

CHARLES G. D. ROBERTS: MYSTICAL POET

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 edited by Laurel Boone
 with Dorothy Roberts Leisner

The author of this essay, August Leisner, was born in 1895. He received his BA from Yale University and his MA from Columbia, and in 1929 he was teaching English Literature at Connecticut State College. In 1930, he married the poet Dorothy Roberts, the daughter of Theodore Goodridge Roberts and the niece of Charles G. D. Roberts. Charles G. D. Roberts was extremely fond of his niece, and the high quality of her early poetry was at least partly responsible for his own poetic rebirth in 1925 and 1926. August Leisner was drawn into Roberts' circle of affection, and in 1934 he undertook to apply his critical skills to Roberts' work. Dorothy Roberts Leisner tells how the essay came to be written:

*"My husband, after talking with Uncle Charles, did some writing on his poetry entitled 'Charles G. D. Roberts: Mystical Poet.' We were in Toronto that summer of 1934, after the loss of the Connecticut State College connection to the Depression cutdown. We stayed on in Toronto — except for a short stay in Stamford, Connecticut, when some graduate work was continued at Columbia — and in 1937 my husband proposed what he had written on Charles as a PhD subject for the University of Toronto. The project had been from the outset approved by Professor Pelham Edgar, then head of Graduate Studies at the University, who always admired Charles' poetry, but Professor Edgar retired just before the work was offered. At the meeting referred to in Professor Edgar's letter [see appendix], it was turned down as being only a Canadian subject and therefore too slight for more than an MA thesis. This was in keeping with Canadian university policy at the time, as Professor Desmond Pacey later showed [see "The Study of Canadian Literature," *Journal of Canadian Fiction* 11:2 (Spring, 1973), pp. 67-72]. In later years, my husband was uncertain about his work on Charles because of the way he himself had stressed the mysticism, but I used to argue with him that the current light of science seemed to make this more and more a value, and the poetry (and animal stories) and their beautifully written interpretation more of interest. Although Charles commended the ideas and approach, my husband never took up the work again."*

*Charles G. D. Roberts: Mystical Poet*¹

I

The Aim

To consider Roberts as mystical poet is to consider his central inspiration as poet, for though a poet of more than one vein, the mystical is certainly his richest and most persistent vein and the one in which may be found his most intimate insight into life. It thus behoves the student of his poetry to discover just what this insight is, and to leave for secondary consideration those of his poems which, either because of their subject or the poet's inclination, do not bear upon this insight.

Were one to classify his poems broadly, they would fall, but for miscellaneous pieces, into the following groups: the mystical poems, which include most of the nature poems and many of the love poems; the tragic poems; the classical poems; and the patriotic poems. But because the tragic poems are reciprocally related to the mystical poems, these will have to be considered in the mystical context; and because among the classical poems "Orion" is partly mystical and "The Pipes of Pan" largely so, some reference will have to be made in this context to the classical vein. Classification may be an unsubtle way of handling a poet, but it does serve the purpose of indicating variety, while at the same time suggesting, perhaps, that in those of the poems that cannot be related to the central vein one need scarcely look for the deepest significance. It should be further indicated that next to the mystical the tragic vein is the most abundant and persistent, and that the classical vein, but for one belated exception, was exhausted by the time "Marsyas" was written for *Songs of the Common Day* (1893), and that the patriotic vein found its most significant concentration in *In Divers Tones* (1886). In other words, the classical vein had a relatively short-lived existence, inevitable in the face of an increas-

1. In abridging this 87-page essay, I have followed these principles: Elipsis marks replace only references to nonexistent chapters. All other omitted material is summarized in brackets. Where quotations from Roberts' poems merely illustrate or strengthen a point, they have been omitted, but the line numbers have been inserted in brackets in the text. Line references have also been supplied for quotations long enough to be set off from the text.

The preparation of this essay for publication has been undertaken as an outgrowth of the Roberts Letters Project, which was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the University of New Brunswick. Dorothy Roberts Leisner sent her letters and her husband's letter from Charles G. D. Roberts to the project, and she gave this essay, along with other valuable items, to the Harriet Irving Library Archives at the University of New Brunswick. In addition to her introductory remarks, Mrs. Leisner also supplied the biographical information about her husband and the letter to him from Pelham Edgar.

ingly personal necessity, and the patriotic vein was bound to outlive its urgency once the national consciousness was aroused.

Although the centrality of his mystical vein might be taken for granted, if only because it contains his deepest insight into life, there are poems of his in which he practically indicates the centrality. "The Aim" [SPCP, p 182]² is such a poem, and the more reassuring for having been written at the commencement of middle age, when he could soberly review his achievement of years and only the more strongly reaffirm "the high resolve" because of the known "failures of the inconstant soul." With the self-depreciatory humility that characterizes the mystic in his self-examing moods, he tells us, or rather the divine "Thou," of

The mean achievement, scamped in act,
The high resolve and low result,
The dream that durst not face the fact,
[11. 6-8]

a confession that need not be taken too seriously since most of his poetry is already behind him. But what is most important is that "the high resolve" has been a persistent motive, a continual upreach of desire toward "the Vision and the Height," in which and on which the spirit could be seen and felt to flower in the beauty of supernal grace.

And that "the high resolve" came very early argues strongly for the centrality of the vein. In his first mystical poem, "A Blue Blossom" [O, p. 97], written when he was not yet seventeen, he already tells us of "A glimpse of some celestial dream" that can illumine, though only momentarily and as if by chance, the darkness which must otherwise be his, a darkness tearful and full of groping amid the sounds and symbols of an "ancient tongue" whose meaning is denied him. This, obviously, is the ecstatic vision of the mystic, though still highly fitful and yet to be deciphered, but because the mightiest of spells, making dedication to its meaning inevitable. For it is of the spirit and its destiny that the vision would speak, the spirit else doomed to "a longing vague and dim" in a world whose beauty must remain blank symbol. And yet this poem, it

2. I have supplied page references to *Selected Poetry and Critical Prose: Charles G. D. Roberts*, edited by W. J. Keith (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974), wherever possible, because this is the most easily accessible edition of Roberts' poetry today. The title of this book is abbreviated to SPCP. For poems not included in that edition, I have supplied page references to the book in which they originally appeared, and the titles of those books have also been abbreviated as follows:
Orion, and Other Poems. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1880. O
In Divers Tones. Boston: Lothrop, 1886. DT
Songs of the Common Day, and Ave . . . Toronto: Briggs, 1893. SCD
The Book of the Native. Toronto: Copp Clark, 1896. BN
New York Nocturnes and Other Poems. Boston: Lamson Wolfe, 1898. NN
The Book of the Rose. Boston: Page, 1903. BR
New Poems. London: Constable, 1919. NP
The Iceberg and Other Poems. Toronto: Ryerson, 1934. I

must be said in passing, is less articulate than it should have been, for Roberts' childhood was much richer in realization than he here gives sign of, a failure that must be attributed, perhaps, to the youthful penchant for self-pity in verse even at the expense of fabrication, or to the mystic's usual exaggeration of his plight when in unecstatic mood. But in any case the spell is here that he was destined to make flower into meaning, destined because impelled by the sheer magic of its beauty.

His poem of actual dedication, though in the face of an "unlighted, difficult, misty world" taking the form of a hope "in sore uncertainty," was to come two years later, when he was entering his senior year at college. The reference is to the quasi-confidential "Epistle" addressed to Bliss Carman [SPCP, p. 21]. Surely his choice in this poem of the "one path," the mystical path, with its progressive shining through of "the morning of the world," is the inevitable answer to the commanding vision of his earlier youth, of his childhood in fact, since it is his "childhood's brightest dreams" that "dwell there." "I'd find / Them meeting me, or hastening up behind," he writes, and, as will appear in "Ave!" and other poems, his prediction was a true one. For by "dreams" he would seem to mean here — and he speaks of "Weaving . . . dreams of waves, and skies, and hills" — the beauty that is the destined because eternal flower of life's desire and of which the beauty of nature is the luminous prophet. Thus the enigmatic vision of "A Blue Blossom" is here shown to be yielding its meaning, having become, indeed, the "Peace, and Hope, and Truth" of a religion to whose fullest illumination his poetic power must henceforth be chiefly devoted. Once we realize the religious compulsion of Roberts' mystical vein, which this early poem so definitely establishes, and there can be no doubt of its centrality.

And there is evidence in his first volume of poems, *Orion and Other Poems* (1880), to which the "Epistle" and "A Blue Blossom" belong, that early as was its publication, for Roberts was only twenty at the time, the mystical quest had got appreciably under way. The poet in the "Ballade of the Poet's Thought" [O, p. 50], where is pictured his bitter apprenticeship to the way of the world and the way of poetry, is distinctly a mystical poet, a forest seer in fact, who is denied nothing by "Nature," whether "In waking vision or visioned sleep"; and there can be no doubt that, despite the poem's universal intent, the poet in question is none other than the author. And the introductory poem of the volume, "To the Spirit of Song" [O, p. 9], though ostensibly an address to the Muse of Song, is this poet's impassioned re-dedication to the vision of the ecstasy. "Surely I have felt the spell that lifts asunder / Soul from body, when lips faint and thought is strong," he exclaims, and there is such an intense visual and aural awareness about his inspiration as to confirm this statement. "To the Spirit of Song" is Roberts' first utterly realized mystical poem, and it was fitting that it should have been addressed to the very essence of the vision, to the visible and audible "soul of song."

Although in this first volume the classical vein is uppermost, represented by such poems as "Ariadne" [O, p. 30], "Memnon" [O, p. 60], and "Orion" [SPCP, p. 5], the last and most ambitious of these is, as has been said, partly mystical, a fact which confirms the centrality of the mystical vein. The mystical impulse was so urgent as in this instance to color, even if it could not shape, material as seemingly alien as the classical. It is true that the mythical has something in common with the mystical, a visionary significance, when at its best, which has its roots, very likely, in the religious intimations of a remote past; yet one would have to stretch his imagination somewhat to see in the classical titan the mystic's soul. Though Orion as Roberts pictures him does not as a whole depart from type, he does possess an openness like the poet's own to the mystical language and ministrations of nature. The fearlessness of Orion is thus accounted for — Roberts' favorite virtue, by the way, and centrally rooted in his mysticism [ll. 119-124; 107-113]. But the mystical communion with nature runs parallel to the classical reverence of the traditional type, and seems to have no organic relation to the story as such. A likely explanation is that, being an ardent nature mystic, Roberts would have his titan hero as much like himself as the classical context permitted. On the other hand, it is possible that he was trying out the mystical potentiality of classical myth, here suggested by the titan's primitive closeness to the divine potencies of nature.

And there is more likelihood to the latter alternative than "Orion" would give evidence of, for in "The Pipes of Pan" [SPCP, p.44], a classical poem in his next volume, "the god" Pan is definitely given mystical significance. It is he who through nature grants "a magical gleam of the secret of life" and whose voice teaches "wonderful things." But here again, because the poem is so fundamentally classical the mystical element does not strike one as organically inevitable, and the classical images and connotations along with the divinity of Pan give a somewhat alien lustre to the "gleam." Lovely as the poem is, it is chiefly interesting in this context as showing Roberts' mystical impulse trying to shape classical material to its own ends, and strong enough to conclude the poem in its own way [by telling what happens to mortals who blow on Pan's discarded pipes] [ll. 39-46].

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It has been observed that though in his first volume the classical vein was uppermost, the mystical quest had already got appreciably under way; and there was a spirit of dedication about the mystical poems there, culminating in the impassioned "To the Spirit of Song," that predicted the rapid ascendancy of the quest and his life-long devotion to it. Nor need the title of his next volume of poems, *In Divers Tones* (1886), disconcert us, since, but for some incidental pieces, the volume is made up of the several strains that were mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. It is true the

effect is that of "medley," a fact recognized in the dedicatory rondeau, and so relished as to have dictated a capricious arrangement of the poems; but the mystical quest is here nevertheless and in several instances yielding a high degree of realization. "On the Creek" [SPCP, p. 54] and "The Potato Harvest" [SPCP, p. 58] are already perfect poems of their kind, the one with its soul-free awareness of the paradisaical essences of nature, and the other with its somber vanishing of the homely scene that is yet but the token of a dreamlike eternity; and when we add to these "A Serenade" [SPCP, p. 49], where love is one with the rapture of the moonlit summer night, and "A Breathing Time" [DT, p. 103], where earth is the mother of renewal out of the unnerving distractions of the world, and "Salt" [DT, p. 90], where the sting of the elements but awakens the spirit to its own eternal strength, we find Roberts striking that variety of strings which was to give to his mysticism the depth of harmony. And we already find in some of these poems that homely concreteness which stamps his mysticism with its distinctive native quality. Moreover, from "The Potato Harvest" and a few other sonnets in this volume was to grow his sonnet series "Songs of the Common Day," a series rich in that native quality. And the strong tragic note in the volume, together with the geologic terror of "The Marvellous Work" [DT, p. 60], is predictive of the titanism in his mysticism — as was "Orion" in a less personal way — his spirit having inevitably to struggle up through the grief of passion into a transcendental oneness with fate. Are not "In The Afternoon" [SPCP, p. 40] and "Tantramar Revisited" [SPCP, p. 51] but the tragic precursors of the mystical triumph of "Ave!?" Medley though the volume is, it not only shows a marked advance over the primarily dedicatory poems of the first volume, but through the joint presence of tragic and mystical poems gives palpable promise of that amazing fusion of impassioned titan and celestial child which Roberts as mystic was essentially to be.

This being true of *In Divers Tones*, and it is not surprising that three years later we should find him printing by itself a mystical poem like a bugle-call of triumph. The reference is to *Autochthon* (1889) [SCD, p. 39], that he wished to distribute among his friends, surely to apprise them of a more than ordinary illumination. It represents, in fact, a new peak of realization, — the godlike scope and power of the human spirit, its immanent identity with nature from the vantage-point of transcendence. So no wonder he summons with bugle "from the unseen height, / In cloud and doubt withdrawn": even as he all others must recognize "the omen of God in our blood," "the foreknowledge veiled in our face." The wonder-smitten poet of "To the Spirit of Song" has risen to a titanic height of being, bugle-sure in proclamation and hammer-sure in might. And yet, what is so characteristic of these his titanic moments, he would embrace not only the darkest elements of strife but the white soothing of the snow over the earth asleep and "the infinite gleam of eyes that keep / The post of her

repose." Hence the comprehensive alternation of this poem, and hence, allowing for the dedicatory poem to his dead brother, its initial position in "The Book of the Native," a large group of mystical nature poems, in his selective collected edition, that was offered in affectionate tribute to the spirit of his dead brother. And from *Autochthon* to *Ave!*, one of his greatest mystical poems, the step was not a very long one, needing now only the joint illumination of his love for Shelley and of the reminiscent, yet ever abiding love for the marshes of his childhood.

The occasion for *Ave!* (1892) [SPCP, p. 79] was the centenary of Shelley's birth, yet it is anything but an occasional poem, for there is a sweeping inevitability about it that marks it out as the first great culmination of Roberts' faith. "Autochthon," for all its bugle-sure proclamation, was mainly a statement of his faith, so without the visionary largeness as really "Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart"; but "Ave!" is the actual experience of this largeness. It is, indeed, the surging up of that ecstasy which, having illumined the marshes of his childhood, must needs now pour its fire from the ocean of memory through "every intricate vein" of his spirit, this intent now upon the "speed sublime" of its arrival "on the hills of Time." Such are the Tantramar stanzas of the poem; and the Shelley stanzas are but the repetition of this motif expanded into the progress of a life. And the poem is remarkable for its masterly fusion of the titanic sweep of the spirit with the childlike tenderness of celestial beatitude.

. . . "Ave!" . . . is Roberts' most comprehensive mystical poem and rich therefore in the essentials of his experience and belief; but before passing on to the next volume, reference must be made to the central importance of the Tantramar marshes. Haunt of his childhood and fostering-place of his spirit, they were, when looked upon in memory, to reaffirm the sublimity of his spirit and to lend themselves as the living symbol of this sublimity. It is quite likely, of course, that we get in "Ave!" a more sublime childhood than had really been experienced, a childhood informed now with "the strife / Of tides from the salt sea of human pain / That hiss along the perilous coasts of life," and majestic, therefore, with the "pain supreme"; but that the essential rapture of "Ave!" is rooted in the experience of his childhood, his young spirit bare in that "most holy place," it would scarcely be possible to doubt. In any case, it is the very essence of Roberts' faith that the child or the childlike is alone illumined by "the morning of the world," so that the life-long love of the marshes is essentially his constant hankering after this dawn. But it is a love, too, as of a child for its mother, since the light of this dawn is, after all, the light of love. Hence these beautiful opening stanzas, grandly pathetic with the separation of the years, grandly because only the more mellow with love, a love, indeed, that in the stanzas that follow these lets loose the accumulated light of years [11. 1-20].

The next volume, judging from its being published the year after *Ave!*, must have been composed of poems written in a large part before "Ave!"; and as far as the mystical poems are concerned, this might appear in any case from the tone and structure of many of them. It is the volume — *Songs of the Common Day and Ave!* (1893) — that contains the series of sonnets which, augmented by two sonnets from the next volume, was to claim the title "Songs of the Common Day" in *Poems*, his selective collected edition. This series — through "The Herring Weir" [SPCP, p. 108] under "Sonnets," but excluding "In the Wide Awe and Wisdom of the Night" [SPCP, p. 107] — is largely the continuation of the motif of certain sonnets in *In Divers Tones*, which again appear here. Its design is the rather loose one of grouping together in the order of seasons a number of landscapes with which he was intimately familiar, though, as might be inferred from the introductory poem, he seems to have trusted his mystical vision to give the series the semblance of a deeper unity. But all the sonnets are not informed with this vision, and though it may be that some of the seemingly un-mystical ones are subtly so informed, an evasive subtlety is not characteristic of Roberts at his mystical best. In any case, what is most significant about the series is the frequent embodiment of his vision in the homely natural scene, especially since not a few of the landscapes, with their bleakness or approximate sterility, might otherwise have been deemed intractable from the mystical point of view. Roberts surely here gives evidence of trying to establish his vision in the face of what to others might have brought discouragement, — a most congenial task, in fact, for one so intent upon the spirit's hardy triumph.

And yet, though the hardihood of the spirit is no doubt here — superbly visualized, for instance, in "The Pumpkins in the Corn" [SPCP, p. 104], and superbly vocalized in "The Flight of the Geese" [SPCP, p. 107] — one misses, on the whole, the titanic verve of "Ave!"; allowing for exceptions, there is an idyllism to the tone that points to a less highly energized conception. It is true, of course, that a visionary idyllism is an integral part of his conception as this remains with him throughout his life, but the timbre of this idyllism had to reflect what was most essential to his conception, — the magical fruition of desire sustained by an impassioned titanism. This obviously was an atmosphere very difficult to achieve, and one from which he might humanly have been diverted by the purely rural calm or by the half-dream of a too relaxed leisure, and yet it is perhaps more likely that his chief fault lay at this time in his choice of the descriptive sonnet as medium. His intense glow of spirit seems rather to have demanded the swifter and more lyrical movement of the shorter-lined stanzaic lyric, or the sweeping and paean-like movement of a stanza like that in "Ave!" "The Hermit-Thrush" [SCD, p.63], for instance, which, allowing for "Autochthon" — here reprinted — is the outstanding stanzaic lyric of the mystical kind in this volume, does have that fusion of visionary calm and impassioned verve against which the leisurely development of the sonnet

would generally seem to militate. And Roberts himself seems in the very near future to have realized this, since but for the two sonnets in his next volume that were later added to the series, he was to give up the sonnet as a medium for his vision. What may have attracted him to the descriptive sonnet in the first place — judging from his aptness as artist — was the impressionistic building up of atmosphere it permitted, and natural atmosphere strongly emulative of the celestial was an important part of his aim; but the slowness of the building up process peculiar to the descriptive sonnet must have at last been felt as impeding his intense glow of spirit. And so, though the mystically idyllic sonnets of the series are not without their charm even when of too soft a benignity, Roberts' continued use of the sonnet for the idyllism of his vision might have imperiled its very heart.

On the other hand, that the sonnet could amply and uniquely serve a certain kind of mystical purpose, the three cosmic sonnets in this volume would conclusively show, for the cosmic scene as an object of mystical interest seems actually to gain through a slow building up. In any case, there is an impressiveness about these sonnets that would be hard to imagine in any other form; and what is more important, it is an impressiveness that marks a new mystical note in Roberts . . . Roberts had inevitably to take into account the universe, with its seeming elemental superiority, and not only accentuate the supra-cosmic status of the spirit but develop a titanism amazing in its daring.

In the light of what has been said about *Songs of the Common Day*, *The Book of the Native* (1896), with its glowing lyrical tempo and supra-cosmic depth, was an inevitable sequel. The reference is to the more important poems of the mystical section, but because this section gave the volume its name, these poems must have been regarded by Roberts as most precious. It would seem, in fact, that "The Book of the Native" is his favorite mystical title, as may be gathered from his later adding under this title in *Poems* a number of poems from other volumes; and actually, had he been consistent, he would have added more, at least most of the mystical poems inexplicably among "Miscellaneous Poems" in *Poems*. For "The Book of the Native" is the generic title under which properly belong all of his mystical nature poems exclusive of the purely cosmic. That he means by "the Native" something more than the usual earthly sense is obvious, for he enjoys with the rest of nature a spiritual kinship that is grounded in the divine parent; which is only another way of saying that there is an infinite multitude of spirits all *native* to the divine love by which they are sustained. This is the foundation of his nature mysticism, and thus "The Book of the Native" is of central importance. Though it is hazardous to epitomize Roberts' mystical poems as found together in any one volume, since he seems constantly in search of new facets, each with its own peculiar luster,

there is nevertheless a distinctive essence to most of the mystical poems in this volume when taken together. It is here that he so utterly feels himself to be the earth's child, luminous with the ancient wisdom of his "simple kindred," and it is here that his vistas so naturally open out on a supra-cosmic depth that lifts in aspiration the simple joy of flowers. These are characteristics basic, it is true, to his experience as mystic, but perhaps at no other time in his life had he so distinctly stamped them upon the mould of this experience. And this seems largely to have been owing to the renewal of his faith at this time forced upon him by the cumulative pressure of his disillusionments in the world. He would re-win with finality the glowing flower of the child in the fields of its flower-kindred, again to open out as they on the vast region of a celestial destiny.

It would perhaps be most fruitful to consider the mystical poems of his next volume, *New York Nocturnes and Other Poems* (1898), in the light of his residence in the city of this title, whither he had gone in 1897 to try his literary fortunes. Surely the dominant love strain of the first section of the volume — the "New York Nocturnes" are mostly love poems — is explicable in terms of this residence, for as can be gathered from many of these poems, love was quite necessary in the city as a source of mystical renewal and nourishment. . . . There have been mystical love poems as far back as *In Divers Tones*, of which "A Serenade" [SPCP, p. 49] is a successful instance, but this was a vein, it would seem, that needed for its fullest development the "fume and stress" of a large city. Even in "Moonlight" of *Songs of the Common Day* [p. 37], where "the fifers" of the "amethystine fields" were such helpful messengers of his love, he had already pointed out how "vain" indeed would be "these hungering hearts that strain / Toward the denied fruition of our bliss" were it not that love had "learned of longing to devise / Out of desire and dream our paradise"; and "My Garden" of the nocturnes [p. 18], "in the city's grime," is obviously a much more sorely needed paradise. And if all but one of the love poems in this volume are nocturnes, it is chiefly because, as we learn in "My Garden,"

Only at night the magic doors disclose
Its labyrinths of lavender and rose;
And honeysuckle, white beneath its moon,
Whispers me softly thou are coming soon;
And led by Love's white hand upon my wrist
Beside its glimmering fountains I keep tryst.

[11. 11-16]

Nor is it merely a coincidence that poems dealing mystically with the city itself should also be primarily nocturnes. Although "Twilight on Sixth Avenue" [SPCP, p. 137] is the only poem of this kind in the volume — here reprinted from *The Book of the Native* — there was shortly to be his "On the Elevated Railroad at 110th Street" [SPCP, p. 163], added to "New York Nocturnes" in *Poems*. Now twilight and midnight are the times of these poems, and but for the mystical efficacy of dawn, as in his London lyric "From the High Window of Your Room" [SPCP, p. 190] in

New Poems, these seem to have been the times most conducive in the city to the ultimate dominance of nature, with what this has to say of the spirit's sublimity. And so in the twilight poem there is a progressive trance-change in the crowded, restless, noisy avenue, until

... I walk with the journeying throng
 In such a solitude
 As where a lonely ocean
 Washes a lonely wood.

[11. 17-20]

The great mystical solitude of nature has reasserted itself. And though "the midnight awe" of the city in the second of these poems is said to carry an even "vaster mystery" than "the midnight awe / Of mount, and plain, and sea," it is doubtful whether this mystery is different in kind from the purely natural; for from the meteor-vantage at this point in the train's career there is but a duplication of the star-sown deep, here "Where upper deep and lower deep / Come darkly rim to rim." The "vaster mystery," to be sure, is a highly inscrutable expression, yet one might safely say that "The city's slumbering face" carries no new mystical implications for Roberts, and this for the reason, very likely, that the "ten thousand lamps / In endless row on row" and the "Tall shadow towers with glimmering lights" can at most emulate the stars and eminences of nature, while a crowded humanity in a deep of its own making is not a whit more impressive, if as impressive, than the single soul amid the immensities of nature. This is not Roberts' explicit reasoning here, but it is implicit, I believe, in his or in any nature mysticism. And this is probably the reason for his having written so few mystical poems on the city. "They fly the heedless throngs and traffic of cities," he said in "The Pipes of Pan," and it is unlikely that they of the "charm-struck / Passion for woods and wild life" and "the solitude of the hills" would be long detained by a twilight on Sixth Avenue or even by "the midnight awe" at 110th Street. Yet these poems are valuable as reaffirming the inveterate nature mysticism of this poet, and as showing, too, that a mysticism of the city is at most the reassertion of the spirit in its vast alliance with the sublimity of nature. And enlightening in this connection is his "Brooklyn Bridge." [SPCP, p. 165] in *Poems*, where the highest tribute to this colossal handiwork of man is its successful emulation of the immanent strength and vastness of nature [11, 17-20].

There would remain, of course, the story of the tragedies and sublimities of a humanity forced to work out its destiny in the centre of a nation's business, but this is a story that Roberts fails to tell, perhaps because the struggle to possess his own soul was felt as typical of all destiny. Yet he falls from grace when "In a City Room" [SPCP, p. 142] he can say to the city from the "quiet breast" of his love,

Then even remembrance of your strifes and pains
 Diminishes to a ghost of sorrows gone,
 Remoter than a dream of last year's rains
 Gusty against my window in the dawn.

[11. 9-12]

Though love was quite necessary in the city as a source of mystical renewal and nourishment, nature was to continue as basically the more important source, not merely through such incursions into the city as we have just witnessed but through taking possession of the imagination by way of illuminated memory. Hence the large proportion of mystical nature poems in the other section of the volume, and one of these with a stronger and deeper accent than had hitherto been struck, — as if the city, aggravated by the anguished need of love as recorded in most of the “Nocturnes,” had, through its drab insistence upon blindness, forced the spirit into redoubled effort toward vision. The special reference is to “At Tide Water” [SPCP, p. 152], Roberts’ greatest poem of “crisis,” a kind of experience peculiar to the mystic, at least in degree. . . . The tragic undertone of “Ave!” is here heightened into thunder, while the marshes of “Ave!” are illumined with a terrible splendor that marks a new depth of mystical realization; and it is a depth that perhaps could only have been found by probing through the broken passions of life in a place as alien as a city to “The open Heaven’s unobscured communion.” And that definitive supra-cosmic poem “Beyond the Tops of Time” [SPCP, p. 149], which is also in this volume, may owe its ecstatic thrust to “the white peace” of consummation through the flamboyant curtains of less-inspired desires to the city need of something even more ultimate than the “mastery” of “the great things and the terrible” in “At Tide Water.” Thus in its upshot this volume of urban title shows Roberts to have reached as mystic, through a tumult and “darkness” of unusual intensity, a more utterly grounded impressiveness.

His next volume, *Poems* (1901), being mainly the republication of poems already considered, need only be regarded for the general glimpse it affords, with what confirmation this can yield of the centrality of the mystical vein. As Roberts indicates in his prefatory note, it is the collection of all his verse before the end of 1898 that he wished to preserve, and though this includes, among others, some mystical poems that had not previously appeared in book form and that were written, most probably, since *New York Nocturnes* went to press, these as a group do not call for special comment. But the plan of the book is noteworthy for the confirmation just referred to. In the naming of sections, only those titles have been retained which had carried for Roberts a mystical meaning, that is “Ave!,” “The Book of the Native,” “Songs of the Common Day,” and “New York Nocturnes.” The other sections are perfunctorily named, according to literary type or even more meaninglessly, as if, failing of a mystical title, he was bewildered amidst his variety; and it is unfortunate that he should have buried his cosmic sonnets among “Miscellaneous Sonnets,” and many another fine mystical poem among “Miscellaneous Poems.” Returning to the titles of mystical connotation, “The Book of the Native” is now a considerably expanded book, for a reason already given, and the most thoroughly mystical of the groups; “Songs of the Common Day” has now the sharper definition that was indicated above, though not

all of the sonnets are mystical; and "New York Nocturnes," though likewise not wholly mystical, has had this note accentuated by the addition of several new poems. But in any case, what is important to observe is that these groups are at least mystical to a palpable degree, and along with "Ave!" and the mystical poems imperfectly classified do give the volume its dominant tone. Moreover, this tone is as on purpose established in the very outset, for the first three sections are "Ave!," "The Book of the Native," and "Songs of the Common Day." And even this particular order seems to have been purposeful. Surely, "Ave!" belongs first, being his most comprehensive mystical poem and of so sustained a sweep as to establish panoramically his central motif. And surely "The Book of the Native" belongs second, being a detailed working out of the implications in "Ave!," and because the most consistently mystical of the groups, rightly claiming precedence over "Songs of the Common Day" though the latter had mainly preceded it in time

If *The Book of the Rose* (1903) belongs, like *New York Nocturnes*, to the period of his residence in New York and thus again shows love as a necessary source of mystical inspiration, the city no longer lurks in the background, and the earlier nocturnal shadows have been swallowed up in a veritable blaze of love. The difference may in part be owing to a higher degree of acclimatization, but it is largely owing to a love not as precariously circumstanced as the love of the "Nocturnes," and to a love, moreover, that needed the fire of "all the South" and the flame of "all the mystic East" to express it. Grasping the mystical symbol of the rose, and, for all its tenderness of petal and subtlety of breath, it became within his hands a pulsing thing whose touch "shakes the blood with fire." An electric change seems to have come over Roberts under the influence of this love, and though through it he fully elicits the flamelike essence of the spirit, it would have been a dangerous change had he failed to chasten it. In "the hot, sweet mould" which fed "The Rose's Avatar" [BR, p. 18] and "Attar" [BR, p.29], "The Fear of Love" [SPCP, p. 175], "Invocation" [BR, p. 31], and "The Wisdom of Love" [BR, p. 25] had also to take root [W]hile some of [the Rose poems] bring this [mystic] love into jeopardy, there are others that lift it to new devotional heights, and this through the very danger to which it was exposed.

It is an intriguing question as to what the relation may be between Roberts' impassioned love and his mystical inspiration when not specifically love's, and it is a question which this volume, more than any other, provokes; for as we pass from the Rose poems to the mystical poems of the second part here too is a beauty aglow as with the flame of the Rose. "The Pipers of the Pools" [BR, p. 46] shows the earth literally saturated with desire and at last so pervasively aglow with delight as to make it seem but "one wild blossom / Breathing to the moon." And "The Great and the Little Weavers" [BR, p. 66] is "The high dream" as it were, luminously weaving the eternal pattern of the world. And that curious dedicatory

poem "Lines for an Omar Punch Bowl" [SPCP, p. 180] ripens by way of glowing rose and shining grape into the "ecstatic" consummated clay aflame with the full enchantment of life. Moreover, in the last two of these poems the perpetual reincarnation which the rose symbol carries for Roberts, though with a tragic emphasis in "The Rose of Life" [BR, p. 20], has come to dominate his vision of the spirit, — the weaving iteration of beauty's pattern or the burning iteration of beauty's flame. This conception of rebirth is unusually alluring, nor is it surprising that it should have reached its fruition when his life was so passionately ablaze with love. But to continue with the mystical wealth of the volume. "The Native" [SPCP, p. 176] and "Child of the Infinite" [SPCP, p. 178], though in any case inevitable developments, the one of his enduring kinship with the bleak earth and the other of his mastery of the elements, have so strong an accent of triumph as to suggest having been partly fed by the impassioned triumph of his love. But be the explanation what it will, there is, one feels, a new flaming intensity about these poems; and thus it might be said of this volume, so appropriately named, that in it burns the culminating rose of Roberts' mysticism now that he was passing into middle age, though in "The Iceberg," written in old age, he had yet to bring into focus as with the lens-like power of ice the tremendous light from the heart of fate.

If *New Poems*, published sixteen years after *The Book of the Rose*, is such a paradoxically slender volume, this may largely be owing to its having been written during the period of his most voluminous prose, an illuminating fact in more than one way. Most of its poems are mystical poems, and what can this mean but the insistence of the mystical impulse, be the necessity of prose ever so great? And to the same fact is traceable perhaps — though one might keep in mind what has just been said of *The Book of the Rose* — his failure to have equalled at this time his greatest mystical pieces of earlier volumes. But this volume has, nevertheless, its own interest and its own distinctive charm. When we consider that it covers the interval of his middle years, we might well be curious as to the effect of these years upon the spirit mystical. Surely we should not be surprised to find a resilience of response to "The slow clog of the hours / Leaden upon" the "heel," as in "Wayfarer of Earth" [NP, p. 23]; or, as in "On the Road" [NP, p. 14], the dynamic drive of cumulative vision that enables him to "breast" each new "rise with full hope" though his feet are "travel-worn"; or again, as in "The Summons" [NP, p. 37], the re-arousal of "the sluggish will" by the "torn wild scarlets" of a wind-flamed sunset regnant with prophecy of the trumpet-resounding "deeps." And yet what gives the volume its distinctive charm is not so much this illuminated daring as the now autumnally mellow conviction that the earth, for "the native," is indeed a trustworthy place. Hence the self-castigation in "O Earth, Sufficing All Our Needs" [SPCP, p. 187] for ever having conceived the supracosmos, and hence the angelic transfiguration of the earth's face in the first

of the "Hill Top Songs" [NP, p. 17]; and hence, too, the remarkably immediate though plaintively distant grace of "The Stream" [SPCP, p. 192] on whose banks he had dreamed as a child, and the time-chastened vision of "The Good Earth" [NP, p. 21], warm with the miracle of his "childhood heart." There is, indeed, in such poems as these an even mellow sweetness than had gone before, the autumnal ripeness, as it were, of the child's kinship with the earth, — "perpetual June," perhaps, where "the light sleeps," or, perhaps, the translucent gold of leaves in the late year's eternal sun.

The colorless title of *New Poems* was to be superseded in 1927 by the mystical title *The Vagrant of Time*, for though the new volume has a poem of this name and, among others, a few more mystical poems, the contents of *New Poems* reappear here and dominate the volume. Judging from the small number of poems added and the not over-active occupation with prose since the publication of *New Poems*, Roberts seems no longer to have felt the need of abundant poetic expression; and except for "In the Night Watches" [SPCP, p. 200], which, though tragic in upshot, arrives at its effect through a powerful mystical atmosphere, his mystical inspiration was marking time. But the characteristic fusion of mystical atmosphere and inordinately tormenting passion in the poem just mentioned augurs well for the future, for it may be said to point towards that ultimate resolution of his feelings in "The Iceberg" [SPCP, p. 207]. On the other hand, the title-poem which he seems to be featuring in this volume is a disappointing performance [SPCP, p. 197]. Though its aim is commendable, for he intended a panoramic sweep of his travels in the spirit of the mystic and with due reference to the mystical gleam of his fellow-beings, the result falls short of what might have been expected. Yet even granting a lapse in inspiration, the relative failure may partly be owing to the complexity of the aim, and partly to the fact that it was hazardous for a nature mystic as passionate as Roberts to split his attention between the sublimities of nature and the "storied rivers" or places of the world. If we may use "The Iceberg" as a basis for comparison, the mystical pulse of this poet needed the elemental blood that feeds the body of nature, especially in its most terrible manifestations, so that the pilgrimage of "The Iceberg," as an analogue of his own pilgrimage, is essentially more faithful than the literally circumstantial travels of "The Vagrant of Time." It would seem, in fact, that for Roberts a mystical sublimity is most effectively secured in the sheer medium of nature, by a sort of translation of the human spirit into the grand beauty and tremendous forces of nature. And that he must himself have realized this would certainly appear from his later choice of the iceberg as the avatar of his spirit, the ice-strewn northern seas deluging once and for all the "storied rivers" and places of the world.

It is a momentous fact, and highly significant for his mysticism, that in a volume as late as *The Iceberg and Other Poems* (1934) his tremendous passions should again come to the fore, and, as through a swift recapitulation of a lifetime's griefs and fears and open clashes with fate, loom up ecstatic for a crown of light. The reference is to the title-poem of the volume . . . for there is about this poem a compactly woven texture of meaning that, could one but achieve an insight as impassioned as Roberts' own, should yield the deepest secret of his being. What he is saying here would seem to require all the light his lifelong progress as mystic can throw. . . . [W]e have in this poem his final word on fate as this yearns for adoption by the spirit mystical, — a sublime acceptance of the terrible as being somehow the very groundwork and the frame, and in a sense the very tissue, of the celestial beauty of the spirit.

Although both the shadow and the blinding radiance of "The Iceberg" might be said to eclipse the other mystical poems of this volume, some of them should nevertheless be mentioned by way of rounding off the quest. It is right, surely, that the dedicatory "To the Spirit of Song," which was said to be his first utterly realized mystical poem, should now find its time-mellowed echo in the "Spirit of Beauty" [SPCP, p. 227], like "a far bell calling"; and it is right, too, that the difficulties of the mystical spokesmanship should be admitted, if only indirectly, in that genial twitting of a "Columbus of the spirit" who, dazzled by his discovery, returned with nothing but "babbled strange tidings" when he should obviously have brought back a more substantial token ["To a Certain Mystic," SPCP, p. 230]. And that in the imminent prospect of "the pulseless, senseless dark," "Re-Birth" [I, p. 21] should now assume a circumstantial reality was very much to be expected, especially from one who has always loved "the kindly flesh of man" and who has so consistently made of desire, once the jagged cliffs of passion were scaled, a veritable heaven of enchantment. But the oracle of the heart deserves the last word; and if it is a word "too deep to tell" as we are paradoxically reminded in "Be Quiet, Wind" [I, p. 14], this is as it should be, since the ultimate truth is, after all, the silent spell of an infinite beauty —

You slow drop spilling from the rose —
You, even you, be still.

And thus we may conclude that the mystic task of this poet has been right along the pointing of words towards an "infinite silence."

Even after this cursory survey of Roberts' volumes there can be no doubt as to the abundant persistence of his mystical vein, in itself a token of the vein's centrality; and when we consider that it is the express aim of the mystic to probe life to its deepest roots, it is in this vein that we should expect to find his most intimate insight into life. Of this insight something has already been said, though much too glancingly; obviously, its importance being central it demands both a detailed and organic treatment.

There is the temptation, of course, to leave "the secret of life" as "a magical gleam," since the expositor's touch runs the risk of dulling the gleam; but this would be to shrink from Roberts' own courageous probing and to deny the intensely glowing heart of the secret he found. And so, be the risk what it will, it must be the aim of this essay to arrive at what he found. But by way of preface to this attempt, certain connotations must be precluded that cling to the word *mysticism*, and with historic justification. The reader who is conversant with those mysticisms that represent in their upshot an estrangement from the earthly values of life must be prepared to expect a reversal of this upshot; and he must also be prepared to see the mystical consciousness so at work upon the tragic enigma of life as to illumine the inherent sublimity of this enigma in the very darkness in which the naturalistic viewpoint would engulf it.

As if the fiery essence of his mysticism were not in itself enough to prove that he is no ascetic, he made it a point to expose directly the stifling abnormality of the monastic ideal. "Brother Cuthbert" [DT, p. 33] is the morbidly nervous, self-divided monologue of an old monk who, though incarcerated since his early youth, still feels the pull of life upon him, and who thus would flee the grinning dark of this Christmas Eve, with its "thousand horrors," for the cell of that one of the brothers who, unlike himself, had for a long time known the caressing though potentially damning hand of life. But he finds him asleep; and it is the imagined dream of the sleeper's Christmas joys as husband and father that feeds the vainly rationalized ache of this lonely, self-appointed guest. Though the poem is marred by a strain of sentimentality, which may have been intended, however, as a realistic transcript of the old monk's "maundering," it dramatically condemns the dread of the "dread storms" of life with what these hold, after all, of love. "Brother Cuthbert" belongs among the still youthful poems of *In Divers Tones*, but as late as *The Book of the Rose* Roberts again takes up the theme, only now to render it with the finished excellence of the mature artist. And the pathos of the "body incomplete" of "At the Wayside Shrine" [BR, p. 79] is the more poignant therefor. Without disturbing the serenity of the saint or the assuagement "by such sweet faith" of the praying nun's mistaken grief, and without morbidity or sentimentality, he evokes the utter because nameless ache of incompleteness [11. 1-32].

Direct though this exposure is of the life-denying absurdity of asceticism, it does not provide us with the mystical ground of his romantic assurance; and yet in this lies the real significance of the woeful "emptiness." What, then, is this ground? Or to put the question in such a way as to lead to the distinctive characteristics of his mysticism: What in terms of idea or belief is the essence of this mysticism that would defy not only the constrictive negation of asceticism but the constrictive affirmation of naturalism?

It is the consummation of the romantic values on an eternal basis, or, in other words, the eventual achievement of a divinely perfect beauty by way of the senses and the heart. Thus desire, far from being something to be denied, is the aspiration towards this beauty, and the spirit is the fulfilment of desire or the utter identification with this beauty. Obviously this beauty is not a mere abstraction but the zenith-acme of the sense and feeling values of life, and can be achieved, therefore, only through our first living these values intensely in the bodily flesh of life. It is true, of course, that beauty even so defined still partakes of the ideal, since even the intensest life cannot achieve it wholly; and so the spirit must be conceived as needing liberation from the obstruction inherent in body. As a matter of fact, Roberts seems primarily to be maintaining not the achievement of a new destiny of beauty but the recapture of a lost heritage of beauty made necessary by our strange migration into the region of fate; yet this idea in no way modifies the values of the earthly life. And it is because he was so insistent on these values that for him the problem of fate, with its chainlike frustration and capricious tyranny of chance, was a problem more crucial than for most mystics, a fact which accounts in large measure for the unusual appeal of his solution. Though we hear at times the impatient note of rebellion against fate, this is but an incidental response, for he is never more profound than in his interpretation of fate. Realizing that the romantic values had to be raised above their naturalistic status, that is, from an accidental excrescence in time to a central quintessence in eternity, he discovered that the only way to do this was through fate itself. And so fate is regarded, at the least, as a stimulus and invigorator of desire, and at the most, as the spirit's actual possession by virtue of its filial relation to an immanent god. Given an immanent god, and fate is but the elemental expression of his omnipotence, and hence the token of the very power that can alone ensure the eternal status of the romantic values. Obviously, in the essential oneness of a god there can be no real or ultimate conflict between terrible power and beauty or beauty's equivalent, love; and what is true of a god must be equally true of a spirit filially related to a god.

To be even more explicit, Roberts' mysticism shows a clearly woven pattern of which desire and fate are the warp and woof; or, to change the figure and thus bring expression into closer consonance with the dynamic essence of his mysticism, desire and fate are the crucial protagonists of the temporal scene. As we know only too well, they are, on this level, in conflict with each other, and it is out of this conflict that passion springs and the grief that is incident to passion. From the point of view of the temporal scene it was the resolution of this conflict that Roberts as mystic had to achieve, and he could do this only by raising desire and fate to the infinite degree, since otherwise there would have remained a margin still to be resolved. In other words, desire and fate are the finite degrees or adumbrations of mystical acmes — that is, of the beautiful and the terrible, which must here be allowed to stand for infinite beauty and infinite power — and

they improve as adumbrations in direct ratio to their intensity. Thus Roberts' mysticism is the infinite heightening of reality as we usually know it, and had to be reached by his first feeling the full impulse of desire and the full force of fate and by his ultimately bringing into play an inordinate sense of beauty and an inordinate sense of power. Finally, the fusion of the mystical acmes — peculiar to the liberated, as to the divine, spirit — was to yield his consummated peace, a peace as infinite in its essence as the infinities whose resolutions it is. It should be understood, however, that once given the knowledge of this peace — as through the ecstatic vision of the mystic — and the resultant wisdom that attends the knower could illumine with anticipatory fusion even the temporal contradiction between desire and fate. Such was the illumination implied above when fate was referred to as a stimulus and invigorator of desire. One might run, of course, the whole gamut of fate's invigoration, that is, up an ever-ascending series of anticipatory fusions commensurate with the increasing intensities of desire and fate and culminating in that fusion of the highest degree at the crest of ecstasies which marks the liberated spirit's consummated peace.

That Roberts brings mysticism into the service of the romantic spirit to establish it on a lasting foundation is in itself an impressive performance, but what is even more impressive is that he does this, consciously and deliberately, in the very face of the naturalistic world-view. It was this world-view that had been undermining the faith in the autonomy of the romantic spirit by making of it a mere excrescence and the "Sport of chance's blind derision," and it is doubtful whether anything could have saved it from this tragic indignity of the will-o-the-wisp — granting the possibility of salvation — except a mystical insight into fate. And the insight had to be arrived at not through a comforting blindness to the worst implications of fate but by searching these out with a courageous clarity of vision and beholding them thus in the essential oneness of beauty and power. This is Roberts' supreme achievement: as against the implied indifference or hostility of fate in the naturalistic world-view, he seizes its utmost terror and makes it serve the sublimity of the spirit.

And this was made possible through a happy conjunction of circumstances and temperament. Nourished in his childhood by the "joy impetuous and pain supreme" of the tidal pulse of the Tantramar marshes, and in his young and later manhood by the fateful yet magnificent findings of science, and all the while of a temperament in which fateful passions had inevitably to play about the visionary heart of a child, he had to resolve, if only for his own salvation, the conflict between desire and fate. This, I believe, is the portrait of Roberts' spirit, and it is only a spirit so constituted and circumstanced that could have yielded this peculiarly significant mysticism.

It is true, of course, that his mystical solution was both prompted and aided by his historical position. To speak of saving the romantic values in the face of the world-view of science is to imply a crisis peculiar to a time and to suggest the helpful pressure of such a crisis towards resolution. Nor can a writer live wholly unindebted to those who went before him. He will be, in fact, the further development or the flowering of a tendency, or will at least draw up for his peculiar needs what of the accumulated wisdom of the world he finds most helpful. But the importance of a writer's "influences" if insisted on in the outset may lead one to minimize the personal immediacy of his crisis. . . . Roberts' mysticism [must be considered] as something personal to himself before considering his indebtedness. Only so will [that mysticism] assume the vitality that it had for him, — the infinite zest of exaltation out of the tremendous pressure of his needs. . . .

That his task was not an easy one is scarcely necessary to maintain, since the bringing of the terrible into cardinal alignment with the beautiful is obviously the most difficult of tasks; nor was it accomplished without a struggle. One might reasonably suppose that only a titan could have accomplished it; and it is no exaggeration to say that Roberts has not only proved himself a titan but something more, for he preserved withal the celestial tenderness of his childhood heart. We are confronted, in short, by an amazing fusion of impassioned titan and celestial child, — amazing and yet inevitable if that divinely perfect beauty was to be achieved whose heart, for all its infinite scope, must yet uncurl within its center the flower of most delicate petal.

Ordinarily one might justly object to the lyricism of the self-preoccupied poet who feels impelled to register for the world his inmost throes, but in Roberts' case it is no small part of his gift to us, this allowing us to share his inmost throes, since it is only through sharing these that we can rightly appreciate his triumph. There is no easier road to his mysticism; we must fight as he fought. . . . [We must understand] the full intensity of the struggle by way of preparation for that consummate peace when beauty finds through passion and the grief of passion its oneness with terrible power.

II

In The Shadow of Fate

[In the first 30 pages of Part II, Leisner discusses Roberts' tragic sense and its relation to his mysticism. He begins, "To realize the full intensity of Roberts' struggle toward consummation one must first realize the full intensity of his tragic vein. This follows from the very nature of his mysticism, which had not only to embrace but to heighten life's tragedy in order to transcend

it." *Leisner then discusses Roberts' tragic vein in detail, first concentrating on the love poetry, then on the personal elegies, and then on other poems such as "Tantramar Revisited" (SPCP, p. 51), "Taormina" (SPCP, p. 217), various sonnets, and especially "Ave!" (SPCP, p. 79). He suggests that "had Roberts failed to achieve his mystical vision, he might easily have become the spokesman of 'the caged bright bird, desire' tearing its wings in vain against the bars of a creation in which desire is a fortuitous, or even a fiendishly deliberate, excrement."*

Leisner shows that Roberts uses features of the landscape, particularly the Tantramar marshes and the ebb and flow of the Tantramar itself, to focus or embody his tragic sense. He concludes that "the natural environment of Roberts' most impressionable years . . . was unusually rich in tragic suggestion; but . . . even because it fostered, and perhaps to a large degree determined, his tragic sense, it helped provide the needed basis for the titanic verve of his mysticism." When Roberts extends his tragic sense to the description of individual human lives, Leisner says, "the utter sense of fate that we have felt so far in the lyrical and descriptive pieces unfolds now as that irony of destiny in which the ecstasy of expectation is made to flare against the black wall of the finished doom." In poems such as "Marjory" (NN, p. 68), where Roberts' sense of the tragic is applied to an individual life, the human feelings and the landscape tend to merge, showing not "the sentimentality of the pathetic fallacy" but rather the roots of Roberts' mystical vision.

The animal stories, Leisner says, are also tragic, because they combine "tenderness of feeling" with "the titanic verve of crucial conflict" to produce "kathartic fusion of terror and pity." Mrs. Leisner relates this insight to Joseph Gold's article "The Precious Speck of Life" in Canadian Literature 26 (Autumn, 1965), pp. 22-32.]

. . . [B]eginning with the three animal stories in *Earth's Enigmas* (1896), [Roberts] was to persist tirelessly, through volume after volume of such stories, in presenting the enigma of life's struggle, — an enigma surely and a most tragic one when not informed with his mystical vision, but an enigma that was nevertheless feeding the tremendous desire and power of his mysticism as this was ultimately to emerge in his poem "The Iceberg," and that even in these stories . . . could at least point to its mystical solution.

In his poetry the fullest impact with fate is to be looked for in that species of mystical poem where the course of the spirit is traced — that is, in the pilgrimage poem. Though in the pilgrimage poem the ultimate focus is on the celestial goal, the central, though provisional, interest must lie in the earthly segment of the course, since it is in the temporal conflict that the spirit must succeed in orienting itself if its goal, the consummated peace, is to have any real meaning. And if, in turn, the orientation is to

carry conviction, there must be no dodging of fate in the region of its reputed supremacy; and this least of all for Roberts, whose mysticism so largely depends upon nature and whose scientific knowledge of nature carries so palpably this reputed supremacy. And if we add what looks like a temperamental eagerness for conflict, his eagerness to purchase beauty at the highest price — though this is traceable, also, to the realization that the highest is the only possible price — we might reasonably expect, in his most successful pilgrimage poems, no stinting in fatal portraiture. This being pre-eminently true of “The Iceberg,” it alone would suffice as illustration; yet “Origins” [BN, p. 16], though not successful as a pilgrimage poem, is so peculiarly interesting in this context as to demand being considered too.

What makes “Origins” so peculiarly interesting here is that at the time of its writing Roberts seems to have been so obsessed with the deterministic aspect of the world-view of science as to have cut the spirit off from the possibility of orientation in the temporal conflict. This is how he pictures the earth-span in this poem:

Inexorably decreed
 By the ancestral deed,
 The puppets of our sires,
 We work out blind desires,
 And for our sons ordain
 The blessing or the bane.
 In ignorance we stand
 With fate on either hand
 And question stars and earth
 Of life, and death, and birth.
 With wonder in our eyes
 We scan the kindred skies,
 While through the common grass
 Our atoms mix and pass.
 We feel the sap go free
 When spring comes to the tree;
 And in our blood is stirred
 What warms the brooding bird.
 The vital fire we breathe
 That bud and blade bequeath,
 And strength of native clay
 In our full veins hath sway.

[11. 18-39]

We have here, obviously, some of the more palpable strands of the deterministic view — ancestral determinism, blindness to direction, ignorance as to all ultimates, and a material though vital relationship, inextricably necessary, with the elements and organic things. What saves the picture from utter circumscription is the partial exaltation of “wonder” before “the kindred skies,” and the vital feeling of companionship with the stir and warmth and strength of our living and elemental kindred. Yet these ameliorations remain at most enigmas that but for the mystical sense could

hardly be expected to open out large horizons. And had the verse that introduces this passage been quoted also — “We start, and then are still” — the static effect would have been even more pronounced. What is chiefly wrong with the passage is his failure to have given fate its impressive dynamic character, since without this the active conflict that his mysticism presupposes for the spirit cannot exist. And yet the dynamic character of fate when objectively considered is surely not foreign to the world-view of science. But he was to make amends for this failure, and as with a vengeance, in “The Iceberg,” written, momentarily, in his old age.

Indeed, by the time he came to write “The Iceberg” he was so intent upon the dynamic character of fate as to have deliberately chosen an iceberg for pilgrim. Through the iceberg he could actually reinforce this character, with what tragic power it connotes, by vividly showing the fated in the role of the fateful. It is true that in “Origins” we too are pictured as a fateful power, since while working out our “blind desires” we “for our sons ordain / The blessing or the bane,” just as we in turn were “The puppets of our sires”; but given the iceberg with its tremendous bulk and utterly fate-driven movement, and the fatal consequences of its career, as well as its own doom, could be that much more terrific. And more graphic, too, and therefore more direct in their impact upon our feelings. Nor is it difficult to translate the iceberg’s pilgrimage into the human pilgrimage, with the added advantage of seeing this limned on a gigantic canvas, and in the pigments most congenial to Roberts’ genius, — the elements, that is, with all that these hold of terror. So powerfully has fate been pictured in this poem and with such a wealth of crucially chosen detail as to justify a close examination of this portrait. Moreover, when we consider that it was the blackest darkness of Roberts’ tragic sense that was to yield his brightest illumination — for such must be the ultimate interpretation of this his culminating mystical poem — the close examination is doubly justified.

We are made to feel, to begin with, what it means to be born out of the loins of fate, outraging “With mountainous surge and thunder” in the emergence “the silence of the Arctic sea,” — an assumption of power that at the very moment of birth resounds with calamity. Yet the power assumed is but a fragment of the parents’ power, ominous with the utter cold of space [11. 10-19, 27-44]. Surely in this passage Roberts unveils the utter nakedness of fate, showing it, in the blackness of Polar night, self-illuminated with spectral light or with the silver indifferent serenity of its stark moon.

Having emerged into the fatal void, the iceberg can but “drift south to a remote / And unimagined doom,” though staunch with endurance, its positive heritage, and not unconscious of the inherited majesty of its parent. And it must needs pass fatelike through the swarming hordes of life and death, with their strange disparity of struggle. Coming, as Roberts

does, from his long experience with this struggle in his animal stories, he would extract the essence of this experience for the purpose of this poem, so that we have in this poem the poetically epitomized flower of his long dramatization of the enigmatic doom.

In the full morning of its soaring "white immensity" the iceberg gets its first glimpse of the struggle, — the sheer swarming of life despite the cold, a screaming and cavernous rapacity amidst the translucently frail; and so abundant the pursued and the pursuers that for all its Alp-like bulk the iceberg is literally eclipsed by the scramble [11. 58-73]. And itself the progressive victim of an all-inclusive fate, having by now been shorn of its pinnacles and shrinking swiftly under "The sweet, insidious fingers of the sun," it gets another and more ironic glimpse of the all but ubiquitous struggle, — beauty up-flashing for a moment from the persistent jaws of doom.

I saw the flying-fish
 With silver gleaming
 Flash from the peacock-bosomed wave
 And flicker through an arc of sunlit air
 Back to their element, desperate to elude
 The jaws of the pursuing albacore.
 [11. 210-15]

And even more ironically, it next sees under the innocence of play the ghost-like haunting of the doom.

. . . I saw the dolphin folk at play,
 Their lithe sides iridescent-dyed,
 Unheeding in their speed
 That long grey wraith,
 The shark that followed hungering beneath.
 [11. 218-22]

And in the earlier part of its course it had already got a glimpse of the inherent innocence of life that is yet so inevitably betrayed by life, a betrayal in which man too plays a part.

And so I voyaged on, down the dim parallels,
 Convoyed by fields
 Of countless calving seals
 Mild-featured, innocent-eyed, and unforeknowing
 The doom of the red flenching knives.
 [11. 74-78]

Yet there remain somehow the indestructibly persistent armies of life, directed, as it were, by a vast inscrutable magnet.

. . . I saw a school
 Of porpoise rolling by
 In ranked array,
 Emerging and submerging rhythmically,
 Their blunt black bodies heading all one way
 Until they faded
 In the horizon's dazzling line of light.
 [11. 223-29]

And all the while of course — since destined to be “shouldered . . . aside in brusque disdain” by “a lazing tuna” — the iceberg has been looking, as through the eyes of fate, at the infinite multiplication of its own prospective doom.

As we follow the career of the iceberg — this fate within fate — we become progressively aware of the chief characteristics of fate. One of these is chance. And it is in the very nature of chance that, though a seeming caprice, it is inevitable in its consequences, thrusting these as with a dire irrelevance into the path of an established, unsuspecting sequence. For the iceberg, unlike its “peers,” is capriciously blown from the usual “snare of bergs” into the great aloneness of the “liners’ track,” to move in a world of wondering ships, a beautiful though alien presence potential with fatal power [11. 106-21]. And the added chance of a “black-thick” fog one night makes of the “ghost” a terribly ponderous reality [11. 145-58].

Returning to its fated secrecy in the fatal fog, and we find articulated that strange atmosphere of fate, as of a lurking expectation that is fear gone stoical. Though this poem is so consistently excellent as to discourage selective praise, the passage that carries this atmosphere, with its curious fusion of impenetrability and predictive resonance, is so remarkable an imaginative feat as to tempt one into special mention [11. 122-44].

And now as we observe the iceberg in the moment of its greatest fatefulness, we become aware of that vast impersonality of fate which enables it to undo simultaneously the fateful and the fated, and to engulf as a mere morsel in an all-swallowing silence the collapsing crash and shrieking cry. The iceberg is here shown descending on the already gouged liner [11. 179-89].

And, almost needless to say, fate is a relentless power that will now pursue what remains of the iceberg — its “squat, pale, alien bulk” — to ultimate physical undoing, and this with the greater swiftness for the basking respite in warmer seas. We get a glimpse, as it were, of the autumn of life with its leisurely decline, in which the consciousness must somehow pass resigned from the heyday of mellowness through the indignity of decay to bodily extinction [11. 230-40].

There remains the cosmic scene with its even deeper tragic implications, and Roberts’ momentary misgivings before this scene. For fateful as the earth can undoubtedly be, there is the reassuring because intimate magic of its kindred up-surgings of life, whereas the cosmic scene, at least to the superficial gaze, has an utterly alien impersonality about it. And if we enquire, as Roberts seems to have enquired, into the essential nature of this impersonality, we find, as he seems to have found, that it centers around two very fundamental questions: Are the cosmic bodies mightier than we? or, In view of the extinction of even cosmic bodies what is there to hope for of ultimate might? That Roberts asked himself these questions there can be no doubt; and judging from the tone of some of the poems in which he answered them, there seems to have been a zone to his experience where the cosmos loomed with a menacing intractability.

Apropos of the first of these questions, why in "O Solitary of the Austere Sky" [SPCP, p. 109] and in "Child of the Infinite" [SPCP, p. 178] should he have affirmed his supremacy over cosmic bodies in the spirit of protest unless he had first felt their presumably boasted superiority? In the first of these poems we actually see him struggling up from his misgivings. From the point of view of the Morning Star, he pictures the earth emerging out of "the mists of sleep," — a pitiable picture, the earth "wet" and "grey-visaged" and cold-pinnacled; and he becomes aware of himself as a part of this picture, — a very small, even an "invisible" part. And though he then asserts his ultimate mastery of the onlooking star, he does so with such exclamatory insistence as if his assurance had first labored up over an inhibitory doubt. And the other poem, for all its magnificent realization of his supremacy, seems to have risen out of a similar struggle, as the antithetic alternation in its opening stanza would suggest [11. 1-8]. And this is borne out further along in the poem, where, speaking to the eventually time-spent earth, he indulges in what looks like the over-triumph of a compensating vengeance [11. 39-44].

Apropos of the second question, it appears that the ultimate extinction of cosmic bodies, though by no means subversive of his mysticism, had depressed him at times. Else why the grotesque bravado of "The Wrestler" [BN, p. 117], who impersonates the power of ultimate destruction? It may be that Roberts is having his fling here in the spirit of mere fun, as the cosmic circus-tent and the wrestler-swaggering movement of the poem might suggest; but if there is anything to the psychology of the jest — and he himself tells us in this poem that "the clown's most ribald jest is a tear" — he is blowing off steam of a darker color. This, for instance, is the finale of the poem:

Oh, many a mighty foeman would try a fall with him, —
 Persepolis, and Babylon, and Rome,
 Assyria and Sardis, they see their fame grow dim
 As he tumbles in the dust every dome.
 At last will come an hour when the stars shall feel his power,
 And he shall have his will upon the sun.
 Ere we know what he's about the lights will be put out,
 And the wonder of the show will be undone.
 [11. 25-32]

And it may be, too, that the extremely tender pathos of the "Recessional" [BN, p. 48], where he is so solicitously preoccupied with the tiny ephemera of the earth, is rooted in the inevitable evanescence of even cosmic things, —

Moth and blossom, blade and bee,
 Worlds must go as well as we,
 In the long procession joining
 Mount, and star, and sea.
 [11. 29-32]

Nor are the closing lines of "The Night Sky" [SCD, p. 31], for all the intended reverence of the poem, entirely convincing as resignation before the infinite ground of things. Unless these lines are being misread, they seem to hum with the melancholy iteration of the ever-lapsing cosmic stream:

The ceaseless hum that fills thy sleep unchanging
Is rain of the innumerable years.
Our worlds, our suns, our ages, these but stream
Through thine abiding like a dateless dream.
[11. 11-14]

All in all, then, Roberts' acquaintance with the world-view of science — and it was obviously an intimate acquaintance — had helped to shape or accentuate his tragic sense; so much so as to have forced him to resolve the enigma of fate by melting the terrible in the crucible of his vision. This, it may be, he would have done in any case, but probably with less awareness or distinctness, for it is only out of the world-view of science that fate looms up so unmistakable, — in the Polar-spectral light of its own definition.

Appendix

Leisner submitted Part I of this essay to Roberts himself. This is Roberts' response to it:

The Ernescliffe
April 6/37

Dear August —

Please pardon my delay. I have wanted to study very carefully this remarkable essay of yours, and also to submit it to several friends. Their unanimous opinion, which coincides with my own, is that it stands above criticism.

Academically speaking, — in craftsmanship and style and in orderly development of your thesis, — it is, of course, altogether admirable. This I would confidently expect of any work on which you had fully exercised your powers. But what I am amazed at is your grasp of the whole subject and, above all, your insight. No other critic, great or trivial, has ever seemed to have the slightest inkling of the philosophy which has, however feebly or obscurely, inspired my work from the very beginning. You have unerringly discerned it. I have tried to approach it (my philosophy) from every conceivable angle. And very frequently, because it has always pervaded my life & my very instincts, I have approached it unconsciously. At times, too, I have perhaps more or less deliberately obscured it, by avoiding obvious classifications. And you only have truly understood my wide-ranging Eclecticism. I have never expected to be fully understood in my life-time, — if ever. I had long ago become smilingly reconciled to being partially or totally misunderstood; & I have always been gratefully appreciative of the partial understandings and of the generous praise which I have received. But now, Old Man, I have simply no words to thank you. I feel very humble before this splendid recognition which you have given me. You are *the* interpreter!

How is "Dork" doing; and the new-come son & heir? Give her my warm love. I congratulate you both on the arrival of the boy! And give my best love to Ann. I like her picture, which Fan has shown me, exceedingly.

Ever, dear Old Man,

Your friend & fellow-craftsman
Charles G.D. Roberts

P.S.

I'm inclined to question, (very diffidently), the use of the word "terrible" in the last line of the chapter. "Its oneness with terrible power". Is it not, perhaps, a shade too strong a word, just there? But I'm open to conviction on the point. Perhaps it is *exactly* what you want to say.

Leisner received the following response from Pelham Edgar:

Lac Brulé P.O.
P.Q.
August 2nd [1937]

Dear Mr. Leisner

When your MS. arrived in the middle of May I was under such pressure of work that I could not give it immediate attention. In any event the meetings of the Ph.D. committee had ended for the session.

Since coming here I have carefully read your first chapter. Knowing its subject so intimately as I do I was naturally greatly interested in your material. I cannot venture an opinion as to its acceptibility for a Doctor's thesis. I would gladly recommend it myself, and shall do so when the committee next meets in October. An unfortunate element in the situation is that I am retiring at the end of the session, and could therefore not supervise your work. I may further say that while there is no prejudice here against Canadian poetry, the subject has hitherto been confined to Masters' dissertations. It looks to me as if you may have to put in another year at Columbia, which would of course be taken as the equivalent of a year here. Many thanks for giving me the opportunity of reading your study.

Sincerely yours,
Pelham Edgar

In the end, Leisner wrote about Thomas Hardy for his PhD thesis. After spending the war years preparing army textbooks, he joined the English Department at Pennsylvania State University in 1945, and he continued to teach there until his retirement in 1961. He died on June 23, 1973, without ever returning to his work on Roberts or seeking to publish any of this essay. But time has not altered the insights in "Charles G.D. Roberts: Mystical Poet." Although it was written some fifty years ago, it retains the fresh perceptiveness of all good criticism.