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MEANING AND VALUE IN "LUKE HAVERGAL"

By RONALD MORAN

"LUKE HAVERGAL" is the most widely explicated and in many ways perhaps the least understood of Edwin Arlington Robinson's short poems. Students of Robinson agree generally that it is an exceptionally fine poem, despite their inability to identify the speaker and the two characters of the poem, and their inability to fix upon meaning in the poem. Chard Powers Smith, who calls the poem "the only surely great one of [Robinson's] Harvard period," argues that the poet's references to "Luke Havergal" as "a piece of deliberate degeneration" and as "my comfortable abstraction" are misleading in the characteristic Robinson manner.¹ "Luke Havergal" is certainly more than the two remarks that the poet has to say about it.

Regardless of the apparatus that the critic brings with him in his approach to poetry, there are certain criteria he looks for in his appraisal of the short poem or lyric: seriousness and significance of the subject matter, its embodiment in terms of artistic quality, and the completeness of the poem as a self-sufficient entity, a concrete and unified whole. On these grounds, "Luke Havergal" stands tall. In approaching Robinson's poems, I must agree with Louis Coxe that "all of Robinson's poetry assumes that one will want to find the paraphrasable element the poet has carefully provided."² It is this "paraphrasable element" that has, for the most part, eluded the readers of "Luke Havergal." Robinson is a subtle poet, perhaps the most subtle of major American poets. Unfortunately, his subtlety has been too often confused with obscurity, this charge having been leveled by a number of astute Robinson scholars, including Yvor Winters. In any event, "Luke Havergal" is not at all an

¹ Chard Powers Smith, *Where the Light Falls: A Portrait of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1965), 127.

² Louis Coxe, *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (Minneapolis, 1962), 31.

obscure poem; it is complex, but the poem contains all the necessary keys to understanding. It is my intention first to explain how and what the poem means and secondly to indicate wherein its excellence lies in order to justify its standing of greatness among the lyrics in our language.

"Luke Havergal" is in the form of an address from the speaker, whose identity is not clear at the beginning of the poem, to Luke himself. Apparently, Luke has lost a woman (wife or lover) through death and presently is living a kind of death in life. The speaker first tells Luke to "Go to the western gate"; the remainder of the poem presents a series of arguments through images to convince Luke of the need for him to commit suicide so that he can join his loved one. The western gate is obviously a symbol of death; the sun sets in the west just as life for Luke, according to the speaker, should find a setting down through death.

Richard P. Adams, whose extensive reading of the poem is quite interesting, takes a different position concerning the gate and the ultimate meaning of the poem: "It may be significant, however, that he is instructed to go *to* the gate, not *through* it, and to listen for a call, not to join the caller. There is nothing in the wording of the poem that requires us to regard Luke's death as either imminent or desirable, and I prefer not to."³ I must disagree with Adams here. In the third line of the poem, the speaker tells Luke to wait in the twilight "for what will come." The end of day, it seems only logical to assume, should be equated with the end of life as we know it. Also, in the first stanza the speaker refers to leaves that will whisper to Luke of his lost woman and "some/ Like flying words will strike you as they fall." A falling leaf is a dead leaf; this supports the death motif introduced by the western gate and reinforced by the twilight. As the poem progresses, the idea of death is given

³ Richard P. Adams, "The Failure of Edwin Arlington Robinson," *Tulane Studies in English*, XI (1961), 132. Adams' reading of "Luke Havergal" is based, in part, on the belief that Robinson took seriously to heart Max Nordau's book, *Degeneration*, and that the poem is, in effect, an outgrowth of Robinson's response to the book. Adams cites the poet's letter to Harry de Forest Smith dated December 14, 1895, in which he refers to "Luke Havergal" as "a piece of deliberate degeneration." (*Untriangulated Stars: Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson to Harry de Forest Smith 1890-1905*, ed. Denham Sutcliffe [Cambridge, Mass., 1947], 238.) Robinson was reading Nordau in June of 1895. Adams also cites the October 6, 1895 letter to Smith, in which Robinson says: "I like the red leaves. Red makes me think of *Degeneration*" (*US*, 233).

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additional impetus. Although Adams does not see Luke's death as either "imminent or desirable," he does admit that the poem is about death: "The obvious meaning lies in the evident fact that it is an elegy, a poem about death, or, more precisely, about our attitudes toward death."⁴

The second stanza begins with an emphatic "No," as if the speaker were encountering resistance from Luke. From this point on in the poem, it seems apparent that the speaker is, in effect, replying to questions that Luke is asking him concerning his plight. The "No" is occasioned probably by Luke's implied question: "Is there nothing more for me to live for?" The speaker answers:

No, there is not a dawn in eastern skies
To rift the fiery night that's in your eyes,

which I take to mean that there is no way in which Luke can find peace of mind on earth. The speaker continues:

But there, where western glooms are gathering,
The dark will end the dark, if anything.

The word "gloom" and the suggestive repetition of "dark" are firm indications of the death motif. Ellsworth Barnard agrees that the first "dark" refers to suicide while the second applies to the "deathlike loneliness" of Luke in his present life.⁵

The fifth and sixth lines of the second stanza are the speaker's rebuttal to the Christian argument against self-destruction:

God slays Himself with every leaf that flies,
And hell is more than half of paradise.

In all probability, Luke has offered the Christian argument against suicide, to which the speaker returns that God created everything, including the leaves, and that every natural phenomenon, so to speak, is a part of God; consequently, God is continually killing Himself. And the speaker suggests here the paradox that life can come from death. The life that Luke is forced to lead is worse than what the speaker offers in what purports to be a life after death. Suicide in conventional Christian theology can be punished by an eternal life in hell. To this

⁴ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁵ Ellsworth Barnard, *Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Study* (New York, 1952), 39.

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the speaker answers that either hell is not as bad as it is pictured to be or that hell is at least better than Luke's present life. In the latter reading, "paradise" could refer to the former life that Luke and his love shared together. But it is perhaps out of order to offer this interpretation. It is altogether possible, though, that the speaker's identification can be gleaned from his statement that "hell is more than half of paradise." Perhaps the speaker is Satan or, less dramatically, represents a Satanic point of view. With this in mind, his eagerness to have Luke commit suicide is thus explainable.

The third stanza begins with the speaker's revelation that he has come out of a grave to talk to Luke in order

to quench the kiss
That flames upon your forehead with a glow
That blinds you to the way that you must go.

These lines introduce Luke's second implied objection to committing suicide: "If I kill myself, I will forfeit all sensuous pleasures and experiences of this world." The reading of "Luke Havergal" offered by A. A. Raven has particular application here. His thesis is that Luke "is not contemplating death or suicide; in fact, he is clinging to life in order to preserve its vivid memory of his love By his too vivid memory of the kiss on his brow he has been blinded to the way that he should go. In other words, the way to preserve love is not to struggle against time by living in the past, but to submit oneself to the future, i.e., to have faith."⁶ Adams takes the fifth and sixth lines of the third stanza "to mean that Luke is not to follow his sweetheart into death, but is to take a different way, which will be a better way to preserve the relationship that death has interrupted. . . . It will be bitter and will require faith." It is Adams' belief that Luke "is being urged not to die but to live, and to keep his love alive by accepting the bitter fact that his love is dead."⁷ Despite these arguments I maintain that Luke is being urged to do away with himself and that the poem is structured by Luke's implied objections to suicide. The speaker substitutes being with the woman for whatever physical pleasure Luke might experience on earth: "Yes, there is one way to where she is." The "Yes" indicates once again response to still another

⁶ A. A. Raven, *The Explicator*, III (December 1944), Item 24.

⁷ Adams, 133.

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implied question put forth by Luke: "Is there any way that I can be with her?" The next line — the speaker's solution to Luke's situation — poses an interpretive problem: "Bitter, but one that faith may never miss." The moment of the suicidal act is bitter, but the speaker adds that at least this way is one that "faith," meaning Christianity, would not at all regret eliminating. The speaker's ironic tone gives impetus to his argument against the conventional Christian point of view.

The concluding stanza of "Luke Havergal" is the final stage in the argument for suicide and against any objections that Luke might have to killing himself:

There is the western gate, Luke Havergal,
There are the crimson leaves upon the wall.
Go, for the winds are tearing them away,—
Nor think to riddle the dead words they say,
Nor any more to feel them as they fall;
But go, and if you trust her she will call.
There is the western gate, Luke Havergal—
Luke Havergal.

Here, the speaker is trying to hurry Luke into the act by calling attention to the winds tearing away the leaves and by his injunction not to try to puzzle the meaning of death or to experience the physical sensation of leaves as they fall upon his person. Apparently, Luke is at just the ripe moment for death, and the speaker is afraid that if Luke does not do it now, he never will. He is worried that Luke will intellectualize his situation (i.e., Christianity frowns upon suicide) or that he will enjoy the physical (the speaker tries to dissuade Luke from this in the beginning of the third stanza). He also calls upon Luke's sense of loyalty to the woman by using the word "trust."

There is every reason to suspect that the woman herself committed suicide. This would account for the speaker's interest in Luke and, more importantly, it would account for the obvious fact that Luke will go to hell and that his life in hell will be far from unpleasant. Her self-inflicted death also explains, if the speaker is telling Luke the truth (that he will hear her call), her concurrence in the speaker's arguments.

Perhaps the speaker, who is obviously aligned with death and probably with the spirit of hell, is, in reality, the subconscious mind of Luke, and perhaps the conflict in the poem

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is entirely within Luke's mind. His Christian upbringing and his enjoyment of the physical fact of being on one side clash with his desire to commit suicide, a desire precipitated by the overwhelming sense of grief he feels over the loss of the woman. Whether Robinson wants the reader to believe that the voice out of the grave is death personified, an agent of the devil, the devil himself, or just the manifestation of the workings of one level of Luke's mind, is, in the final analysis, irrelevant. The nature of the arguments offered is not affected by the identity of the speaker. Winters feels that the speaker is the woman; Emery Neff thinks that the speaker is either the woman or Luke talking to himself.⁸ Whoever else, the speaker is certainly not the woman; the context and structure of the poem simply do not allow for that reading.

"Luke Havergal" presents the experience of a man contemplating death. Knowledge of whether or not Luke finally does kill himself is not needed to make the poem any more impressive; what is important is that the poem gives complete knowledge of the factors with which Luke has to contend in this contemplation of death. Unfortunately, this poem has been the object of various misreadings; and despite the arduousness with which Robinson students have approached the poem, "Luke Havergal" at times emerges as anything but the poem which Robinson seems to have intended. Take, for example, this reading by Mathilde M. Parlett: "Luke Havergal has been studying the religions of the East. Failing to find there the answers to his questions, he remembers the arguments of a friend, now dead, who, though himself repelled by dogmatic, institutional Christianity, has found assurance in the example and teachings of Christ. In memory, the friend speaks 'out of a grave.'"⁹ Richard Crowder's reading, or perhaps his lack of such, is another case in point: "this poem should be regarded as an exercise in the manner, say, of the symbolists, not, of course, without serious overtones, but possibly without a great deal of specific meaning."¹⁰

Even though "Luke Havergal" presents some interpretive problems, the experience of the poem is complete and the poem

⁸ Yvor Winters, *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1946), 35; Emery Neff, *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1948), 68.

⁹ Mathilde M. Parlett, *The Explicator*, III (June 1945), Item 57.

¹⁰ Richard Crowder, *The Explicator*, VII (November 1948), Item 15.

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is structured brilliantly. Robinson achieves coherence by the use of a refrain and by the use of a clipped echo in and at the end of each of the four stanzas, by a recurrent pattern of imagery, and by including only that which is absolutely essential to achieving his intended effect: to present an imagined human experience to which a competent reader will respond emotionally. He will recognize and understand the factors working on Luke and, consequently, will have compassion for him.

Each of the four stanzas is composed of seven iambic pentameter lines and an eighth line of iambic dimeter. The eighth line repeats the end of the seventh line, which itself is a repetition of the first line of the stanza:

(1)

Go to the western gate, Luke Havergal—
Luke Havergal.

(2)

No, there is not a dawn in eastern skies—
In eastern skies.

(3)

Out of a grave I come to tell you this—
To tell you this.

(4)

There is the western gate, Luke Havergal—
Luke Havergal.

Through the refrain and clipped echo techniques, Robinson gives the poem a movement which is instrumental in reflecting the ripeness at the moment for Luke to commit suicide.

The use of the color red provides a consistent pattern of imagery along with Robinson's use of leaves, both of which help to unify the poem. In the second line, the "vines cling crimson on the wall," suggesting the season of autumn, another figure of death. And in stanza two, Luke's eyes are described in terms of a "fiery night." The color red also suggests blood; and although there is no mention of the way in which Luke would kill himself, the reader has the right to associate blood with death. Red, too, is the conventional color ascribed to hell: "And hell is more than half of paradise." And, of course, red is the color that describes most appropriately both eastern and western skies. In the third stanza, the speaker has come

to quench the kiss
That flames upon your forehead with a glow
That blinds. . .

Discussing the kiss in terms of "flames" and "glow" provides another example of red used in this pattern of imagery. Once again, the "crimson leaves" are mentioned in the last stanza, providing the final usage of the color red.

The lines quoted for illustration testify to the appropriateness of the language selected by Robinson. Here, in a poem that assuredly treats death, the poet employs only the most concrete of words. It is to his credit and to his readers' pleasure that Robinson does not slip into abstractions in discussing death. At this point, it is interesting to note that most of the words in "Luke Havergal" consist of only one or two syllables. As a rule, Robinson's successes are poems in which words of more than two syllables are kept to a minimum.

The attitude expressed by the speaker is certainly not the one held by the majority of readers as they experience "Luke Havergal." And perhaps one could argue that this is Robinson's attitude, though I think that this would be an injustice to the poet, not because of what is said, but because the dominant attitude in a poem does not necessarily have to reflect the poet's beliefs. In any event, "Luke Havergal" provides a good testing ground for the problem of belief and acceptance. It underscores the point that it is unnecessary for the reader to share the attitude of the poem in order to judge the poem as valuable.



E. A. ROBINSON'S "ANNANDALE" POEMS

By CHARLES V. GENTHE

IN their examination of the poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson, critics have neglected the influence of Molière on the New England poet, and have thus missed the full implications of the "Annandale" trilogy. Robinson's often anthologized sonnet, "How Annandale Went Out" is commonly interpreted as a doctor's narrative on his own act of euthanasia.¹ Robinson, in fact,

¹ See, for example, Ben Ray Redman, *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1926), 58; Ellsworth Barnard, *Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Study* (New York, 1952), 177; Emery Neff, *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1948), 155.