

Edwin Arlington Robinson

(1869-1935)

Eros Turannos (1916)

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 were alone the cost.—
He sees that he will not be lost,
And waits and looks around him.

A sense of ocean and old trees
Envelopes and allures him;
Tradition, touching all he sees,
Beguiles and reassures him;
And all her doubts of what he says
Are dimmed with what she knows of days—
Till even prejudice delays
And fades, and she secures him.

The falling leaf inaugurates
The reign of her confusion;
The pounding wave reverberates
The dirge of her illusion;
And home, where passion lived and died,
Becomes a place where she can hide,
While all the town and harbor side
Vibrate with her seclusion.

We tell you, tapping on our brows,
The story as it should be,—
As if the story of a house
Were told, or ever could be;
We'll have no kindly veil between
Her visions and those we have seen,—
As if we guessed what hers have been,
Or what they are or would be.

Meanwhile we do no harm; for they
That with a god have striven,
Not hearing much of what we say,
Take what the god has given;

Though 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.

ANALYSIS

This is the great Robinson...a depiction of the mind and fate of one who dwells in Tilbury Town... Again, the protagonist is a failure; again, it is the fact of her isolation that interests the poet. He goes so far in the fifth stanza as to confess that his account of her, the account of a community of outsiders, is one raised to the level of art and therefore not necessarily true to the facts of her life—"The story as it should be." The poet as outsider can only make an object-lesson of her, the knowledge of which is an end in itself. She is, in effect, the excuse for the poem, not its subject. She will not (or cannot) "express" her sense of her fate; an outsider performer cannot do so; he can, however, analyze it as it might strike the community, and put it in the perspective of his understanding of the general fate of people such as she.

The first four lines quite bluntly present her situation; the rest of the first stanza, introducing the weirs-sea image, goes more deeply, as it discovers something symbolic in her fate—though the image, nominally a symbol, is so restricted and controlled as to operate as a simile. The poem, elaborating that symbol, or simile, is in the end not a detailed and evocative exploration of her soul, but rather a kind of monument to it. Robinson is at his best at such monumental poetry; he shows what the graveyard (or gravestone) poem really can be. He assumes for most of his protagonists an inevitable, walled-off privacy; sensing the failure of that 'individualism' traditionally associated with New England towns, he would again and again show that it is no longer possible to summon up a feeling of genuine community and solidarity on the basis of such individualism. So he seeks to memorialize it, to put on record the failure of Americans (or some Americans) to be persons. What he seeks to do demands an ability to discover such similitudes as are in "Eros Turannos," to make out his subjects as they are, above all, objects—waiting for public inspection, analysis, and understanding.

There is thus the tendency of many of the packed lines of "Eros Turannos" to function almost as proverbs and epigrams; we learn lessons. There is the carry-through to the end of the weirs-sea figure introduced in the third stanza. We are not allowed to forget that we are listening to a master-rhetorician. In the fourth stanza, we are told, not that the "falling leaf" is somehow sympathetically expressive of her "confusion," but that it simply "inaugurates" it—i.e., at once gives and marks a beginning. Directly after this, we are told that the "pounding wave reverberates / The dirge of her illusion"—where again the expressive significance is minimized and the memorializing significance, the similitude, made most important. Too, the waves' reverberation is one with the town's vibration, but there is no hint of any kind of transnatural "correspondence" here, just a sense of a rhetorical device powerfully used to direct our attention as the poet-observer wills.

So it goes: the figurative language, the rhymes (especially the feminine rhymes, which have the effect of easing the epigrammatic bite, making the lines subside rather than end sharply), and the stanzaic structure—each has this powerfully memorializing effect. At the end, the public meaning of a closed-off, private life is put in such a way that it can be openly confronted, but by the reader, not the protagonist. We do no harm to her real self to make her a vehicle for an understanding of man's fate, the poet assures us. For us, she may be said to have striven with a god, grateful for what she might get from him. And then, magnificently, yet rather marmoreally, the weirs-sea and the figure are made to resolve the whole. With the Robinson of "Eros Turannos," much as we would like to be more, we can only be witnesses. With his forebears we could have been celebrants. But now we write poems, and read them, in order to make bearable our understanding that the truth is that, if we are heroic, we can be true only to ourselves, not to one another. The Adamic glow is no longer strong enough to light up the American community; and yet it is, for this Robinson, all we have. Our only certitude lies in our incertitude.

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