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"Enduring to the End": Edwin Arlington Robinson's "Mr. Flood's Party"

by WILLIAM V. DAVIS

IN DEALING with Edwin Arlington Robinson's poem "Mr. Flood's Party," critics have invariably glossed the reference to Roland in the third stanza as an allusion to the twelfth-century romance, the *Chanson de Roland*. A typical analysis of the allusion in the poem is that given by E. Sydnor Ownbey.¹ More recently, Thomas S. Brasher, following the suggestion of Wallace L. Anderson, has explored a possible additional reference to Browning's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came."² Clearly, both allusions, to the *Chanson* and to the Browning poem, are significant in terms of a full understanding of the theme of Robinson's poem. Indeed, it seems reasonable that Robinson had both sources in mind.³

There are, however, several other allusions in the poem which, to my knowledge, have not been bothered with but which seem as thematically suggestive as the variously interpreted allusions to Roland and Browning. I refer to the twice mentioned allusion to Robert Burns's song "Auld Lang Syne" (ll. 42, 49) and to the phrase "enduring to the end" (l. 17). Furthermore, these two allusions are interrelated.

First, the fact that the Burns song is mentioned twice fits in with the other "doublings" in the Robinson poem: the double nature of Flood's character; the metaphor of the jug as "sleeping child" (ll. 25-29); the "two moons" (l. 47); the parallel with one, or both, Rolands already mentioned. Clearly, the theme of the Burns poem haunts the theme of the Robinson poem.

But beyond the thematic suggestion which the Burns poem gives to

1. E. Sydnor Ownbey, "Robinson's 'Mr. Flood's Party,'" *The Explicator* 8: Item 47.

2. Thomas S. Brasher, "Robinson's 'Mr. Flood's Party,'" *The Explicator* 29: Item 45; Wallace L. Anderson, *Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Introduction* (Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 111.

3. It seems equally clear that both Robinson and Mr. Flood are referring to the *Rubáiyát* of Omar Khayyám when we read "The bird is on the wing," (l. 11) This allusion, like the one to the *Chanson*, is regularly noted in glosses. What often goes unnoticed, however, is that the "Bird of Time" (l. 27 of the *Rubáiyát*) which is one vehicle for the *carpe diem* philosophy of the *Rubáiyát*, is extended and given an ironic twist by Robinson's further parallel between Khayyám's "Sev'n-ringed Cup" (l. 18) and Flood's lowly "jug," which enables Flood not only to foretell the future (which was the prime purpose of the cup of Jamshyd, invented for him for that express purpose by Kal-Kosru), but, as well, permits him to understand his place in terms of the past. Flood's "Winter-garment of Repentance" (l. 28 of the *Rubáiyát*) is history-haunted more than future oriented. Only ironically is Flood's jug a "Cup that clears / Today of past Regret and future Fears" (ll. 81-82 of the *Rubáiyát*).

the Robinson poem *via* the overt allusion to it, there are several additional details which need to be noted. Burns's reference to a "cup o' kindness," which serves as a part of the refrain to his poem, is repeated, doubled, in the second regular stanza of the poem. This "doubling," in one of Robinson's sources, may well have suggested to him not only the doubling device he uses throughout his poem, but, as well, the possibility of a double allusion which could work both ways at once, as the Roland allusion does. Further, the question which the Burns poem asks, "Should auld acquaintance be forgot, / And never brought to mind?"⁴ is the question which Mr. Flood himself ponders. Finally, the final stanza of Burns's poem suggests the same kind of meeting between friends which Flood, alone and lonely, "forgot," has with himself over his own private "cup o' kindness," now his only "jo."

Secondly, the reference to the expression "enduring to the end" (l. 17), is, Anderson suggests, an allusion to Jesus's words in *Matthew* 10:22: "He that endureth to the end shall be saved."⁵ Anderson argues this since, according to Browning, this phrase expressed the theme of his "Childe Roland." On the one hand, it seems as if Anderson has taken a happy accident, his discovery of Browning's remark, coupled it with a possible reference to "Roland," and made of it a necessity. On the other hand, if the reference to Jesus's words in *Matthew* 10:22 is apt, then is it not also possible, however ironic, to see in Robinson's use of Burns's "cup o' kindness" a further allusion to Jesus's words in *Matthew* 26:39: "if it be possible, let this cup pass from me"; thus joining two Biblical allusions, just as everything else in the poem has been joined and doubled? However, in the context of both the *Chanson* and "Childe Roland," would it not be even more to the point to note Ezekiel's oracle of the cup of wrath, a "cup of horror and desolation" (*Ezekiel* 23:33) which Jesus's words clearly echo?

Whatever else is true of this poem, it is certainly the case that among the many poems in which Edwin Arlington Robinson detailed "those intimate expressions of the bereavement and the loneliness of old age which are among his characteristic contributions to poetry,"⁶ none is more graphic, more fully-realized, than "Mr. Flood's Party."

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4. *The Complete Poetical Works of Robert Burns* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1897), p. 251.

5. Anderson, *Edwin Arlington Robinson*, p. 111.

6. Emery Neff, *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York: William Sloan Associates, 1948), p. 86.