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Robinson, Hardy, and a Literary Source of "Eros Turannos"

by JEFFREY L. SPEAR

Someone asked: who was the greatest writer of the past generation? Robinson immediately replied: Thomas Hardy. "Oh, you mean as a novelist; but isn't Meredith a better poet?" And Robinson's look of tolerant compassion was long remembered by the [MacDowell] colonist to whom he repeated his assertion that Hardy was the greatest English writer of his generation—"the greatest poet and the greatest novelist."

Although most of Robinson's written comments on Hardy are more tempered than the judgment preserved in this record of his conversation, it is clear that Robinson was an enthusiastic reader of Hardy's novels in his formative years. His sonnet, "For a Book of Thomas Hardy," which he included in his first two volumes of poetry praises the art of the novelist, but coincidentally it was published in The Critic just as the storm was breaking over Jude the Obscure and Hardy was deciding to abandon fiction for his first love, verse.

The Torrent and the Night Before (1896) appeared two years before Hardy's Wessex Poems, and though Robinson was much the younger man, scholars interested in the influence of "the cottage lights of Wessex" upon Robinson's imagination have quite naturally concentrated on the novels Robinson knew in his youth rather than the poetry he discovered after publishing his first two volumes. Certainly the distinction between the influence of Hardy the novelist and Hardy the poet is not always clear. It would be natural, for example, to see Robinson's "Kosmos" as a specific reply to Hardy's "Hap"—both are sonnets that advance and then, in opposite ways, dismiss the idea of a God hostile to man. Robinson's very title sets his view of the cosmic order against Hardy's. But "Hap," though written in 1866, was not published until after "Kosmos" was written. It is as if Robinson had distilled Hardy's early poem from the novels and then replied to it.

In his judicious study of Robinson's literary background, Edwin Fussell detects some influence from Hardy's poetry—he notes, for example, the similarity between Hardy's "Zermatt" and Robinson's "Monadnock Through the Trees"—but he cautions critics to beware of over-

emphasizing similarities or attempting to enforce causative connections.  

Certainly it would be easy, but misleading, to equate the poets merely on the basis of their common themes. Hardy and Robinson do not speak in the same accent; they are not even regional poets in the same sense. Nevertheless, it seems to me that Hardy the poet was more important to Robinson than has been generally supposed, and that in at least one signal instance Robinson found in a Hardy lyric the germ of one of his best Tilbury Town poems, "Eros Turannos."  

In what is surely the most exhaustive examination of "Eros Turannos" yet published, Sigmund Skard lays great emphasis upon the title as a key to the poem. Skard finds in his love of Greek drama in general a source for Robinson's version of the choric voice, and in his knowledge of Euripides' *Hippolytus* in particular both a source for Robinson's title and even, in Aphrodite's opening speech, "Robinson's poem *in nuce.*" Like Hardy, Robinson was interested in recasting Greek themes in modern dress, but the lady of "Eros Turannos" does not seem to be a modern Phaedra, or even a Guinevere. Skard may indeed have located the source of Hardy's title; but the title forms something of an ironic contrast to the body of the poem, for the tyrant god with whom the lady struggles has more aspects of Chronos than of Eros. A more probable specific source for both the form and content of the poem than Euripides' *Hippolytus* is one of Hardy's *Poems of the Past and Present*, "Wives in the Sere"—"sere" being the claw of time, of time-in-marriage. Though not well known today, this two stanza poem was one of the first of Hardy's to appear in the United States, having been singled out for separate publication before *Poems of the Past and Present* was issued by Harpers in 1902:

I

Never a careworn wife but shows,

If a joy suffuse her,

Something beautiful to those

Patient to peruse her,

Some one charm the world unknows

Precious to a muser,

Haply what, ere years were foes,

Moved her mate to choose her.

II

But, be it a hint of rose

That an instant hues her,

Or some early light or pose

5. "Wives in the Sere" appeared in both *The Living Age* and *Current Literature* in 1901.
The first two of Robinson’s six stanzas are sufficient to set a formal comparison:

She fears him, and will always ask  
What fated her to choose him;  
She meets in his engaging mask  
All reasons to refuse him;  
But what she meets and what she fears  
Are less than are the downward years,  
Drawn slowly to the foamless weirs  
Of age, were she to lose him.

Between a blurred sagacity  
That once had power to sound him,  
And Love, that will not let him be  
The Judas that she found him,  
Her pride assuages her almost,  
As if it were alone the cost.—  
He sees that he will not be lost,  
And waits and looks around him.

Both poems are in octaves formed from the fusion of two ballad stanzas linked by a repeated rhyme word. It is primarily the alternation of masculine and feminine rhymes combined with the fact that the second syllable of the feminine rhyme is a repeated word that gives the poems a similar lilt. The major formal difference between the two poems lies in the second quatrains: Hardy continues the b-rhyme and ballad measure which in Robinson’s poem becomes a tetrameter triplet followed by the trimeter line with the b-rhyme. Robinson may, in fact, have borrowed his rhyme-scheme from another of the *Poems of the Past and Present* on a domestic theme, “Between Us Now,” but Robinson wrote so many poems in various forms of octave that he might well have developed the rhyme-scheme independently.

“Wives in the Sere” is a small corner of that cumulative picture of relations between the sexes that Hardy built up over many years in his *Collected Poems*. It is a generalized observation, a musing on the power of a thought or gesture to cancel momentarily in the mind of the alert
observer the ravages of time and reveal to him the essential beauty in the
now careworn wife that might have "moved her mate to choose her," only to condemn her to the woe that is in marriage. The almost Spartan style of "Wives" marks it as one of the many poems in which Hardy’s determination to eschew all Tennysonian rhetoric and disguise his art is almost too successful. Hardy’s diction seems aggressively unpoetical—his typical mixture of the odd, the awkward, or the coined word (e.g., "haply," "wherewith," "unknows") with items from the common stock of English poetry worn almost smooth with use ("joy," "charm," "Time"). That Hardy can use the word "rose" in the description of a woman without stirring a single literary association is, after its fashion, rhetorically superb. By making almost every line initially trochaic and end-stopped Hardy deliberately dampens the rhythm that Robinson is so concerned to exploit.

Turning from Hardy’s poem to Robinson’s gives the impression that Hardy’s spare verse, almost barren of ornament, called all of Robinson’s literary craftsmanship to the task of reconstructing the poetic machinery Hardy so studiously dismantled. Robinson expands Hardy’s two stanza contrast between past and present into a six stanza narrative told in the present tense, but with a break in time between stanzas three and four. He narrows Hardy’s focus from a class of wives to one representative woman who, because she is given the power of choice, seems more responsible for her fate than Hardy’s wives. In contrast to Hardy’s deliberate artlessness, Robinson constructs a rhetorical masterpiece that gives the impression of plain speech while building each stanza to just the climax he wants through careful manipulation of syntax; and a choice of run-on or end-stopped lines that either builds upon the triple rhyme (as in stanza one), or runs counter to its cumulative tension (as in stanza two).

The first three stanzas of "Eros Turannos" could be the paradigm of half a novel or three acts of a play. Robinson focuses upon the factors that lead the lady to secure her Judas lover while the reader’s experience of small towns in New England, whether garnered from life or literature, rushes in to fill out a setting and social situation which Robinson barely sketches. The pride that the lady is prepared to sacrifice; her association with "tradition" together with the "sense of ocean and old trees" which—rather than the idea of the lady herself—envelop and allure her lover, have universally invoked the impression that she is of superior stock and doubtless possessed of the requisite big house on the hill. But we are never told so. There is more direct evidence—his "mask," the epithet "Judas," the sacrifice of pride—to suggest that, until both the passing of days and what she knows of them dimmed her doubts, the lady found her lover untrustworthy. But the fact that so many interpreters go on to give him a class background and a character is another tribute to Robinson’s powers of evocation.
Her lover once "secured," the season both literally and figuratively changes. The very trees and ocean that were so alluring to her lover become correlatives of the lady's inner state.

The falling leaf inaugurates
The reign of her confusion;
The pounding wave reverberates
The dirge of her illusion;

In addition to denoting her state of mind, "confusion" may refer directly to her husband in an old sense of the word as the cause of one's confusion; that is, one's ruin or overthrow. A cancelled opening of stanza five connects "confusion" in this archaic sense with the town's opinion of "the story as it should be."

We say it is enough to prove
That she has found him master,—
As if the story of her life
Were told or her disaster.

What had been her home is reduced to a place:

... a place where she can hide,
While all the town and harbor side
Vibrate with her seclusion.

The vibrations may be mere hyperbole suggesting Tilbury Town gossip about the lady's seclusion, but they are attributed to "the town and harbor side" rather than the people. Taken as pathetic fallacy, like the dirge she hears in the surf, the vibrations suggest the projection of her inner agitation, her confusion, on her surroundings, making the image of the vibrating landscape an approximation of Edvard Munch's 1895 lithograph, *The Cry*.

For four stanzas Robinson's speaker has seemed as omniscient a narrator as Hardy's "muser." But in the last two stanzas he addresses us in the first person plural, in effect identifying himself with the townspeople. Although his portrait of a lady seems to go beyond what can be suggested by "tapping our brows," we cannot be sure that the speaker has truly pierced the veil between "her visions and those we have seen." In the end the townsman can only offer symbolic similitudes for what the god has given: the breaking waves and solitary tree commonly associated with sorrow or loss in nineteenth-century poetry, and the striking image of the staircase to the sea derived from the visionary staircase erected for another trapped wife, Louisa in Dickens's *Hard Times*.9

7. See the first entry under "confusion" in the *OED*.
8. Quoted from the list of manuscript variants in Skard, p. 288.
9. See *Hard Times*, Book II, chapters 10 ("Mrs. Sparsit's Staircase") and 11 ("Lower and Lower") passim. Robinson may have had a literal staircase in mind as well, as Chad Powers Smith contends in *Where the Light Fails* (New York, 1965).
...like waves breaking it may be,
Or like a changed familiar tree,
Or like a stairway to the sea
Where down the blind are driven.

Robinson's poem is infinitely more complex than the Hardy lyric which gave rise to it, but looking back on "Eros Turannos" with "Wives in the Sere" in mind, a central thematic similarity emerges. The momentary rejuvenation of a wife in the sere merely emphasizes the inexorable grip of the claw of time. The images with which "Eros Turannos" concludes suggest time, decay, death. They also bring us back through the poem to the first stanza, to the "downward years" flowing to "weirs of age" which were presented as the alternative to marriage, as if in securing her lover the lady could arrest that progress. Surely the illusion that love transcends time is ultimately the illusion that dies with her passion, the illusion for which she sacrificed her pride "as if it were alone the cost." Though her story is more elaborately told, Robinson's lady is another wife in the sere.

"Wives in the Sere" seems to have served as a catalyst that freed Robinson's imagination and precipitated a poem that is in literary terms virtually its opposite: a highly wrought, rhetorical performance which in its figures and its music continues the poetic tradition against which Hardy was in pointed rebellion. Writting in 1901 with, according to Fussell, Hardy's novels in mind, Robinson said:

There is no question about it, these English fellows have a finish that the American writer lacks; and the more I read the more I am convinced of the fact. They may lack a certain freshness and sparkle that characterizes the novelists of our country but there is a certain element of completeness and rhetorical ease that more than balances the other.  

As a poet, however, Hardy rejects that finish and rhetorical ease which relies so heavily upon the reader's literary conditioning. The Hardy who, as Donald Davie shrewdly notes, "imposes himself so imperiously upon his medium, imposes himself upon his reader hardly at all. 'Take it or leave it,' he seems to say; or, even more permissively, 'Take what you want, and leave the rest.'"  

The illusion of anonymous or naive statement that, in one aspect of his work, Hardy labored so studiously to achieve may well have drawn the apparently more sophisticated American poet to Hardy and allowed him to read and reread without any threat to his own poetic integrity. Hardy was thus a liberating influence, more manageable than, for

example, Tennyson in whose tradition Robinson was working and whose stronger voice is at times, to my ear at least, intrusive.  

Robinson’s interest in Hardy’s poetry seems never to have faded. It is at least of literary, if not biographical, interest that less than a year before cancer killed him, the sixty-five year old bachelor poet should have had running through his head from Hardy’s last published volume another of his seemingly anonymous poems: “Epitaph on a Pessimist.”

I’m Smith of Stoke, aged sixty-odd,  
  I’ve lived without a dame  
From youth-time on; and would to God  
  My dad had done the same.  

Princeton University  
Princeton, New Jersey

13. It is possible, for example, to juxtapose stanzas of Robinson’s “Sainte-Nitouche” and Tennyson’s In Memoriam and, despite the different rhyme-schemes, to read them as a single poem without a sharp sense of disjunction. For other examples of Tennyson’s influence on Robinson, see Fussell, pp. 94–98 and passim.  