

HUMOR



Edwin Arlington Robinson

(1869-1935)

Mr. Flood's Party (1920)

Old Eben Flood, climbing alone one night
Over the hill between the town below
And the forsaken upland hermitage
That held as much as he should ever know
On earth again of home, paused warily.
The road was his with not a native near;
And Eben, having leisure, said aloud,
For no man else in Tilbury Town to hear:

“Well, Mr. Flood, we have the harvest moon
Again, and we may not have many more;
The bird is on the wing, the poet says,
And you and I have said it here before.
Drink to the bird.” He raised up to the light
The jug that he had gone so far to fill,
And answered huskily: “Well, Mr. Flood,
Since you propose it, I believe I will.”

Alone, as if enduring to the end
A valiant armor of scarred hopes outworn,
He stood there in the middle of the road
Like Roland's ghost winding a silent horn.
Below him, in the town among the trees,
Where friends of other days had honored him,
A phantom salutation of the dead
Rang thinly till old Eben's eyes were dim.

Then, as a mother lays her sleeping child
Down tenderly, fearing it may awake,
He set the jug down slowly at his feet
With trembling care, knowing that most things break;
And only when assured that on firm earth
It stood, as the uncertain lives of men
Assuredly did not, he paced away,
And with his hand extended paused again:

“Well, Mr. Flood, we have not met like this
In a long time, and many a change has come
To both of us, I fear, since last it was
We had a drop together. Welcome home!”
Convivially returning with himself,
Again he raised the jug up to the light;
And with an acquiescent quaver said:
“Well, Mr. Flood, if you insist, I might.

Only a very little, Mr. Flood—
For auld lang syne. No more, sir; that will do.”
So, for the time, apparently it did,
And Eben evidently thought so too;
For soon amid the silver loneliness
Of night he lifted up his voice and sang,
Secure, with only two moons listening,
Until the whole harmonious landscape rang—

“For auld lang syne.” The weary throat gave out,
The last word wavered; and the song being done,
He raised again the jug regretfully
And shook his head, and was again alone.
There was nothing in the town below—
Where strangers would have shut the many doors
That many friends had opened long ago.

ANALYSIS

“Mr. Flood is a drunken derelict, an outcast, a disgrace to the community, a friendless and poverty-bit old nuisance. But once he had been young and full of hope, with a comfortable home and, presumably, wife and children, and in those happy days all the doors of the town would have been hospitably open to him. The main fact of the poem is the falling away of Mr. Flood, and the main emotion of the poem is pity at his ruin. Poetry, in general, deals with emotion, and one of the dangers all poems run, especially those involving strong emotions, is that the reader will feel tricked, or bullied, into his response—that he will feel that the poet is insisting on an emotion which is not justified.

Our first question is: Do we feel that the desired response is justified by this poem? Nobody can tell you the answer to this question. You simply have to submit yourself to the poem as fully as possible, and then, in candor, see how you feel. But assuming that you feel the poem to be at least moderately successful—as many readers have felt—then we have another question: How has the poet presented the poem so that the intended emotion is actually available?

In general we may say that the poet has not insisted upon his own response (or ours) to Mr. Flood’s ruin. He has, rather, presented Mr. Flood’s own response to the situation; that is the central point of the poem. Mr. Flood, coming home alone by moonlight, with his jug, stops and has a party by himself, Mr. Flood and ‘Mr. Flood’ meeting after a long separation, drinking decorously like two gentlemen sitting at their snug

leisure, toasting each other. There is no swinish self-indulgence here. Everything is correct and mannerly: 'Only a very little, Mr. Flood-- / For auld lang syne. No more, sir; that will do.' Then the two Mr. Floods sing in moonlight, two old friends celebrating their long association.

Taken in itself this is a comic scene—the standard comedy of the drunk trying to be sober. Robinson is not afraid to make his drunkard funny, and because he is not afraid to make him genuinely funny, he can elicit a pathos which is far this side of mawkish and generalized pity. The humor gets its point and edge from the pathos, but it also undergirds and guarantees the pathos.

We can appreciate the straight comedy, but even as we appreciate it we are aware that it is modified by three facts. First, the scene which Mr. Flood, in his alcoholic dignity, enacts on the lonely road is a scene which, under happier circumstances, might very well have been taking place, this very moment, with a real friend, behind one of the severely closed doors down in the town, Mr. Flood talking over old times with a respectable citizen and a good bottle. This contrast, implied but never stated, is always at the back of our consciousness. We are amused by the comedy, but pity is mixed with the amusement.

As the second fact to modify the comedy, something else enters our reaction too: a sneaking admiration for Mr. Flood's gallantry in not giving way to self-pity and sodden drunkenness—not yet, anyway—and in maintaining, even in his ruin, some fiction of dignity and social decorum. The point is that Mr. Flood, by not making a direct bid for sympathy, succeeds in attracting it.

The third fact that modifies the comic effect is the running commentary by the poet himself, as he presents Mr. Flood in action. In the commentary we shall find the same sort of complication which we have noticed in our own reaction. Let us look at the commentary in the first stanza. The poet says that Mr. Flood is 'alone,' that his remote house is 'forsaken' but is as much as he will ever know 'On earth again of home.' So far, we find the poet insisting on our sympathy for his character. But two things come in to modify this direct bid for sympathy.

Take the word *warily*. The word does carry some sense of the hunted animal, and in that sense continues the direct bid for our sympathy. As soon as we know the poem, however, the word gives us, also, the beginning of the comedy: Old Eben peering this way and that to be sure that he is alone before his little charade. More important, to modify the direct bid is the phrase 'having leisure.' This is another comic touch, a joke. There's no reason why Eben shouldn't stop if he wants to, leisure is all he does have. But the phrase slips incidentally into the structure of the sentence, as we would use it about a man of business who ordinarily did not have leisure, and this casualness makes the humor wry and controlled. So in the first stanza, in a minor way, the complication of the poem has been initiated.

With the third stanza the commentary seems, at first glance anyway, to make only the direct bid. We find the phrases 'valiant armor' and 'scarred hopes outworn.' They are direct, yes. But they are too direct; that is, the phrases remind us of all the clichés of chivalric poetry about knights and derring-do, and when applied to the likker-soaked old derelict they are mock-heroic, too grand, merely funny.

Then we find Mr. Flood, holding up his jug, literally compared to Roland, the hero of the Old French epic *The Song of Roland*, the nephew of Charlemagne, who, as commander of the rear guard of the Emperor's army in the mountains of Spain, held off an overwhelming force of the Moors and refused, until the very end, to blow his famous horn for help. Some readers have felt that the association of the village drunk with Roland is too romantic, too obviously and arrantly a bid for our sympathy: as Roland called for help to his far-off friends, so Mr. Flood summons up the old days of friendship and dignity. The association is, in fact, extreme, but it is perfectly consonant with the realism of the preceding part of the poem. The gesture of lifting the jug, and the shape of the jug, evoke with literal accuracy the gesture Roland made. Mr. Flood is a ghostly Roland and his horn is a silent one, unless we hear the gurgle of the whiskey. The episode is, again, a piece of mock-heroic banter, but something of the grandeur of Roland rubs off on Mr. Flood.

As we have the mock-heroic in the third stanza, so in the fourth, we have what we may call the mock-sentimental modifying the direct bid for sympathy. We may even take the image of the mother and child to

be a smuggled-in reminder of the time of Mr. Flood's happier fortune. But when the child suddenly becomes jug, the effect goes comic. But look at the phrase 'knowing that most things break.' Again as with the phrase in the first stanza, 'having leisure,' this phrase is slipped casually into the sentence, in an unemphatic participial construction. Yet this phrase, in its incidental construction, is the thing the poem is about—the instability of human happiness.

Mr. Flood finished his party 'with only two moons listening' to the song celebrating his happier days. So the scene ends with a last joke at the old drunk's expense. Are we prepared now to accept the direct statement of Mr. Flood's sad situation? Has the poet, in other words, done enough justice to the various aspects of the situation to allow us to accept the pathos as real and not as sentimental self-indulgence? To do justice to the situation—that is what a poet is obligated to try to do."

Cleanth Brooks & Robert Penn Warren
Understanding Poetry, 3rd edition
(Holt 1938-61) 214-17

"Few poems balance so precisely on the point between comedy and pathos, tears and laughter, as 'Mr. Flood's Party.' For the poet to have poised it so was a triumph in the management of tone. The drunk has always been a figure of comedy, and Mr. Flood, as he drinks and sings with himself, "with only two moons listening," is richly comic. The similes enhance the humor. Mr. Flood with a jug at his lips and the ghost of a warrior with a horn at his lips may be visually similar, but the discrepancy between their emotional contexts makes the comparison ludicrous. Mr. Flood setting his jug down may resemble a mother laying down her sleeping child, but the incongruity between the drunk's solicitude for his jug and a mother's solicitude for her baby again is ludicrous. But the fun is not supplied entirely by the poet; it is supplied also by Mr. Flood himself. The grave solemnity, the punctilious courtesy, with which Mr. Flood goes through the social ritual of greeting himself, inviting himself to drink, welcoming himself home, and cautioning himself against a refill ('No more, sir; that will do')—all show a rich vein of humor which makes us laugh with Mr. Flood as well as at him. This is a lovable drunk—though he is not loved. With two Mr. Floods, and two moons, we are almost prepared ourselves to believe that 'the whole harmonious landscape rang' (it takes two people to create harmony) until we realize that this is only the heightened sense of appreciation that every drunk has for the beauty of his own singing.

But the things that make Mr. Flood ludicrous also make him pathetic. The allusion to Roland winding his horn calls up one of the most famous and moving episodes in all literature, in *The Song of Roland*, and the comparison, though ludicrous, is also plangent and moves us with emotions more profound than comedy. Roland was sending out a call for help, and Mr. Flood needs help too; but we know that no help came for Roland in time to save him. The comparison to the mother and her sleeping child, in much the same way, reminds us of the familial relationships and gentleness and love which are missing from Mr. Flood's life. These two images, with the help of the silver moon, lay a veil of tenderness and soft emotion over the poem, which moves us to compassion as well as laughter. Mr. Flood, after all, is not a mere ne'er-do-well. He has a delightful sense of humor and an old-fashioned courtesy. He was once honored in the town below and had many friends there. He has an educated man's acquaintance with literature: in speaking of the fleetingness of time, he can quote from 'The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam' ('The Bird of Time has but a little way / To flutter—and the Bird is on the Wing'), and then use the quotation wittily and gracefully to propose a toast.

The reference to *The Song of Roland*, though made by the poet, reinforces our sense of Mr. Flood as a sensitive and educated man. The song he sings—'For auld lang syne'—has added force because Mr. Flood can look only backward for better times; he can't look for them in the present or the future. Mr. Flood is old: the husky voice that wavers out, and the trembling care with which he sets down the jug are signs of age as well as of drink. His loneliness is stressed throughout the poem: he climbs the hill 'alone' (line 1), there is 'not a native near' (line 6), he speaks 'For no man else in Tilbury Town to hear' (line 8), he must drink with himself (line 9), he stands 'alone' (line 17), the moonlight makes a 'silver loneliness' (line 45), he is 'again alone' (line 52), he has no friends in the town below (lines 54-56). A ghost in the moonlight, Mr. Flood sends out his call for help, and is answered only by other ghosts—'A phantom salutation of the dead'—old memories.

We are not told why Mr. Flood has been cast out from the town below, why he is no longer honored, for what social sin or error he has lost his place in society. We know only that he is old, alone, friendless, dishonored, deserving of compassion but getting none. The ‘strangers’ who would have shut their doors to him in the town below are probably many of them literal strangers, but some are former friends from whom he has been estranged. The final note of the poem is not one of laughter, but of heartbreak.”

Laurence Perrine
100 American Poems of the Twentieth Century
(Harcourt 1966) 7-8
with James M. Reid

“Turned down for alcoholic reasons” by *Collier’s*... ‘Mr. Flood’s Party’ is in some ways like ‘Miniver Cheevy’ and ‘Richard Cory.’ It is a character sketch, a miniature drama with hints and suggestions of the past; its tone is a blend of irony, humor, and pathos. Yet it is, if not more sober, at least more serious, and a finer poem. It is more richly conceived and executed, and it contains two worlds, a world of illusion and a world of reality. A longer poem with a more complex stanza pattern and a heightened use of language, its theme fully informs the poem: It is dramatically represented by Mr. Flood and given emotional and intellectual depth by means of interrelated allusions and images focused on a central symbol. The theme is the transience of life; the central symbol is the jug. Both the theme and the symbolic import of the jug are announced in the line ‘the bird is on the wing, the poet says,’ though only the theme, implicit in the image, is immediately apparent. Its relationship to the jug goes back to its source in the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*... The transience symbols coupled with the eat-drink-and-be-merry philosophy of the *Rubaiyat* prepare the way for Mr. Flood’s party but also intensify the poignance and sharpen the irony.

In stanza three, the passage referring to ‘Roland’s ghost winding a silent horn’ is the richest in the poem, both in language and in suggestion. It serves a multiple function. The likening of Mr. Flood with lifted jug to Roland, the most courageous of Charlemagne’s knights, blowing his magic horn presents a vivid picture, made both striking and humorous by the incongruity. At the same time, however, it is a means of adding pathos and dignity to the figure of Mr. Flood, for there are some similarities. By the time that Roland blew his horn the last time, all his friends were dead; like Mr. Flood he reminisced about the past, and his eyes were dim. Moreover, he had fought valiantly and endured to the end, and these attributes of courage and endurance are transferred to Mr. Flood. The expression ‘enduring to the end’ has a double reference behind it: It calls to mind the words of Jesus when he sent forth his disciples, ‘He that endureth to the end shall be saved,’ a statement that Browning said was the theme of his ‘Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came.’ The Roland allusion is even more subtle. The comparison is not to Roland blowing his horn in broad daylight and surrounded by the newly dead, but to the *ghost* of Roland, and the horn he is winding is a ‘silent horn.’ Roland, the last to die, is seeking his phantom friends. So is Mr. Flood. Lighted by the harvest moon glinting on the ‘valiant armor’ of Roland-Flood, this is a world of the past, dim and mute. Fusion of figure and scene is complete. ‘Amid the silver loneliness / Of night’ Mr. Flood creates his own illusory world with his jug.

The significance of the jug symbol, foreshadowed by the *Rubaiyat* and Roland references, becomes clear in an extended simile at the mid and focal point of the poem:

Then, as a mother lays her sleeping child
Down tenderly, fearing it may awake,
He set the jug down slowly at his feet
With trembling care, knowing that most things break.

The interplay of similarities and dissimilarities in the relationship of *mother: child* and *Mr. Flood: jug* is too delicate and suggestive to be pinned down and spoiled by detailed analysis. Suffice it to say here that in the child the future is contained; in the jug, the past. Memories flood in as Eben drinks, and he lives once more, temporarily secure, among ‘friends of other days,’ who ‘had honored him,’ opened their doors to him, and welcomed him home. Two moons also keep him company, one real and one illusory. A last drink and the singing of ‘Auld Lang Syne,’ with its ‘auld acquaintance’ and ‘cup o’ kindness,’ and the party is over. And with a shock we and Mr. Flood are back in the harsh world of reality which frames the poem

and his present and fleeting life.... The loneliness of an old man, the passing of time; Eben Flood, ebb and flood. There is no comment, and none is needed.

The striking and functional contrast between the rich figurative language of stanza three in 'Mr. Flood's Party' and the final unadorned lines suggests something of the range of language found in Robinson's poetry. Too often Robinson's language has been described as 'bare,' 'dry,' 'sparse.' Such terms are not inaccurate to describe one aspect of Robinson's language, possibly the dominant aspect, but they leave out other aspects and give little indication of his expressive use of language. Robinson's vocabulary is large and varied, and he uses it with great flexibility. Though he delighted in words, he was not intoxicated by them. Sensitive to rhythm and sound, he never used words for mere musicality.... Robinson...had no use for 'poetic diction,' archaisms, or hollow rhetoric. There is no surface dazzle in his work. As a poet he wanted to convey his vision of reality honestly; to do so required honest treatment of his medium. There is no dense imagistic base in most of his poems and no lush color, but Robinson's use of imagery and figurative language is nonetheless notable. He knew how moving the simple can be, and how effective are such devices as graduation, contrast, and climax. The pinnacle of a mountain is discernible only as it stands out above the lower peaks, but a single peak need not be as high if it rises from a plain."

Wallace L. Anderson
Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Introduction
(Houghton 1967) 110-13

Michael Hollister (2015)