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Two Robinson Revisions: "Mr. Flood's Party" and "The Dark Hills"

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The study of a large group of manuscript poems by Edwin Arlington Robinson with emphasis upon his techniques of revision gives rise to two general observations: First, one is struck by the relative paucity of revisions. The majority of Robinson's lines are set down in manuscript in what eventuates as the final form; so that most often a revision consists merely of excision of a line or a short group of lines. It is as though the lines have been long meditated before being written down, and once written, like the man Flammonde, they "came and stayed." Second, when Robinson does make changes, he characteristically moves toward greater logical and metaphorical unity, a more sensuous and flexible rhythmic movement, and greater universality. In a character portrayal, details tend to become more tightly integrated, to create a stronger confirmation of the character.

Two poems which reveal such aesthetic gains through revision are "Mr. Flood's Party" and "The Dark Hills." In their final form, both poems are among Robinson's most expert utterances. In both poems, however, the refinement achieved by revision is striking. This improvement can be closely traced by comparing the final versions with the original manuscript versions. I wish then to examine in "Mr. Flood's Party" the final stanza, which shows major revision, and in "The Dark Hills" the final four lines, both for the intrinsic interest, and to attempt to define and evaluate the nature of the revisions.

In the final printed version of "Mr. Flood's Party," appearing in the volume Avon's Harvest (1921), the last stanza is as follows:

"For auld lang syne." The weary throat gave out,
The last word wavered, and the song was done.
He raised again the jug regretfully
And shook his head, and was again alone.
There was not much that was ahead of him,
And there was nothing in the town below
Where strangers would have shut the many doors
That many friends had opened long ago.

In the autograph manuscript version we read:

"For auld lang syne."—The weary throat gave out;
The last word perished, and the song was done.
He raised again the jug regretfully,
And without malice would have ambled on;
But hearing in the bushes a new sound,
He smote with new profanity the cause,
And shook an aged unavailing fist
At an inhuman barrage of applause.

In comparing the two versions, we note at once that the
manuscript version creates a dichotomy in the character of Mr.
Flood. To define this, it is necessary to examine in some de­
tail the revised version. I do not, however, propose a com­
plete reading of the poem, but merely enough to make my
points with regard to the effects created by the original last
stanza and its revision.

In the printed version, Mr. Flood is all of a piece. Through
Robinson's careful assembling of details Mr. Flood emerges
as an old man of some quality. Robinson has handled him
with great tenderness, but with dramatic objectivity, and al­
ways with a balancing humor—the touch of the two moons,
for instance, and the Dickensian echo of his name, which sug­
gests his proclivity toward a fluid intake. The total character­
ization is that of a rather shrewd old man, who is perfectly
aware of his situation in life and of the fact that those who
outlive their contemporaries face isolation and loneliness. But
this aspect of experience is neither personalized nor sentiment­
alized. Mr. Flood is philosopher enough not only to quote
Omar Khayyam, but also to accept the fact that if “the bird
is on the wing,” this is a normal activity for a bird, even the
bird of Time (or perhaps especially the bird of Time.) In
the face of the natural evanescence of life, he enacts his am­
bivalent (because both amusing and pathetic) little “double­
dialogue,” standing in the middle of his lonely road, and en­
during his “valiant armour of scarred hopes outworn” without
complaint or self-pity. Indeed, Robinson elevates him in dignity and endurance and valor with the simile of Roland's ghost winding his silent horn. The connotations of Roland's ghost recall to us the legend of a gallant knight who, in the face of overwhelming odds, fights his good fight even unto the end. This allusion to the mythic hero carries a double value: First, by the allusion to Roland, Robinson suggests Mr. Flood as another brave warrior, also doomed (as are we all) by overwhelming odds—here the inevitable conflict with Time; Second, through a modern connotation of the analogous heroic "myth," Mr. Flood appears as a kind of archetypal figure, as the straitened circumstances of his life in his "forsaken upland hermitage" convey to us the familiar and perennial pathos of old age in a world which has passed it by.

Nevertheless, Mr. Flood can still sing, and sing he does; though he chooses of all songs the one best calculated to suggest, by inference, not only the quality of his own physical and psychological worlds, but, as we grow older, of all of our pasts. (Perhaps nothing in the poem so directly and emotionally involves the reader as the choice of this song.) But Mr. Flood, despite his name and context, is far from being just a laughter-provoking old inebriate. When the song ends and the magic jug is empty, (magic, because for the nonce it has filled the hour with the joys of another time) he merely shakes his head and is "again alone." We imagine him readjusting to a world of only one moon, and trudging along up the hill to the solitary dwelling that "holds as much as he should ever know/ On earth again of home." So he vanishes from our sight, but not from our memory; for his image remains, to contribute its modest moment to the perennial drama of lonely old age.

This seems to me something of the total effect of the final version. We sense no blurring of the focus, no inconsistency in the characterization, no wavering in the tonal control, even in the moments of greatest humor or pathos.

In the manuscript version, however, Mr. Flood is cheapened and vulgarized. And speaking generally, the last five lines introduce a new and inconsistent quality: suddenly Mr. Flood reacts to "an inhuman barrage of applause" with malice, profanity, and an "aged unavailing fist." Since there is only one
other minor change in the rest of the poem (to be noted later), Mr. Flood’s rather violent response to his external environment comes not only as a surprise, but requires a quick and unsupported shift in our perspective. After the composite which has been built up in all the rest of the poem, “malice” strikes a false note. We are left with the feeling that he is not as gallant as he had appeared; that, indeed, he is rather a bad-tempered old man, after all; or perhaps he is reacting with the irritability which may accompany a state of seeing two moons where there is only one, and if so, this also seems inconsistent with the previously-established characterization.

The details of the revision are likewise informative. In the second line of the last stanza, the original “perished” is refined into “wavered.” The change replaces a mere predication of fact with a term which is aurally descriptive, and which thus reinforces our visual image of Mr. Flood as he lifts in the moonlight the uncertain voice of old age and even perhaps of a momentary loss of control (whether because of sentiment, alcohol, or both). In the last four manuscript lines, the “new sound” in the bushes alters both the nature and the effect of the setting (“the road was his, with not a native near”). Up to this time, we have responded sympathetically to the little scene on the unfrequented road, and the very loneliness has contributed to the emotional interest. But was someone here all the time? The “inhuman” is confusing. Is the audience bird, beast, or man? Or does “inhuman” (synonym, unfeeling?) merely qualify the applause as that of some unsuspected human bystander, who has been there all along, and who now adds a jeering coda to Mr. Flood’s lyrical testimony? We do not know. The last line raises some distracting and detracting questions which, however answered, largely undo the integrity of characterization which has thus far been achieved.

Thus we can see that Robinson’s fortunate revision of the last stanza confirms the previous careful characterization of the rest of the poem, eliminating any possible dichotomy—an important function for the last stanza. The revision also reaffirms the accumulated pathos of Mr. Flood’s present life, with the simple flat statement that doors once opened to him by friends are now closed by strangers. Since this may be a common experience on returning, after a lapse of time, to any
place where one has once had ties, the poem thus closes on a note of universality made the more poignant by the very undramatic quality of the final statement. In the manuscript version this universal note does not appear. The emotion and the situation are individualized and specific, hence limited.

"The Dark Hills," a completely different kind of poem, is surely one of Robinson’s most effective lyrics. It is not accidental that at least six composers have set it to music, for musicality is perhaps its dominant quality. Through rhythm, imagery, and phonematic effects, it creates, sustains, and rounds out a mood that—brief as it is, like certain enchanted moments of a sunset—achieves a specific emotional tone. I quote first the printed version:

Dark hills at evening in the west,
Where sunset hovers like a sound
Of golden horns that sang to rest
Old bones of warriors underground,
Far now from all the banded ways
Where flash the legions of the sun,
You fade—as if the last of days
Were fading, and all wars were done.

The autograph manuscript version reads as follows:

Dark hills at evening in the west
Where sunset hovers like a sound
Of golden horns that sang to rest
Old bones of warriors underground,

No other stillness have I found
Where Time stays listening as in yours,
And hears the quivering world go round
With all its engine-shaken floors.

Again, we begin our analysis with the printed version. Obvious is the merging of the original two stanzas into one. This binds the two quatrains into one visual and emotional unit. The merging is also an improvement in logic, for the manuscript version presents a diversity of subject: emphasis upon the dark hills moves to the poet himself, and then to Time. The revision presents one subject and one emphasis—the Dark

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3 In *The Three Taverns* (1920).
Hills—as they are absorbed, in their eternality and remoteness and mystery, by the oncoming darkness.

Of course in both versions the first quatrains are identical. They present the basic situation, the contrast between the oncoming darkness and the sunset light, which is imaged as “golden horns” playing a sort of Taps for the long-buried warriors. The simile of the horns introduces into the visual effect an aural image, thereby doubling the sense response. But in the manuscript version the second quatrain introduces a logical contradiction into the situation presented in the first quatrain: the sunset, first imaged as golden horns, now becomes a “stillness.” Further, Time listens, and hears—not a Pythagorean music, but a world quivering to modern machinery—engines, guns, planes, or perhaps even the sound of an elevator moving up and down in a modern apartment or office building. Thus, in the second quatrain of the manuscript version, the fine remoteness invoked by the bones of buried warriors is destroyed by the jangle of a mechanized world. “Engine-shaken floors” is too mundane and too immediate in the context already established. In the revision, however, the resources implicit in the warrior image are appropriately developed in “the b annered ways” and “the legions of the sun” (we think immediately of the long-vanished Roman legions). This “spreading” of the warrior-image thus creates a stricter logical and metaphorical unity. In addition, it creates a sense of universality: the sunset upon the hills no longer suggests a specific modern world, but rather produces a sense of generality, which contributes to the timeless and mysterious qualities of the dark hills.

In addition to the above improvements, the revision is also marked by an intensification of the tone-quality. This intensification is created by the phonematic patterns, the syntax, and the metric.

First, with regard to the phonematic patterns, we note a suggestive movement from front to back in the articulatory gesture, produced by the back and front vowels, as in dark, hills, sunset, sound, bones, old, evening, west, rest, sang, ways, le-

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5 In both senses of the word tone: the “feeling” quality of the poem, which is contemplative, gently melancholy; and literally, with regard to the aural quality.

gions, fade, done. This movement intuitively suggests the movement of the sun across the heavens, and the attendant changes from light to darkness as the crimson and gold of the sunset fade into night. Further, the recurrence of back vowels as in golden, horns, old, bones, warriors, intuitively suggests both the spatial aspects and a sense of remoteness in the physical situation out of which the poem arises. In addition, each of the first four lines ends with the consonants t or d, or alternating voiceless and voiced stops, suggesting through the closure of the mutes the end of the day; while the last four lines of the revision end with s, sounding as z, and n, the latter group being continuants or movement phonemes. Thus in terms of its phonematic content, the octet as a whole gives the sense first of closure, which then suggests the end of the day and the remoteness of the past, then of a sense of movement, of daylight activity and the present. The phonematic content thus reinforces the ideational content. In the original version, however, only two lines of the eight, lines 6 and 8, carry a movement aspect in the voiced s. This creates an “overbalance” of stopped phonemes, which gives undue prominence to the “night” aspect. After all, sunset is not yet night, and it is, on the contrary, the very brilliance of the colors which attracts the poet’s attention.

Syntactically, the long expansive apostrophe beginning “Dark hills . . . ” is in itself an intuitive delineation of the gradual waning of the day into night. Analysis of the structure reveals that the entire poem is composed of one sentence, dividing into the apostrophe (first four lines) and the main clause (last four lines). The apostrophe contains 25 words, composing two adjective clauses, 5 prepositional phrases, 6 single-word modifiers. The main clause contains 29 words (an almost even balance), and includes 3 prepositional phrases, 1 adjective clause, 2 adverbial clauses, 6 single-word modifiers, and one conjunction. The entire poem thus contains 13 subordinate clauses and phrases. To diagram the finished version is to see that the apostrophe appears as a series of descending “steps.” This pattern is balanced by the main clause, which is modified by another series of phrases and clauses. The measured “dropping” and suspensory effect of all the modifying constructions graphically suggests the slow
but progressive dropping of the sun behind the horizon, as the division of the sentence into two main parts echoes the two main elements of the poem, light and darkness. The first version, however, presents in the last quatrain simply an independent clause modified by an adjective clause with a compound predicate. Here, in the first version, the descending effect of the second version is almost entirely absent.

In the revised version the metrical quality, which is dependent upon the syntax, is also superior to the original. In the original version, lines 5, 6, 7, and 8 are end-stopped. But in the revision, line 7 is run-on, and the caesural pause occurs after the first foot, while in line 8, it occurs in the middle of the second foot. This rhythmical variation in the revision delicately relieves a possibly monotony in the metrical beat, while still allowing the underlying beat to echo in its regularity the steady dropping of the sun.

Thus, again, as in “Mr. Flood’s Party,” close analysis has revealed some of the aesthetic principles that govern Robinson’s art. These include emphasis upon logical and metaphorical unity, phonematic symbolism, and syntactical and rhythmical appropriateness.

A study of a poet’s revisions often does little more than provoke one’s casual interest. Seldom does a revision lock into place with the inevitability which, for instance, marks Poe’s famous revision of

To the beauty of old Greece
And the grandeur of old Rome

into

To the glory that was Greece,
And the grandeur that was Rome

But Robinson’s revisions here create something of that same sense of inevitability. To study such representative efforts allows us to see Robinson in the process of achieving that fine craftsmanship for which he has long been noted, but which, because of its very apparent naturalness and unobtrusive finish, may too easily be overlooked.