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Robinson's "Luke Havergal"

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THE NUMEROUS explicators of Edwin Arlington Robinson’s “Luke Havergal” have generally taken their lead from Charles Cestre’s observations in his *Introduction to Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1930) concerning the protagonist’s identity as a bereaved or lost lover contemplating suicide. Ronald Moran (CLQ, VII [March 1967], 385-392), whose analysis of the poem is the most complete to date, has offered the most persuasive case for this interpretation, and there is some evidence in the poem for such a reading. Luke Havergal is told to go to the western gate in order to hear a feminine voice, and in line 18 a voice from a grave announces that it has come “to quench the kiss.”

If we identify Havergal as simply a lost lover, however, then we must account for the “she” of the poem, ostensibly his former mistress and possibly a suicide herself, but if she is no more than his former mistress, then it is difficult to see why his bitter quest should concern faith (line 22). Moreover, we are left with the problem of identifying the voice from the grave (the “I” of the poem), which we can only vaguely describe as Luke Havergal’s guide. Excepting for the rather ambiguous phrase, “God slays Himself” (line 13), there is nothing in the poem to indicate the element of suicide, though that reading has gathered some strength from tradition. The interpretation of the remaining images and allusions in the poem (the gate, the leaves, the fiery night, hell and paradise, and others) is left to the imagination of the explicator, who usually returns to “traditional” symbolic renderings.

The understanding of this poem should begin, I think, with a more probable identification of Luke Havergal himself than has previously been offered, but his identity as a type of lost lover needs not be dismissed, though perhaps it should be adjusted. Emery Neff has observed that “The name Luke Havergal, with its dying fall and associated rhymes and assonances (Robinson had a fine ear for proper names) sets the tone from the first line.”

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1 All citations of “Luke Havergal” are from the *Collected Poems* (New York, 1954).

name symbolism here. The similarity of “Havergal” to “prodigal,” as in the parable of the prodigal son, suggests that there might be some connection with the biblical character. Indeed, the story of the prodigal son is related only in the gospel of Luke, and that circumstance may account for Havergal’s first name. While “Luke Havergal” may not reflect the story of the prodigal son directly, I think that Havergal is a penitent sinner, or a sinner soon to be made penitent, of the type described in Luke 15, and we are doubtless to remember that God rejoices over “one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.”

A letter to Harry DeForest Smith dated December 14, 1895 makes reference to “Luke Havergal,” thus establishing a date before which the poem was written. It would hardly seem necessary to prove that Robinson would have been familiar with such a common bible story, but it may be worth noting that in writing to Smith on May 20, 1895 Robinson observes: “I am in the middle of St. Luke now and find him magnificent reading.” Moreover, he did eventually write a poem concerning that parable and entitled “The Prodigal Son” (published in Nicodemus, 1932), which might suggest a prevailing interest on Robinson’s part in the plight of the penitent sinner.

If the Bible provides the source for a clue to the identity of Luke Havergal, along with some implications for the interpretation of the poem, the literary analogue and, I think, the direct inspiration is to be found elsewhere in Robinson’s reading. As I shall demonstrate, the tone, imagery, allusions, and personæ of “Luke Havergal” lead me to suggest Dante’s Divine Comedy, specifically the “Inferno,” as the analogue. Fussell has observed, in his study of Robinson’s reading, that “it is impossible to consider Robinson’s relation to European literature without at least a few words about Dante,” and Cestre has suggested that “The Man Against the Sky” is a four hundred-line compression of “the theme that Dante treated in the third part of his sacred epic.” Although Fussell finds no significant allusions to Dante’s work in Robinson’s poetry, he does cite a letter from Robinson

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4 Ibid., 226.
6 Charles Cestre, Introduction to Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York, 1930), 60.
to Smith, dated November 9, 1890, in which Robinson refers to a translation of the fourth canto of "Inferno" which had recently appeared in the Atlantic: "It is a fine thing and must have taken a world of time, patience and rum on the part of the translator. At times the meter is a little shaky and identical rhymes are a little too frequent, but considering the nature of the work we can easily overlook these defects." That Robinson knew the Divine Comedy, or at least the "Inferno," and that rather well, can therefore be substantiated.

Richard Cary's description of the flyleaf of Robinson's copy of the Divine Comedy (CLQ, IX [September 1969], 401-402) indicates that he owned a copy of the epic by the spring of 1893, and two letters to Smith in the fall of 1894 recount Robinson's displeasure with this Longfellow translation. We may be certain, therefore, that Robinson had been reading the Divine Comedy about the time that "Luke Havergal" may be supposed to have been written. The evidence offered here does not, of course, prove that Robinson had the "Inferno" in mind when he wrote "Luke Havergal," but it does establish the possibility that Dante's masterpiece could have been the analogue of that difficult poem. The test of these suppositions lies in the poem itself.

If we identify Luke Havergal with the protagonist of the Divine Comedy, then we may conclude that, like Dante, he is a sinner who has lost his way in the world without the guidance which had been afforded by his proper object of love. Like Dante, Luke Havergal must be made aware of his sinful state and he must be made penitent so that his life may be reordered. The feminine persona in the poem, the "she" to whom Havergal is being directed, corresponds in her function to Beatrice in the Divine Comedy, or, since she makes no actual appearance in this poem, perhaps we should say that the focus is more narrowly the "Inferno." It is she who will inform Havergal of his sin, just as Beatrice, in Purgatory, informs Dante. The voice from the grave, which has come to guide Luke Havergal to the woman, plays the role of Virgil, who is also a guide from the

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7 Rutcliffe, 7.
8 Cary's reference is to an edition by Houghton, Mifflin, and Company published in 1891. I have used Longfellow's translation of Dante in my citations from the Divine Comedy (Collected Works, volumes IX, X, XI).
9 Rutcliffe, 174, 180.
grave. In a general sense, therefore, we may see that the per-
sonage of the poem may be appropriately identified with reference
to Dante's *Divine Comedy*. A more intensive and detailed
examination hereafter will demonstrate how this identification
functions more explicitly in the poem.

Certainly many of the images and virtually all of the tone of
"Luke Havergal" are consistent with the imagery and tone of
Dante's "Inferno." The "western gate" to which Luke Havergal
is directed needs not be other than that which most expositors
have assumed it to be, based upon the traditional association of
the west with death, but if we read the poem in the context of
the *Divine Comedy*, we can perhaps understand and account for
the latent optimism which Richard Adams has detected in it.10
Luke Havergal is not, after all, destined to an eternity in Hell
any more than Dante is.

The vines, colored crimson by the setting sun, may predict
the eerie lighting of Hell. Like Dante, who begins in the "forest
dark," Havergal will begin his journey in the evening (twilight).
The falling leaves, alluded to in the first, second, and fourth
stanzas of "Luke Havergal," recall a unifying symbol in the
*Divine Comedy*, which Dante employs first at the end of the
third canto of the "Inferno," where Dante and Virgil observe
the sinners in Charon's ferry at the Acheron river:

As in the autumn-time the leaves fall off,
First one and then another, till the branch
Unto the earth surrenders all its spoils;
In similar wise the evil seed of Adam
Throw themselves from that margin one by one,
At signals, as a bird unto its lure.

Obviously Dante's leaves cannot be equated with the falling
leaves in Robinson's poem, for Robinson's leaves whisper of
"her," while Dante's do not presage the coming of Beatrice in
any way. At the end of "Purgatorio" there is a passage which
recalls these lines early in the "Inferno":

From the most holy water I returned
Regenerate, in the manner of new trees
That are renewed with a new foliage,
Pure and disposed to mount unto the stars.

The falling leaves, and later the fresh foliage, suggests the progress of Dante through the first two stages of the *Divine Comedy*. Similarly, the falling leaves in “Luke Havergal” may indicate the first stage of Havergal’s journey, for which we may predict a happy ending. The symbol of the leaves in the *Divine Comedy* is reiterated in the last canto of “Paradiso” where Dante, in his apostrophe to the “Light Eternal,” perceives at its depth, “Bound up with love in one volume, / What through the universe in leaves is scattered.” The distinction is drawn between the simple unity of divine love as opposed to the chaotic diffusion of human passions. It is toward this sort of vision that Luke Havergal, like Dante, is being led. His involvement in the disarray of human affections, indicated by the kiss that flames upon his forehead, has led him astray, and he must be directed toward the “one way.”

The “fiery night” that blinds Luke Havergal in the second stanza of the poem is not only appropriately infernal, but it is also indicative of the heightened life of men on earth in the “forest dark.” The darkness of Hell, therefore, will put an end to the darkness of Havergal’s benighted earthly existence, in the sense that it will be an instructive experience for him, just as the experience of “Inferno” is intended to be instructive for Dante. This leads us to a line which has proved difficult for the expositors: “God slays Himself with every leaf that flies.” This may simply indicate, as Gieraschi suggests, that God (as nature) dies with the passing of the seasons, but the heresy, even metaphorically, would be unlikely. Rather, I would suggest that there is some sort of relationship between the leaves, since they do whisper of “her,” and God. Moreover, God is “slain” in only one way, and that is when He assumes the person of Christ. If my view of this poem is correct, then this is one way of relating the feminine persona of the poem to Beatrice, or Divine Revelation and the grace of God.

The next line, however, represents still another problem passage: “And hell is more than half of paradise.” Read with respect to the *Divine Comedy*, this may mean that Hell appears to be more populous than Paradise, or that Luke Havergal, like the protagonist in the *Divine Comedy*, must journey through Hell in order to reach Paradise, for the trip through Hell does  

account for more than half of Dante's journey. He attains the Earthly Paradise by the time he reaches the twenty-eighth canto of "Purgatorio," but he spends all thirty-three cantos of the "Inferno" in Hell. At any rate, there is "not a dawn in eastern skies"; that is, on the one hand, Havergal, like Dante, will be going into a world of darkness, or, on the other hand, there is no salvation to be hoped for in the temporal world, the world of ordinary sunrise and sunset.

In the third stanza, the speaker identifies himself as a voice "out of a grave." There is nothing in the poem to indicate that this voice is that of a woman, nor is there anything to indicate that this voice is to be equated with that of the woman who will eventually speak to Luke Havergal. The voice that guides Havergal informs him that he will "quench that kiss" that "flames" upon his forehead, blinding him to the way that he must go. We may assume that it is this kiss, or rather, what it represents, that constitutes the "fiery night" of the second stanza. In the ninth canto of "Purgatorio," Dante is marked with seven P's on his forehead to indicate the seven deadly sins, and as he ascends the mountain, these signs are erased by the angels of the seven terraces. In this sense, then, Luke Havergal's kiss represents his earthly sins, which blind him to his proper path.

We may remember here that Dante is reproached by Beatrice for his weakness, for, having deserted her after her death, "Himself from me he took and gave to others." Indeed, he has fallen so low that there is no way for her to assure his salvation, "Save showing him the people of perdition." The torrid kiss in "Luke Havergal," therefore, represents literally the kiss of some other woman, or metaphorically it identifies Havergal's pursuit of the "false images of good," as Beatrice describes Dante's departure from the path. We are reminded here as well of the return of the prodigal son who, as his jealous brother complains, has "devoured thy living with harlots." The result, therefore, is that there is only one way for Luke Havergal, as there is only one way for Dante, and that is the way of faith. The way is "bitter" because it runs through Hell.

The speaker in the poem returns to his imperative mood in the final stanza, that stanza in the poem which seems to me the most nearly apocalyptic in nature. In this stanza the images of the first stanza are taken up again, but with several significant
alterations. The voice now emphasizes the crimson leaves rather than the crimson vines. The leaves are being torn away by the wind, and indeed they were already in the process of falling in the first stanza, but the allusion to the clinging vines might have afforded Luke Havergal some false sense of security. He might suppose that he may safely cling to his former ways, much as the vines cling to the walls. The voice becomes quite urgent; there is to be no hesitation, a condition that reminds us of the many times that Virgil must urge Dante in the pursuit of his salvation throughout “Inferno” and “Purgatorio.” The winds that are tearing away the leaves may be simply the storm winds of autumn, on a naturalistic level, or they may refer to the winds of vicissitude, which are representative of the nature of man’s temporal state. The winds are therefore portentous; Havergal must not procrastinate.

The following two lines are also problems for the interpreter of the poem: “Nor think to riddle the dead words they say, / Nor any more to feel them as they fall.” If the leaves are whispering of her, why should their words be “dead”? At the naturalistic level, the words of the leaves may be dead because the leaves themselves are dead. With respect to their identification with the words of Beatrice, however, the words may be considered dead because she is dead, at least temporally. I think, however, that the main thrust of the line concerns the guide’s advice to Havergal not to try to comprehend everything at this point, not to riddle those words. Here, we may recall the occasional advice of Virgil to Dante, especially in Purgatory, that he await further explanation or clarification of the mysteries he has encountered until he meets Beatrice. The next line advises Havergal not to “feel” the leaves as they strike him in their descent. The guide is telling Luke Havergal that the experience awaiting him may be painful, but he must endure it, just as Dante must endure the frightening experiences of Hell and the reproaches of Beatrice in Purgatory.

The next line of this final stanza recalls the antepenultimate line of the first stanza, but again with an important alteration. In the first stanza Havergal has been told to go, and if he listens “she will call,” but in the last stanza he is told to go, and if he trusts her “she will call.” Apparently the advice of the guide has changed, for listening implies merely the ability to hear and
the willingness to pay attention, but trusting implies faith. Moreover, the directions have changed somewhat, for in the first stanza Luke Havergal is told to “Go to the western gate,” but in the final stanza he is told “There is the western gate.” Evidently he has made some progress already in his journey. He has made up his mind to proceed, or perhaps he has even taken the first steps in the direction of the gate.

In centering his poem on this particular moment, at the very first of the *Divine Comedy*, Robinson is stressing the vital point of decision that a man must arrive at and act upon if he is to change his way of living. Just what action Luke Havergal takes we do not know, for it is the moment of decision itself that is the subject of this poem. A Joycean scholar would most likely recognize this moment as an “epiphany” in the life of the protagonist.

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ROBINSON’S FRIEND ARTHUR DAVIS VARIELL

By Richard Cary

For a taciturn, recessive man, Edwin Arlington Robinson had an astounding number of friends who could be classified as close or even intimate. A singularity of his relationship with each—for his correspondence clearly reveals no two sharing the same level or degree of Robinson’s sensibility—is that he rarely introduced those unknown to each other and otherwise made mention of little beyond their names. Except as they might meet under auspices outside his ken, he chambered and isolated one from the other, esteeming each for his private and exceptional essence. So it is that Robinson’s friends often chanced upon some unsuspected association, old in time yet utterly new to them.