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multiplied in noise and fierceness, Brown's plea for preserving the "folk-lore of fiction" is even more relevant. Both for their sociological and their literary merit, Alice Brown's New England tales deserve renewed recognition, as does her place in a transitional period of fiction.

RIDDLING LEAVES:
ROBINSON'S "LUKE HAVERGAL"

By N. E. Dunn

"Luke Havergal," Edwin Arlington Robinson's early poem in the Symbolist mode, has offered considerable challenge in regard to interpretation. Readers tend to emerge from the poem with a few scattered suppositions concerning the situation but without a clear conviction about the meaning of the situation. Presumably, Luke's lover is dead and he is faced with a temptation of some sort, possibly to join her in death by suicide. The problem is to determine the significance of the specifics and the concretes in the poem.

It is salutary to begin one's exploration of meaning in the poem with the proviso in mind that the concretes may not "mean" anything. As Wallace Anderson has observed in his discussion of "Luke Havergal," the purpose of a Symbolist poem is essentially to create mood, music, and mystic feeling, as though by means of a disembodied voice.\(^1\) It may well be that specific details such as crimson leaves and a western gate have no "meaning" other than whatever personal emotive associations the reader himself brings to them. It is also possible, on the other hand, since these very images are not only used but used recurrently, and with a certain consistence of pattern and association, that the poet has endowed them with more specific significance. If so, the images cease to be merely emotive images and become symbols, conveying idea.

Western gate and crimson leaves are central to the imagery—

and thus to the possible symbology—of the poem. Reference to them begins and ends the poem, there is only one stanza in which they are not mentioned, and they are always mentioned in conjunction with each other. The import of this imagery first derives from the naturalness with which it reflects the death situation the poem apparently involves: movement away from beginning (east, dawn) and toward an end (west, gloom) in terms of diurnal time, and movement toward death (dying leaves) in terms of seasonal time. There is the possibility, however, that, using them in conjunction as he did, Robinson had in mind a frame of reference to which the western gate and the wind-blown leaves of his poem are an allusion. Identified, this frame of reference would, in its turn, contribute a dimension of meaning to the poem.

From the beginning the crimson leaves of autumn are associated with words, with communication. They are "like flying words"; they "will whisper" of someone; Luke is admonished not to try to "riddle the dead words they say" as they fall. Yet a sense of urgency is associated with the leaves; Luke is urged to "Go, for the winds are tearing them away." Furthermore, the leaves are located at "the western gate." The conjunction of communicating leaves with a western location is not new in literature, and the relationship of the two would certainly be not only familiar but exceedingly meaningful to a classicist like Robinson. The relationship between speaking leaves, wind, and the west are highly suggestive of what is, quite literally, the central experience of the hero in Vergil's Aeneid. In Book VI Aeneas, having left Troy, in the east, years before, has finally arrived with his little band of Trojan survivors at the general destination established for him by the ghost of Hector the night Troy fell: Hesperia, the Western Land. Exhausted by successive tragedies Aeneas, in a dream, is urged by the spirit of his dead father to seek him out in the world of the dead that he may communicate to his son truths which the latter needs to know in order to fulfill his obligations as appointed savior of the Trojan people. For assistance in this mission Aeneas applies to the Cumaean Sibyl. Just as she begins to slip into the divine trance Aeneas speaks to her.

"Do not commit your sayings to leaves
He alludes to the traditional practice of the Sibyl, "foreseer of future things": when she emerges from her trances she records on leaves taken from the trees the ambiguous sayings vouchsafed her by the god she serves. Aeneas wants the direct and spoken truth, without the intervention of a written record subject to the danger of confusion, concerning his means of ingress through "the gateway / Of the underworld," the Sibyl’s cavern, which is "here," in the Western Land. And when the trance is over Vergil concludes, "Thus from her sanctum spoke the Cumaean Sibyl, pronouncing / Riddles that awed them."

If Robinson intended to make such an allusion by his references to riddles, leaves, wind, and western gate, then it follows that the allusion to similarity of situation signifies some similarity of meaning in the two poems. The particulars already cited seem to justify further consideration of the possible clarification which Aeneas’ situation may afford the enigmatic one of Luke Havergal.

The situation of Aeneas at the point in the epic to which the leaf imagery in Robinson’s poem alludes is comparable to what is apparently the situation of Luke Havergal in at least one important regard: each man has suffered the loss of his lover. Reluctantly and at the insistence of a god Aeneas has deserted Dido and left Carthage. Setting sail for Sicily and Italy, he grieves to see the smoke arising from the funeral pyre upon which the betrayed queen has committed suicide. In "Luke Havergal" suggestions of death abound, and the "she" of the poem is generally taken to be Luke’s dead love. Both protagonists are in search of something. Aeneas consults the Sibyl for information about access to the dead; Luke is exhorted by an unidentified voice out of a grave to go to a western gate and listen for “her” call. The inquiring frame of mind in each case is certainly natural under the circumstances. Loss by death is precisely the kind of crisis which stimulates soul-

2 Book VI, 74-76. The translation used here is that of C. Day Lewis, The Aeneid of Virgil (New York, 1952).
3 The interpretation of the Aeneid used here is heavily indebted to the insights supplied by Maud Bodkin in Archetypal Patterns of Poetry: Psychological Studies of Imagination (New York, 1958), 118ff.
searching for answers to primal questions about life. At such a time there is a need for withdrawal, for contemplation, for introspection. In the case of Aeneas, it comes at a time when he has recently suffered other losses by death, those of his father and of a comrade-in-arms, and also at a time which is critical in his career. He has completed one large part of his divinely appointed mission in that he has brought his people to the promised land, but he still has another large part of that mission to perform in that he must establish them safely in that alien land. The brevity of the modern lyric, of course, does not allow scope for such development of the life-circumstances of Luke Havergal, and we know only that he has apparently lost a loved one. But the essential effect is the same: there are questions to which some answer must be sought. From his interview with the Sibyl and from his subsequent journey through Hades Aeneas learns much about the nature of man, about the meaning of the past, about the potentialities of the future, about the nature of the universe. Bodkin reads the tale of the descent into the cavern as Vergil’s use of ancient symbology representing the descent into the self; that is, the withdrawal into introspection and contemplation which a life crisis naturally precipitates in the mind. Luke Havergal is almost certainly engaged in the same introspection, as further consideration should show.

In Vergil’s symbology, the Sibyl probably represents the voice of the mind. She speaks to Aeneas “out of her Cavern” and the one hundred doors of the place open, “letting out her inspired responses.” Aeneas himself virtually makes the equation between her sayings and the operation of his own mind:

“Maiden, there’s nothing New or unexpected to me in such trials you prophesy. All of them I have forecast, worked out in my mind already.” (VI, 104-106; italics added).

Furthermore the Sibyl is described as the one to whom the god Apollo gives “the power to see deep and prophesy what’s to come.” In the Graeco-Roman mythology Apollo is, of course, the god of the sun-chariot, the god of “light” and therefore of enlightenment. His truths, however, are drawn by the Sibyl from within her “vasty cave” and “deeply recessed crypt.”
Cave and crypt are the mind, wherein lie buried one's memories of the past, memories which constitute, after all, the essential material with which one thinks. Out of his memory of what he has observed and experienced, one speculates and draws conclusions. The cave which is the repository of Apollo's truths is one's own mind. For Aeneas, plunging into the cavern is plunging into the depths of his own being. If we are to understand some similarity between this and the situation of Luke Havergal, then the unidentified "I" of the poem who comes to advise him is now identifiable; it is the voice of his own mind, perfectly expressed by the Symbolist technique of the "disembodied voice."

The caverns of Hades, however, are also the Underworld, the world of the dead. Avernus is the gateway to "death's dark kingdom." Aeneas will thus be exploring not only the memories of his personal past—as when he confronts the ghost of Dido, for example—but also his knowledge of the past of his people, as embodied in the spirits of his father Anchises and others of the Trojan heroes, and of the past of mankind, represented by the spirits of all those who have died. But his trip through the world of the dead will be a movement from darkness into light, from the dark caverns of Hades into the light of the Elysian fields. Confrontation with death has forced upon him not only the exploration of the inner recesses of his own nature, with its previously unacknowledged fears and repressions, but also the exploration of all that has gone before and "died," such as the old Trojan civilization. From this exploration will come for Aeneas an emergence into understanding about himself and about the nature of the world, an understanding upon which he can consequently base his expectations of the future, dramatized in this case by the parade of the future heroes of Rome. In the case of Luke Havergal, it is perhaps a bit clearer in the light of this allusion why the voice of prophecy comes "out of a grave." The voice is not that of the one who has died; it is the voice of his own intelligence, confronted with the fact of death and the world of the dead, prophesying that under certain circumstances "she," who is dead, "will call." Who she is, and what her call signifies may also be implied by the Aeneas analogy if it is pursued further. So far, at least, the implication is that Luke, like Aeneas, may have to forego
certain commitments to the past, in a larger sense as well as in the personal one, and to build new expectations of the future, again in both the personal and the larger senses. Thus we have the Robinson poem working on two levels, as the Vergilian one does: for the lover, the entry into death has been literal; for the protagonist, it is figurative. Both poets depict a universal life experience, but each uses it in such a fashion as to indicate that his concern is both the situation and the significance of the situation.

For Aeneas, part of the significance of the experience is religious, as is indicated by his becoming thereafter the willing agent of Jupiter. But even before his journey begins the Sibyl establishes the religious nature of the experience by chiding Aeneas for being slow to say his prayers, adding that only then would the spell work and the doors open. She also alludes to the fact that Aeneas’ being able, while still a living man, to visit and return from the world of the dead is the result of his faith. In the course of the journey itself, much of the instruction Aeneas receives from his father Anchises is of a philosophical if not of a specifically religious nature, expounding the Platonic concept that Mind permeates matter. Luke Havergal may not engage in prayer in the traditional sense, but he is admonished to “wait for what will come,” to “listen,” and to “trust,” directives suggesting a receptive frame of mind, at least. That Robinson also intended religious, or rather, spiritual, connotations in his poem is manifested, however, by overt statement: “God slays Himself with every leaf that flies,” an enigmatic observation but one that may identify, for the speaker, the Mind that permeates matter. The identification of God with the dying leaves, cut of all the forms in nature which the poet might have chosen, redirects attention to the significance of the leaves in particular. Part of that significance is clarified in this case both by Robinson’s adherence to his frame of reference and by his departure from it. Aeneas, it will be remembered, prays for an oral rendition of the Sibyl’s truths lest, committed to leaves, they be scattered by the winds. In Robinson’s poem, the leaves have already become the means of communication:

“The leaves will whisper there of her, and some,
Like flying words, will strike you as they fall.”
Later, however, Luke is informed that the winds are tearing the leaves away, and is advised not to try to “riddle the dead words they say, / Nor any more to feel them as they fall.” He is told, instead, what he should do: “If you trust her, she will call.” Ultimately, then, Luke is encouraged to ignore, as Aeneas does, whatever messages from God may be recorded on leaves, since they are made worthless by the scattering wind, and is urged instead to rely upon the message conveyed by voice. Robinson’s figurative use of Vergil’s concretes becomes evident. Words having to do with God and written on “leaves” have become dead, vitiated by the winds of change. The voice of God is the voice of the mind. It is possible now to identify the “she” of the poem; the one of whom the leaves whispered, the one for whom Luke is to listen and whom he is to trust, the one who will call. “She” is truth: the source of knowledge that lies buried in the mind and is accessible to man if he will examine his own mind. The old leaves of the old books—or the old Book—were about her, but they recorded earlier men’s ideas about “the big show,” as Robinson referred to the cosmic scheme and man’s place in it; the old “truths” are now blown away, outmoded, and another means of access to truth is needed. It is also possible to see why “there is yet one way to where she is,” and why it is “one that faith may never miss.” The one way to truth is contemplation within the mind, and one must have faith in the fruits of the mind. Luke is exhorted to Emersonian self-reliance. If that one way is “bitter,” it is because it requires honest exploration of the inner self, including that recognition and acknowledgement of hidden fears and repressions which were symbolized for Aeneas by the beasts and terrors of the dark caverns of Hades. But only after this night journey can one approach the light of Elysium, the “Light” of which Robinson was in constant pursuit.

The converse is stated negatively in the poem. Luke must go to the western gate and descend into the dark in order to end the dark because “there is not a dawn in eastern skies.” He will have to delve into the depths of the self rather than look for light in the sky. The old Eastern records, purporting to be founded upon celestial enlightenment, no longer serve. If this is to deny the Judaeo-Christian mythology, it is not necessarily to deny significance in the Christ-story, as would be made clear.
in others of Robinson’s poems, such as “Calvary.” His—and the Western world’s—nostalgia for the old, lost truths is also expressed in poems like “The House on the Hill”:

They are all gone away,
The House is shut and still
There is nothing more to say.
. . . . . . . . . . . .
Why is it then we stray
Around the sunken sill?

Since the old truths are blowing away, Luke learns that he need not even “feel” them as they fall any more, as the beginning of the poem had suggested he might do. What he must do is go and wait and listen and trust, and out of the grave of the past, his own and that of mankind, truth will call, understanding will come, he will have his vision, as Aeneas did his. The young Robinson, writing during his college days, was apparently convinced that a certain asceticism was necessary in the quest for the Light. The kiss that flamed upon Luke Havergal’s brow would have to be quenched lest it blind him to the way that he must go. The deprivation of passion which affects the introspection in the first place is a necessary condition to the journey from darkness into light; Dido must be renounced. Later, in poems like Lancelot, the more mature poet would concede the necessity for both kinds of fulfillment. Meanwhile, “There is the western gate, Luke Havergal. . . . There is the western gate.” The reiteration conveys two truths: it exists, and its location is known.

It is easy to over-read so suggestive a poem as “Luke Havergal,” and perhaps in this case the elements of allusion have been made to bear too much weight. However, the similarity of detail between the passage by Vergil and the poem by Robinson would almost certainly have been a matter of conscious choice on the part of a poet who, at seventeen, had translated a long passage from Vergil and who was, in the words of Richard Cary, “dubbed P.V.M.” by a friend “in honor of his zeal for Vergil,” Robinson’s allusion to the Aeneid, if his imagery is intended to be that, fulfills the function that such allusions frequently do in that it both corroborates and corrects readings

of the poem which have relied upon its intrinsic signals to meaning. Indeed, “Luke Havergal” can be considered a kind of primer of preparation for reading the canon of Edwin Arlington Robinson. It contains subjects and themes which Robinson was to deal with again and again, and it presents them in terms of allusive symbols which inform the reading of the same or similar symbols in later poems, such as the “orient Word” in “The Man Against the Sky,” for example, or the references to Voice and darkness and Light at the conclusion of *Lancelot*, or the use of cave- and father-imagery and of the story of Lazarus returned from the dead, as noted by Nicholas Ayo.⁵ Among the more significant cases, perhaps, is the relation of the frame of reference to the interpretation by Richard P. Adams in his study of “The Failure of Edwin Arlington Robinson.”⁶ Whether or not one concedes philosophical failure in Robinson’s work as a whole, the Aeneas analogy supports Adams’ conclusion that “Luke Havergal,” in particular, has to do not with the imminent death of Luke but with the desirability of his confronting the fact of death, and it certainly supports his finding in the poem a general significance concerning cultural interregnum and the desire for revelation of the evolving forms of civilization.

If, in his use of Vergil’s details, Robinson constructed a symbolism suggesting the rejection of the dead words of lost belief, he was, of course, responding to the intellectual climate of his times. The early twentieth century inherited the aftermath of the introduction of evolutionary thought and the consequent necessity for replacing disproven creeds with new truth. Robinson himself called his poem “a piece of deliberate degeneration.” Chard Powers Smith considers this one of Robinson’s “characteristically misleading later references” to the poem.⁷ Probably it is, instead, one of Robinson’s typically ambiguous statements of fact, referring both to the deliberately decadent Symbolist mode in which the poem is written and to the degeneration of idea which is its subject.

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