change during five long years. As in Wordsworth, Roberts' "province is that border-land wherein Nature and the heart of Man act and react upon each other" (Roberts, p. 274).

There is yet a further reason for opening this discussion of "The Tantramar Revisited" with an extended examination of the third section. The reason is that it is imperative to qualify Strong, who argues that "in the fourth stanza the speaker retreats almost desperately to the realm of memory." As has been observed, the speaker has returned, not to say retreated, to memories long before this point. Strong holds that the speaker "is to be frustrated . . . in his wish to retrieve pleasant and happy, timeless and static, memories of the landscape" (Strong, 33). There is in the text no indication that the landscape has changed in any upsetting way. The changes occurring now have all occurred before, and they are not the source of the speaker's frustration, which precedes the poem. "The salt raw scent of the margin" (Roberts, 1. 51), which Strong interprets as the sting of memory, is, like all the other details in the poem, felt in the present and remembered in the past. The speaker's grief is only figured forth in, not caused by, the changing of the seasons. After all, such a change is too gradual to be perceived, although it can be imagined. In the third section, the speaker's mel-

---

11. *Ten Canadian Poets: A Group of Biographical and Critical Essays* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1958), p. 48.

12. "Portraits of the Landscape as Poet: Canadian Nature as Aesthetic Symbol in Three Confederation Writers," rpt. from *Journal of Canadian Studies* (1971) in *Twentieth-Century Essays on Confederation Literature*, ed. and introd. Lorraine McMullen (Ottawa: Tecumseh Press, 1976), p. 148.

ancholy state of mind leads him imaginatively to speed up the seasonal cycle. As Hopkins knew, when we grieve at such a prospect, it is for ourselves that we mourn; "It is the blight man was born for."

This dual temporal frame of reference, this juxtaposition of past and present, and of memory and imaginative perception, is common in Wordsworth's poetry. As Karl Kroeber observes with reference to "Tintern Abbey," "We see . . . the sight of one time (a real prospect or an imagined one) laid over the sight of another time."<sup>13</sup> Wordsworth's mind, like a palimpsest, is twice written-over; his memory keeps the past alive in the present. One major difference between Roberts and Wordsworth resides in their characteristic attitudes towards memory. Wordsworth's greatest joy is that man and nature yet remember the fugitive glories of youth. For Wordsworth, the memory continually interacts with the present, and is therefore dynamic, not fixed and dead. As Kroeber notes, "We believe in Wordsworth's memories because he does not claim that they are unchanging; they, too, are vital."<sup>14</sup> Roberts, on the contrary, frequently regards the memory as more of a curse than a blessing, reminding him as it does of joys that are no longer attainable. "In the Afternoon," another return poem from the *In Divers Tones* volume that is set in the Tantramar region, laments the inevitable intrusion of memory into present joy: "Sweeter than all thy breath of balm / An hour of unremembering calm!" (Roberts, 11. 7-8). His protest is in vain, for the wind that he is addressing brings "all the olden sweetness," but not "The old unmindful peace" of his youth (Roberts, 11. 45-46). An analogous return is the occasion for Roberts' "The Valley of the Winding Water," where a specific death is the source of the speaker's isolation from his beloved landscape. Now the valley "Wears the same light it wore of old," but the speaker's "heart beholds not anything."<sup>15</sup> Lampman's praise of "In the Afternoon" is apposite. That poem, he writes, "is an illustration of Mr. Roberts' most noticeable faculty, the power of investing a bit of vivid landscape description with the musical pathos of some haunting reminiscence or connecting with it a comforting thought, some kindly suggested truth." And as Frye

---

13. Kroeber, *Romantic Landscape Vision: Constable and Wordsworth* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975), p. 32. In Basil Willey, *The Eighteenth-Century Background* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1940; rpt. 1961), p. 279, Willey refers to the "palimpsest" of Wordsworth's memory.

14. Kroeber, p. 22.

15. In *Poems, New Complete Edition* (Boston: L.C. Page and Company, 1907), p. 151.



suggests, it is in a reminiscent and nostalgic vein that Roberts is most convincing.<sup>16</sup>

To return to "The Tantramar Revisited": it should now be obvious that even the opening lines present a mental landscape. The melancholia so palpable in the poem has its source in the speaker, not in the landscape. As has been implied, the speaker's grief is surely not for the flight of summers—they will, after all, return. To understand his grief, we must remember Lampman's warning that "human nature is something more than mere primal nature."<sup>17</sup> The speaker's grief reveals that it is a mixed blessing to be "something more" than nature, for only man is afflicted with the concerns implied in the following lines:

Many and many a sorrow has all but died from remembrance,  
Many a dream of joy fall'n in the shadow of pain.  
Hands of chance and change have marred, or moulded, or broken,  
Busy with spirit or flesh, all I have most adored;  
Even the bosom of Earth is strewn with heavier shadows,—  
Only in these green hills, aslant to the sea, no change!  
(Roberts, 11. 3-8 35)

By calling pain "the shadow" of joy, the speaker points to the inextricable union of the two qualities. When he says, "Even the bosom of Earth is strewn with heavier shadows," we know that he is projecting his own grief onto the landscape. Such is the procedure of the Romantic nature poet, as Roberts argues in "The Poetry of Nature." In Coleridge's words, "we receive but what we give, / And in our life alone does Nature live." Coleridge knows what Roberts' speaker will discover by the end of "The Tantramar Revisited," namely that we "may not hope from outward forms to win / The passion and the life, whose fountains are within."<sup>18</sup> According to these epistemological assumptions, the search for a privileged area beyond "the hands of chance and change" is clearly a doomed one, since the aggrieved speaker will carry the shadow of those destructive hands with him wherever he goes.

---

16. Lampman, "Two Canadian Poets," pp. 35-36; Frye, "Letters in Canada" (1955), rpt. in *Bush Garden*, p. 46.

17. "The Modern School of Poetry in England," in *Archibald Lampman: Selected Prose*, ed. and introd. Barrie Davies (Ottawa: Tecumseh Press, 1975), p. 96.

18. "Dejection: An Ode," in *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. and introd. Elisabeth Schneider (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1951; rpt. 1971), p. 132, 11. 47-48, 45-46.

Thus the melancholy character of Roberts' speaker is well-established in the opening section, and therefore implicit in the rest of the poem. As Pacey's lucid analysis of the structure of "The Tantramar Revisited" acknowledges, Roberts' interest is first and last of a psychological order:

we begin with ten lines in which the poet describes his own emotional situation; then follows the long middle section in which the poet so vividly describes the Tantramar region; and the poem concludes with ten lines which bring us back to the poet.<sup>19</sup>

As is apparent from this quotation, Pacey regards the poem as autobiographical and the speaker as Roberts himself. Reacting against such a view, Jackel suggests that the poem has an ironic speaker. A better interpretation, perhaps, would lie between these extremes. Pacey's emphasis on autobiography does not recognize the skill with which Roberts constructs a speaker to suit his purposes, whatever autobiographical significance those purposes may have. Jackel's suggestion that the speaker is an ironic one is not true to the mode of the poem. A Romantic lyric may of course offer some irony, but only of the type that corrects itself in the course of the poem, simulating the process of a mind in meditation. Jackel rightly argues that "there are contradictions between what the speaker says *about* the landscape and the imagery in which that landscape is presented." Certainly, change is everywhere at work in nature: the houses are "Stained with time," the slopes are constantly "Wind-swept," the shores are vexed by the "Surge and flow of the tides," (Roberts, 11, 12, 14, 18), and so on. Jackel's argument is that the speaker's inability "to recognize that a good deal of what gives the landscape its charm derives from the same process he deplores," combined with Roberts' awareness of the speaker's failure, gives the poem its central irony (Jackel, 49). This interpretation, an extension of Strong's, assumes that the speaker really does deplore nature's mutability, whereas, as we have seen, the opening lines indicate that his dissatisfaction lies elsewhere.

Strong argues that the speaker seeks in vain to find his desired spot of permanence in the Tantramar area:

in the middle stanzas . . . the speaker's comfortable polarities begin seriously to break down and, in the process, seriously to threaten

---

19. *Ten Canadian Poets*, p. 48.

his "darling illusion" as he observes increasingly that the landscape is not entirely light or flat or immune to the forces that exact their toll on the world of Man, that, in fact, Time, bodied forth in cyclical imagery and in the imagery of darkness, operates here too.

(Strong, 32)

The polarities that Strong sees as breaking down in the poem's middle sections—the sections dealing with the Tantramar prospect—do function in this manner in the poem, but in their simplicity these polarities are inadequate fully to explain the poem's sadness. To find that the cycles of time are operative in any specific region is scarcely a revelation. The close inspection of the third section of the poem already given here indicates that the speaker was familiar with this type of change in the past. His memories enable him to describe the net-reels at different times of the day, and to describe their present appearance from a great distance. He knows the setting so well that he does not need to observe it again.

Jackel's argument moves further from Strong's than has been implied. Jackel notes an "increasing insistence on human feeling in the imagery" as the poem progresses, and assigns a "crucial importance" to the fourth section, the description of men working the net-reels:

Here we not only have men at work, we have men who, when their work is done, can return *home*: the human feelings which permeate the landscape reflect the relationship between the marsh country and the people who inhabit it.

This argument is salutary, not only because it recognizes Roberts' psychological interest, but also because it seizes upon the two salient characteristics of the speaker: he is returning to his former home, and the experience is a painful one for him. Jackel notes that "The Tantramar community perpetuates itself through time," a point that, once granted, refutes Strong's notion that the speaker's "darling illusion" involves a static ideal of a changeless community. Nothing in the poem indicates that the community has changed greatly. What has changed, as Jackel notes, is the speaker himself. Formerly a resident, he is now "an alien (this is reinforced by the word 'spy') who can participate in the life of the region only through memory." And Jackel concedes that the speaker achieves this insight by the end of the poem, recognizing his "darling illusion" as the "offspring . . . of his own wishful imagination" (Jackel, 50).

Jackel's argument, however, unlike Strong's, does not explain the puzzling conclusion of the poem. Here the speaker tells us, among other things, that his decision not to descend to the marsh-land is prompted by the need for distance to preserve the "darling illusion":

Yet will I stay my steps and not go down to the marshland,—  
 Muse and recall far off, rather remember than see,—  
 Lest on too close sight I miss the darling illusion,  
 Spy at their task even here the hands of chance and change.  
 (Roberts, 11. 61-64)

If, as Jackel argues, the speaker has already recognized his alienation, how would closer contact with the Tantramar be disruptive? How could it further dispel his illusion, already recognized as "wishful"? And why does the speaker suddenly revert to his fear of "chance and change"? Insofar as Jackel answers these questions, he does so with reference to Roberts' autobiography. This critical procedure is oddly inconsistent with Jackel's stress on the poem's craft, and on its ironic speaker. Strong's article contains the fullest and most provocative response to the poem's conclusion. Citing Eliot's "human kind / Cannot bear very much reality," Strong finds the speaker admitting "the value of and necessity for illusions," particularly the illusion "that there is a corner of past space where there is 'no change' " (Strong, 34). It would be difficult to disagree with this interpretation, for it recognizes the central paradox of the poem: Roberts writes a moving account of a universal nostalgic experience, while simultaneously retaining a critical perspective on nostalgia itself. According to Geoffrey Hartman, "Romanticism at its most profound reveals the depths of enchantments in which we live."<sup>20</sup> As Strong implies, "The Tantramar Revisited" shines a healthy and humane light into those depths. To support his interpretation, Strong might have noticed the poem preceding "The Tantramar Revisited" in the 1886 volume *In Divers Tones*. That poem, the sonnet "Mist," speaks of the "hand compassionate" of mist, a hand that "deludes us to our own delight." Here Roberts does perceive illusions as "darling," in the sense that Strong detects in "The Tantramar Revisited." As the end of "Mist" indicates, however, Roberts could also be highly dubious of our ability to maintain our illusions:

And ah that life, ah that heart and brain  
 Might keep their mist and glamour, not to know

---

20. "Romanticism and Anti-Self-Consciousness," in *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays 1958-1970* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 307.

So soon the disenchantment and the pain!  
But one by one our dear illusions go,  
Stript and cast forth as time's slow wheel revolves.<sup>21</sup>

Whether or not there is a unity beneath the diversity announced in the title of the *In Divers Tones* volume is a subject for another study. In any event, the presence of "Mist" immediately before "The Tantramar Revisited" does serve to strengthen Strong's argument.

There are other and less appreciative interpretations of "The Tantramar Revisited," interpretations which are useful chiefly as foils to Strong, but which may help to clarify Roberts' achievement. For Elizabeth Waterston, the poem's conclusion is unsatisfactory: "This is an ominous note of escapism in a young poet, still only twenty-five, in a young country very much in the process of change." For T.E. Farley, the conclusion shows that "The poet no longer has the will to go back, for the impact of reality upon the ideal would give him too much pain."<sup>22</sup> Waterston and Farley overlook two important dimensions to the poem, namely, that Roberts does candidly and tough-mindedly confront the pain of the impact of reality upon his ideal, and that he does go back to the Tantramar, even if he remains at a distant vantage point. In this way "The Tantramar Revisited" differs from one of its Wordsworthian antecedents, "Yarrow Unvisited," the first and best of the English poet's three poems on the Yarrow river. In this poem, the speaker decides, against his beloved's wish, not to visit the Yarrow, somewhat as Roberts' speaker decides not to go down to the marsh-land. For Wordsworth's speaker, the idea of Yarrow is preferable to the actual river:

"Be Yarrow stream unseen, unknown!  
It must, or we shall rue it:  
We have a vision of our own,  
Ah! why should we undo it?"<sup>23</sup>

This poem is not a great influence on "The Tantramar Revisited," but it does offer an instructive contrast. Roberts' landscape is familiar, not

---

21. *In Divers Tones* (Boston: D. Lothrop and Company, 1886), p. 52.

22. Waterston, *Survey: A Short History of Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Methuen, 1973), p. 84; Farley, *Exiles and Pioneers: Two Visions of Canada's Future 1825-1975* (Ottawa: Borealis Press, 1976), p. 68.

23. In *Poems, Volume I*, ed. and introd. John O. Hayden (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 602, ll. 49-52. Subsequent citations from Wordsworth will be from Hayden's two-volume edition, and will appear parenthetically in the text, with the designation, Wordsworth, preceding the line number.

unvisited, and, as the very title states, that landscape is to some extent revisited.

Tom Marshall is slightly more sensitive than Farley and Waterston to the poignant details of "The Tantramar Revisited." He recognizes the tension in the poem between memory and perception: "Roberts remains aloof from the beloved landscape, attempting to hold it unchanged in his mind." But Marshall does not recognize either that, as we have seen, Roberts' imagery implies his own inability to imagine a static landscape or that the poem's melancholy tone hardly corresponds to a desire to remain aloof. Marshall offers Carman's "Low Tide on Grand Pré," another return poem, as a contrast to "The Tantramar Revisited." In the former, "The landscape is made expressive both of his remembered joy and the grief that followed it"; in the latter, "Roberts holds the landscape of remembered happiness at a distance. He seems to want to be godlike, above the battle."<sup>24</sup> Now it is true that Roberts' speaker is somewhat aloof from the Tantramar, but he is neither triumphant nor godlike is his distance. As the crucial lines that open the conclusion stress, it is this very distance or aloofness that is at the source of his grief:

Yet, as I sit and watch, this present peace of the  
 landscape,—  
 Stranded boats, these reels empty and idle, the hush,  
 One grey hawk slow-wheeling above yon cluster of hay-  
 stacks,—  
 More than the old-time stir this stillness welcomes me  
 home.

(Roberts, 11. 55-58)

The details of this scene—the "stranded boats," the "empty and idle" reels, "the hush," the solitary (and predatory) hawk—are admirably selected to convey a sense of entropic melancholy. The speaker has "peace" and he has "stillness," but it is not for these qualities that he has returned to the Tantramar. These qualities, once again, are both reflective of the speaker's mind and descriptive of the Tantramar. What he misses is "the old-time stir," that last noun referring to internal excitement as well as to external activity. The repetition of "stir" in the next line, and the twofold repetition of "old-time" in the next two lines, reinforce the suggestion that the speaker's lament is more for the loss of his own youth than for the loss of his naive conception of the Tan-

---

24. Marshall, 21, 22.

tramar as a realm of the changeless: "Ah, the old-time stir, how once it stung me with rapture,—/ Old-time sweetness, the winds freighted with honey and salt!" (Roberts, 11. 59-60). He is unable to win renewed vitality from the outward forms of nature because, in Coleridge's words, "the fountains are within." He lacks the answering harmony that can come only from within, where the "hands of chance and change" have indeed had their effect. This lack, of which the speaker is not yet completely conscious, is most noticeably in his memory of how the "old-time stir" once "stung [him] with rapture." Rapture, clearly, was a function of his spirit, not of the landscape. Thus it is possible to find a reason for the conjunction "Yet" which abruptly introduces the last four lines of the poem. If the speaker were to go down to the marsh-land, he would meet the same winds, but, because of his present mood, he would receive no rapture from them. The conjunction signals a contrary mode of argument, according to which the speaker's melancholia is assigned not to the Tantramar, as it has been to this point in the poem, but to his own alienation. His decision not to descend is based, not on the desire for distance, but on a preference for joyous memories of the old time over further and closer perceptions, which would only prolong his grief. The "darling illusion," now recognized as such, is that the landscape of the speaker's youth is somehow uniquely protected from change. By understanding that he had half-created the Tantramar's former sanctity, by accepting responsibility for his changing perceptions of nature, he is able to internalize, and so gain some control over, the forces of "chance and change."

As Keith notes, the poem's concluding phrase—"the hands of chance and change"—by repeating an earlier line, "brings the poem full circle."<sup>25</sup> As Jackel notes, the iambic metre of that phrase, by breaking the poem's metrical norm, "brings the poem to an authoritative conclusion" (Jackel, 45). There is in addition the possibility of an allusion in this phrase. Although "chance and change" is not a sufficiently uncommon phrase to make its presence in "The Tantramar Revisited" a definite allusion,<sup>26</sup> neither is it a hackneyed phrase, and Roberts' artistry in the poem leads one to believe that every phrase has been considered carefully. Therefore, it may be significant that, in light of the poem's

---

25. Charles G.D. Roberts (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1969), p. 50.

26. As J.D. Kneale has informed me, the phrase also occurs in Thomas De Quincey's "The Literature of Knowledge and the Literature of Power"; see *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and Other Writings by Thomas De Quincey*, ed. and introd. Aileen Ward (New York and Scarborough: New American Library, 1966), p. 332.

general debt to Wordsworth, there is a Wordsworthian instance of the phrase "chance and change. It occurs in Canto Seven of *The White Doe of Rylstone*, in a passage describing the spiritual resolution of the heroine, Emily, who carries

inward a serene  
 And perfect sway, through many a thought  
 Of chance and change, that hath been brought  
 To the subjection of a holy  
 Though stern and rigorous, melancholy!  
 (Wordsworth, 11. 1593-97)

If Roberts' use of the phrase qualifies as an allusion, then the contrast between his speaker and Emily would specify the inadequacy of the former. Unlike Emily, whose religious devotion can withstand outrageous fortune, Roberts' speaker submits to a melancholia that, while rigorous, is not holy. Unlike Emily, who can subject thoughts of mutability to more pious thoughts, Roberts' speaker can see only the "hands of chance and change."

It is fortunate that a full understanding of "The Tantramar Revisited" does not depend on so tenuous a link to Wordsworth. Roberts' poem makes an unmistakable generic allusion to "Tintern Abbey," and this context will lead us to a similar conclusion. To confirm the importance of that context, Roberts clearly refers to "Tintern Abbey" at three points in "The Tantramar Revisited": as Bentley observes, Roberts' repeated phrase "Now at this season" (Roberts, 11. 33, 37, 39) recalls Wordsworth's "at this season" (Wordsworth, 1. 12).<sup>27</sup> The "rapture" that Roberts' speaker remembers in the past corresponds to what Wordsworth calls the "dizzy raptures" of "the hour / Of thoughtless youth" (Wordsworth, 11. 85, 89-90). At such a time, writes Wordsworth, the individual "had no need of a remoter charm, / By thought supplied" (Wordsworth, 11. 81-82). In maturity, however, both Wordsworth and Roberts' speakers are disturbed by the "still, sad music of humanity," though their attitudes towards that music differ markedly. Wordsworth is chastened, subdued, and elevated, but Roberts' speaker receives less abundant recompense. And that is the crucial difference between the two poems: Wordsworth can return to a beloved setting without abandoning his other and more human concerns, which are manifested particularly in his speeches to Dorothy; by contrast, Roberts, at this point in his career, cannot resolve his two concerns, the social

---

27. In "Tantramar Space."



and the natural. "The Tantramar Revisited" is thus in a sense a homecoming that is not a homecoming. The speaker's decision not to descend to the marsh-land, far from being escapist, is a courageous rejection of attractions that are merely natural. Romanticism, according to Hartman and others of the Yale school, repeatedly conducts an enquiry into the role played by enchantment in everyday life: "Nature in its childhood or sensuous radiance (Blake's Beulah) exerts an especially deceptive lure."<sup>28</sup> The path leading to that lure is painfully abandoned in "The Tantramar Revisited." So to abandon the childhood view of nature marks an important step in the education of a Romantic poet, and Roberts was, after all, twenty-three when he wrote this poem. The older Roberts would come to a more mature, more religious, and more Wordsworthian position, achieving in *Ave* and in the *Songs of the Common Day* a poetry that offers a fuller consolation for the loss of youth's raptures. Although the Tantramar does not have for the older Roberts the peculiar sanctity that it once seemed to have, and although its apparent glories have to be recognized as psychological projections, Roberts comes to realize that Wordsworth's "light that never was, on sea or land" is nonetheless psychologically real for all that. This light, as Roberts implies in "The Outlook for Literature" (Roberts, p. 262), is not so much a metaphor for delusion as for the modifying effects of the imagination upon external reality. To conclude this discussion of "The Tantramar Revisited," we might paraphrase Roberts' account of Wordsworth, and say that while the poem seems, "at first glance, chiefly descriptive," its vision is actually "occupied not so much with Nature as with the relations between Nature and [Roberts'] inmost self."

*University of Western Ontario*

---

28. Hartman, p. 307.