

Colby



Colby Quarterly

Volume 9
Issue 7 *September*

Article 5

September 1971

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Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 9, no.7, September 1971, p.367-374

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"NO, THERE IS NOT A DAWN . . ."

By BERTRAND F. RICHARDS

The poem "Luke Havergal" by Edwin Arlington Robinson contains many subtleties which are perplexing. No doubt many people might read this poem with pleasure and derive a satisfying meaning from it, paying little or no attention to those elements within it which puzzle one who reads in depth. Such reading is perfectly legitimate and an excellent way of approaching many poems. However, the one who delves deeper will find much to tantalize him; perhaps the enigmatical repetition of the name *Luke Havergal* throughout the poem; perhaps the seemingly shifting speakership apparent in the poem; perhaps, most perplexing of all, the riddle of the line, "Out of a grave I come to tell you this."

That the intricacies involved in this poem are many-faceted has been indicated. To attempt to resolve some of these and to arrive at meaning (one- or several-leveled) which will possess significance, and which can be justified from the poem itself seems a worthy purpose. Only such extraneous material as the titles of a limited number of other poems by Robinson will be needed to achieve an understanding of the poem.

"Luke Havergal" at first glance would almost certainly be identified with that group of poems which are psychological portraits of such men as Flammonde, Miniver Cheevy, Richard Cory, Cliff Klingenhagen, Bewick Finzer, and Annandale. But this poem is not a psychological portrait: still, it possesses an insight which is more deeply psychological than that of any of the others mentioned. In this connection there would be no point in bringing up these titles other than the fact that each reveals a most uncanny aptness which contributes to the total effect of the poem. That such aptness is peculiarly possessed by the name, *Luke Havergal*, is of paramount importance since the name is not only the title of the poem, but is twice repeated in the first and last stanzas.

It is necessary to state here that there is no intention of facetiousness in this discussion of Robinson's employment of puns in the names he selects to title his poems. Consider what the poet seems to have done in his title, "Miniver Cheevy." *Miniver* is almost assuredly a pun on *Minerva*. *Minerva* is the Greek

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goddess of wisdom and seems with ironic intent to reveal the unwisdom possessed by Miniver. *Cheevy*, in like manner, seems a pun on the word *achievement*, but again, the pun signifies the negation rather than the affirmation of achievement. Miniver, the unwise, is also he who achieves nothing. Similar anachronisms may easily be discerned in the other names mentioned; these titles all possess a grim sardonicism, not devoid of a wry humor. Furthermore, they all evince a colloquial flavor, a twang not usually associated with poetic diction. What, then, can be deduced from the title, "Luke Havergal"?

There are two significances which can be attached to *Luke*. First, there is that of reference to St. Luke, the physician. This allusion immediately brings to mind the admonition quoted in *Luke* 4:23, "Physician, heal thyself." Both the idea of *physician* and of the exhortation later on are shown to have decided relevance to the meaning of the poem. *Luke* also carries connotations of wavering or indecision as in the half-way between hot and cold of *lukewarm*. *Havergal* naturally divides into *have* and *gal*. *Have* signifies possession, and the word *gal* is a colloquialism for *girl*. Even a cursory reading of the poem indicates a possessed girl. But the pronunciation demanded by the poem implies *gall*. It is necessary only to quote one word, *bitter*, from the poem itself in order to justify the double pun.

At this point it will not be a digression to consider the poem as form. Certain guideposts seem to appear from the nature of the construction of lines and stanzas. There is the shortness of the poem structured of four identically designed stanzas. There is constant repetition. In fact, the fourth stanza is so reiterative of the first as to seem almost a paraphrase. With such spatial economy and such profligacy of repetition, no words can be further wasted. The central idea demands an acuity of expression, and its effect must be cumulative, augmented by iteration and reiteration.

The stanzas are eight-lined but hardly deserving of the term *octave*, since each consists of seven full pentameters succeeded by one dimeter. In each stanza this dimetric final line simply repeats the last two feet of the seventh line. In addition, two of these dimeters repeat the title so that within a poem of twenty-eight actual lines, the name *Luke Havergal* occurs five times. Thus, in the very form itself, one feels the insistence of the repetition.

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The rhyme scheme carries further the duplicative nature of the poem. Each stanza rhymes AA BB AAAA. Six recurring rhymes in an eight-line stanza can hardly be called diverse, but the poet is not yet through with his incessant hammering of recurrent rhyme. The entire poem can easily be schemed with the resultant pattern: AA BB AAAA, CC DD CCCC, EE FF EEEE, AA BB AAAA. Thus, in the thirty-two lines, twelve carry the same burden. In addition, there is a distinct phonetic relation between the *C* and *E* rhymes in that the latter is a softening and shortening of the former, both in the final vowel and consonant sounds. In actuality, there are in the thirty-two lines, twenty-four devoted to two pairs of twelve repetitions, four lines repeating an additional sound, and only two independently rhymed couplets. In form, then, the poem seems to announce that it will convince by such repetition as will wear down resistance.

When repeated readings of the poem failed to dispel the elusiveness of the intention of the poet, it was determined that two things must be done. First, the speaker of the poem must be identified; second, the imagery involved must be interpreted. Who could speak this poem? Is it spoken by one person or more? A tendency, although it soon becomes clearly a mistaken tendency, is to assign the third stanza to a separate speaker. The revelation that this speaker speaks from beyond death seems at first to preclude the possibility of utterance of the other three stanzas. This separate speaker, however, is impossible of identification from the rest of the poem; therefore, the entire poem must be one person's pronouncement. The only person who could speak this poem is Luke Havergal himself, not the Luke Havergal of the title, but his alter ego, in the sense of a second self. The meaning of the poem is far from clear, but the determination of the speaker begins to dispel the obscurity.

The poem is spoken to Havergal by a part of himself he feels to have died. Why this alter ego should be addressing him, and just what it is that is being said can not yet be stated. The best approach to unraveling the perplexities of the figurative language seems to be the isolation of and examination of the figures, be they images, image-clusters, or symbols, as they occur in the poem. In this connection, it is also important to list the frequency of occurrence and to be aware of overlap between

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clusters.

Counting the title as one instance, there are seven repetitions of the name *Luke Havergal* within the poem. Luke Havergal is an individual and these repetitions seem to imply an emphasis on individuality. We have already examined the double entendre of the title and are prepared for a symbolic extension from the individual man to the universal individual, mankind. Other implications are glimpsed, but they are still shadowy, too obscure for immediate unraveling.

The images inherent in the words *gate* and *wall* suggest both enclosure and limitation. In combination with *western*, they become a distinct death symbol, and the wall becomes the barrier or separation between life and death. The word *western* occurs five times, but *twilight*, *night*, *dark*, *grave*, *dead*, *glooms*, *slays*, *hell*, *quench*, and *fall*, are figures which contribute to the death symbol of the word *western*, and in this sense there are twenty repetitions. If this were not enough, the vine-leaf motif, reinforcing the idea of death, occurs four times. It is true that the *dawn-eastern* cluster, symbolizing life, occurs twice, but it is uttered only as a negation. *Paradise*, *faith*, and *trust* are the only words in the entire poem which bear much of an optimistic connotation.

The word *words* occurs as an image in its own right, and linked with it we have *whisper*, *listen*, *call*, *tell* and *riddle*. This cluster seems to add up to a knowledge or revelation symbol, to an acquiescence to authority, to a subjugation to the imperatives of the fully cognizant alter ego.

There is a cluster of words, *strike*, *rift*, *slays*, *quench*, *blinds*, and *tearing*, which might be considered as making up a violence or threat symbol which implies that the progression demanded by the compulsive nature of the pronouncement will not be peaceful. Closely linked with this idea is the fire symbol encompassed in *crimson*, *hell*, *flames*, *fiery*, and *glow*, which suggest not only sensuality and earthy passion, but also the need for purification and the nature of purification. On a separate level, which will be dealt with, the fire symbol is representative of ambition and aspiration in man.

An important cluster, although in all its forms it can boast only eight repetitions, is implied by *go*, *wait*, and *way*, especially when the latter is combined with the word *bitter*. It seems impossible to attach symbolic importance to this cluster: it is less

than a symbol and yet more. It is, rather, a motif to which *urgency*, *summons*, *predestined*, *compulsion*, or *imperative* might adjectivally be applied.

The most obvious and at the same time the most puzzling of all the figures in the poem has up till now been unmentioned. This is the idea embodied in the word *she*. It is only through the identification of "she" that meaning can be attributed to the poem, and it was through the search for such identification that the three meanings the poem has revealed came to be recognized. It seems wasteful to elucidate these identities at this point, since the intended short explications of the poem will clearly state them.

A further dilemma, and one of the utmost importance, is displayed in the line, "God slays Himself with every leaf that flies." In itself this statement would not be so puzzling; the idea is quite common in spite of the intensive nature of *slays*. Since God created all life, when any living thing dies, a part of God dies. But, why *slays*? There is no death other than that God wills it, and hence He wills His own death? Perhaps. But, then, why is hell more than half of paradise? The balance swings in favor of evil over good? Again, perhaps. But in stanza one, the same leaves, which are part and parcel of God, speak, or at least whisper of "her." And then immediately they are not words, but like words, and may, or may not, strike you as they fall. Again, in the last stanza the leaves speak, but this time the words they utter are dead words, and it is implied that even if they strike you, you will not feel them. That here the perplexities inherent in "Luke Havergal" remain perplexities and that satisfying answers are not forthcoming must be apparent.

To further complicate matters, this idea of the slain God occurs in stanza two, where the death symbol is most obtrusive, and where the despair is blackest. Yet this is the only stanza in which "she" is not mentioned. However, the one hope expressed in the poem is the hope of reunion with "she" through the gate and beyond the wall—beyond death. But this reunion cannot merely and automatically happen; the necessity for action on the part of the hearer is implied. "If you listen she will call." It is not that she will be constantly calling, and if you listen you will be able to hear her. No, it is rather, if and only if you listen, then she will call. The same qualification is true of the paraphrase of the last stanza. If and only if you trust

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her, then will she (be able to?) call.

Even with these unresolved difficulties present, three explanations can be attempted. The first is the most likely intent of the poet when he wrote the poem. It is, however, frequently contended that poets often write better than their intention and often write from sources drawn from the deep well of the continuum of human experience, so that, truly, a poem may express from the poet's subconscious a much deeper and more important meaning than his conscious purpose.

The first meaning derived from the poem is rather banal and youthful-romantic. It is fraught with the ideas of lost love and suicide. The idea of death to the young is a romantic notion because of its very remoteness from them. But this is what the poem seems to say: Luke Havergal has lost through death the woman he loved. When she died, a part of him died with her, and his alter ego is addressing him, suggesting with a certain imperiousness that he join her beyond the wall of death. This reunion is, of course, possible only through suicide. The evidences though are that this is not such a crime. It is readily apparent that he has nothing to live for. God kills Himself to achieve the continuance of His creation. (The vine figure: the leaves die and in their death contribute to the life of the vine. This is what the voices are telling him.) Love is eternal and waiting beyond death, but love ("she") can be obtained only by action on his part. He must listen and trust and have the faith which will enable him to end life and to achieve reunion with her. (He must ignore the fact that the living vine *clings* to the wall?)

This concept is one of gall and bitterness, a concept appealing to the self-centered inexperience of youth. But remember, it is not the living Luke Havergal speaking, but his dead alter ego, selfishly demanding the rejection of life. It is important that no inkling is given as to whether or not the living Luke will accept or reject this suggestion.

A second interpretation maintains the same situation but substitutes the universal for the individual. Luke Havergal is not a man, but mankind. The alter ego—all men have died—is addressing all men who are living. The command to suicide is gone; mankind is constantly dying. The address is rather a matter of assurance that this continual dying is not in vain. God slaying Himself iterates the transcendental idea of the Over-soul.

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God exists only in the mind of man, for man exists only in the mind of God. As in the existence of every mortal and living thing, God is implied, so is the death of God implicit in the death of every living thing. But God is eternal. Hence, the continuing mind of man is eternal and the spirit resident in both man and God. The "she" of this interpretation is revealed as Psyche, the soul of man. The voices of the leaves are again the evidences of nature, but this time they are the answers to the quest for reality, which are frequently missed by man, and which are of no actual consequence (therefore, dead words) once the metaphysical idea of God and Man equated is achieved. The voice of the alter ego in this interpretation is the voice of knowledge, and it is here that the pun of the title begins to be felt. It is the function of the physician to cure through the application of his knowledge, and in the voice of the admonition, the physician is usually unable to recognize or cure his own ills. But here we are at face with the universal physician, the vast reservoir of mankind beyond death, prescribing that man may be cured of his fear of both wall and gate and thus made impervious to the hurt of "dead words" of false knowledge and doubt.

The third interpretation is that this outpouring is a personal expression of a poet's despair over a real or fancied loss of his creative ability. Again, this is a romantic notion and may imply a genuine persuasion toward suicide if "she" (the creative power) has gone through the gate and beyond the wall. The poet's alter ego which has died with the departure of his creative power harangues him with the knowledge of the futility of continuing creative effort. It tells him that there is no hope of a rebirth (dawn in eastern skies) of inspiration which will lift him from his despair (fiery night). Since any hope the poet may possess is without foundation, the alter ego has come as from death itself (Out of a grave . . . not, Out of *my* grave . . .) to extinguish this false hope (the kiss) which blinds him to the realization that his life and his work as a poet are over. The words of the leaves in this interpretation would be the poetic fancies which he had perceived and some of which he had utilized as "flying words" in his poems. But now, in the final tearing of the leaves from the vine in the last stanza, the poet has lost the ability to feel words as a poet and, therefore, they have become for him dead words. He must, then, if not abandon life itself, abandon life as a poet.

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The riddle of "Luke Havergal" has not been solved. There remain many perplexities, many unanswered questions. For instance, what are the winds which are tearing these word-leaves and slain-God-leaves away? Are they winds of time, winds of revelation, or winds of something else? Who can say? But one can answer that however meager the results, a thorough examination of the poem itself can engender an experience which is its own reward.



ROBINSON IN LEARY'S *ARTICLES* . . . 1950-1967

By WILLIAM WHITE

As a supplement to his 1954 bibliography, *Articles on American Literature 1900-1950*, Professor Lewis Leary has recently published his *Articles on American Literature 1950-1967* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1970, xxi, 751 pp.). The new compilation, though it covers eighteen years in comparison to its predecessor's fifty-one years, is still nearly twice the size of the earlier work. It is naturally an indispensable reference work for anyone doing research in our native letters. Also indicated is the considerable increase in scholarly activity in the field; and sometimes meaningless as it is to make a "head count," we can tell from Professor Leary's list who are the most "popular" American authors among critics, scholars, and other article writers.

William Faulkner, with 29 pages of entries, listing 837 articles, is the author who has engaged the most attention, followed by Henry James (29 pages) with 763 items. Among the other leaders, in this order, are Herman Melville (23 pages), Nathaniel Hawthorne (23), T. S. Eliot (22½), Walt Whitman (22), Ernest Hemingway (17), Edgar Allan Poe (16), and Ralph Waldo Emerson (15). Surprisingly, Emily Dickinson (7) has but 215 entries devoted to her and her poems; not surprising is that Edwin Arlington Robinson has only 2½ pages, listing 76 articles—a fairly good showing for a poet whom many feel is undeservedly neglected.

Leary disclaims any attempt to be exhaustive. His Robinson list, for example, is somewhat less than the 110 articles—exclu-