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Roberts's 'Series of Sonnets' in *Songs of the Common Day* (1893)

In his brief "Prefatory Note" to *Songs of the Common Day and Ave: an Ode for the Shelley Centenary* (1893), Charles G. D. Roberts acknowledges "the kind courtesy of Messrs. D. Lothrop Company," the publishers of his *In Divers Tones* (1886) volume, for permitting him to "reprint seven sonnets" which, he says, have been brought forward to the present "collection" "to complete the series of sonnets dealing with aspects of common outdoor life."¹ Recently, the sonnets of *Songs of the Common Day* have been treated to good effect by Don Precosky as a carefully organized and "richly complex sequence."² Yet certain aspects of the structure and coherence of the "series" remain to be appreciated, it seems to me, because account has not been taken of the technical implications of the word "series" itself, a term chosen by Roberts over such possibilities as "sequence" and "group," the words used, with good reason, by Precosky to describe the "two blocks" [22] of sonnets that he quite correctly perceives in *Songs of the Common Day*. Nor has sufficient attention been paid to the implications of the bibliographical presentation of Roberts's "series of sonnets dealing with aspects of common outdoor life," particularly the poet's exploitation of the fact that, when poems are printed one to a page, those that face each other on even/odd pages (2/3, 4/5, and so on) can be readily seen as a pair and—as confirmed at several places in Precosky's reading—compared for their possible points of affinity or contrast. In the essay under way, account will be taken of the implications both of Roberts's use of the word "series" and of his bibliographical presentation of his poems with a view to expanding the insights of Precosky and, with him, Jean Mallinson, Lorraine McMullen, and others, into the structure, coherence and concerns of the *Songs of the Common Day* sonnets.

If the *Songs of the Common Day* "series of sonnets" is taken to include, as a kind of "Prologue," the lyric "Across the fog the moon lies fair"³ and to end, as the phrase "series of sonnets" appears to require, with the final sonnet in the volume, "O Solitary of the Austere Sky" (38), then these two pieces are the only two poems in the "series" that do not obviously belong to a facing pair of sonnets. A structural explanation for this is that "Across the fog the moon lies fair" and "O Solitary of the Austere Sky" are to be seen as in their own way complementary—as a related and, it may be, contrasting pair of poems that provide a frame for the intervening sonnets. More credence is lent to this suggestion by the echoes that sound between "Across the fog . . ." and "O Solitary of the Austere Sky": both poems are set at night and in the "mist"; both employ the "O" of apostrophe or formal address; and both treat of the "moon," described in the latter as the "Pale presence of the unextinguished star [i.e., the sun]." Moreover, the echo of the "ghostly amethyst" of the "Prologue" poem in the "amethystine fields" (37) of "Moonlight," the sonnet that immediately precedes "O Solitary of the Austere Sky," helps to prepare the way for the closure that occurs with the final poem, a solitary sonnet on a "Solitary" subject which nevertheless has a point of reference and contrast in the poem that initiates the series. As the echoing and contrasting relationship between "Across the fog . . ." and "O Solitary of the Austere Sky" intimates, the *Songs of the Common Day* series is developmental in nature: expectations are set up at the outset and then closed off at the conclusion, the corollary to this presumably being that the intervening thirty-six sonnets constitute a telic middle-ground in which ideas announced in the "Prologue" poem are developed towards the position stated in the final sonnet.

The discussions of McMullen and Precosky have left little room for doubt that *Songs of the Common Day* is based both thematically and structurally on the principle of contrasting pairs. For McMullen, the octave and sestet of "The Winter Fields," for example, reveals how Roberts "combines description and reflection," using "antithesis—a structural device which characterizes many of his sonnets—to oppose winter to summer, present to future, death to life," hope to despair, and permanence to mutability.⁴ Arguing that "McMullen fails to note that contrast as a method does not occur merely within single poems" (27), Precosky affirms that "By placing side by side poems which may have been written years apart [in fact, "over an eleven-year period, from 1882 to 1893"], Roberts gives his seasons sonnets a kind of roundness and enhances the narrative possibilities of the sequence"

(22, 27). In the course of his article, Precosky examines various instances of Roberts's "use of contrasts between sonnets" in *Songs of the Common Day* and, as already noted, he perceives the presence of two contrasting "blocks" of sonnets in the series: (1) a preliminary "sequence" comprising twenty-six sonnets (pp. 2-27) that are arranged "according to the seasons" and place "particular emphasis on process" and (2) a subsequent group of eleven sonnets (pp. 28-38) that are unified more by the "ideas" and "mood" contingent upon "Roberts' awareness of his own mortality" (23). But Precosky perhaps underestimates the overall thematic and structural coherence of the poem (if a "complete . . . series of sonnets" may now be called such) by failing to perceive "Roberts' awareness of . . . mortality" as the consequence of his "emphasis on process" and to recognize the "sequence"/"group" division of *Songs of the Common Day* as a reflection of the octave/sestet structure of the Petrarchan sonnets that comprise the bulk of the series. For is not Roberts's tendency to "present a scene, and his emotional response to it, in the octave and to expound upon its meaning in the sestet" (Precosky, 26) in such sonnets as "The Furrow" and "The Sower" (the first facing pair in the series) writ large in the contrast between the comparative emphasis on external nature in the seasonal "sequence" and the greater "subjective and introspective" (23) emphasis of the ideas "group?" And—to anticipate a later stage of the present discussion—is not the affirmation of human transcendence and immortality with which "O Solitary of the Austere Sky" concludes the series directly related to the preoccupation with renewal and rebirth in the natural world in the seasonal sonnets?

In order fully to appreciate the way in which the *Songs of the Common Day* is a poem based thematically and structurally on the principle of development by contrast, it is helpful, perhaps even essential, to take up and ponder the implications of Roberts's description of his "sonnets dealing with aspects of common outdoor life" as a "series." Derived from the Latin *serere*, meaning to join or weave together, the term "series" has various mathematical, chemical, and grammatical applications which, in the aggregate, perfectly describe what the *Songs of the Common Day* has been implied by the preceding comments to be: an ordered and connected succession of elements or expressions (sonnets) that is generated by the placement one after another of units (again, sonnets) that are similar and yet different by virtue of their place in a developmental pattern (x ["Across the fog . . ."], x_1 ["The Furrow"], x_2 ["The Sower"], x_3 . . . , and so on). Nor is it without value to observe that while *all* the elements or expressions in

any “series” resemble one another and, indeed, function in relation to one another, the most pronounced resemblances and relationships are likely to be between and among contiguous units (x_1 and x_2 rather than x_1 and x_3 , for example, though always—and this is worth stressing—with one or more constant factors working among and across x_1 , x_2 , x_3 and the other items in the series). Not only does *Songs of the Common Day* reveal overall the movement and coherence of a (finite) “series” but, as the present essay and the following assemblage of comments by Precosky suggest, it also exhibits locally a number of affinities and contrasts of the sort rendered by x_1 , x_2 , x_3 and so on:

The “grey monotony” of “The Furrow” and the “brown, sad-coloured hillside” of “The Sower,” the first two poems in the sequence, form a contrast with the “shining brooks” of “The Waking Earth,” the third sonnet. . . . “The Waking Earth” contrasts in a different way with “The Cow Pasture,” the sonnet following it. . . . The sonnets of summer also have their contrasts. In “The Pea-Fields” and “The Mowing” Roberts works out similar pictures of “high” summer using contrasting techniques. . . . To increase the complexity of the sequence further, Roberts pairs “The Pea-Fields” and “The Mowing” . . . and contrasts them with the two succeeding poems, “Burnt Lands” and “The Clearing.” (27-28)

No more than Precosky’s can the present essay examine in detail all the pairs of sonnets in *Songs of the Common Day*, let alone many of the other relationships between and among poems and groups of poems in the “series.” Some of the paired poems, including its first and final poems in the series, can be examined, however, both as a means of confirming the importance of the pairing strategy to *Songs of the Common Day* and as a means of filling in the outline already given of the poem’s overall development and coherence.

While Precosky, McMullen and Mallinson⁵ have successfully shown the relevance of a number of Roberts’s early essays, most notably “The Poetry of Nature” (1897), to *Songs of the Common Day*, comparatively little attention has been paid to “Across the fog the moon lies fair,” the three-stanza lyric that constitutes the “Prologue” and provides the program for the series.⁶ Like the octaves of many of the sonnets in the series, and like the “season-sonnets” (Precosky’s phrase, 23) that immediately follow it, the first stanza of “Across the fog . . .” recreates for the reader a scene in external nature (and notice the echo of the opening lines of Arnold’s “Dover Beach”: “The sea is calm to-night. / . . . the moon lies fair / Upon the straits. . . .”):⁷

Across the fog the moon lies fair.
Transfused with ghostly amethyst,

O white Night, charm to wonderment
The cattle in the mist!

Already stereotypically feminine in its whiteness, its ability to "charm," and its association with "amethyst," the "Night" becomes in the second stanza of "Across the fog . . ." a "grave Mysteriarch," an ancient female guardian of mysteries, to whom the poet appeals for a "po(r)tion" (brackets added) of her ability to transfigure and defamiliarize "things" that appear "dull" and ordinary in the light of common day. "Make thou my vision sane and clear," he asks Night in the final stanza of the "Prologue" poem, "That I may see what beauty clings / In common forms, and find the soul / Of unregarded things!" It is apposite to observe at this point that the "*Common Day*" of Roberts's title and the "common forms" of the stanza just quoted allude to Wordsworth's *The Recluse* and "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," where the phrase "common day" occurs, respectively, in a celebration of "Beauty" as a "living Presence on the earth," a "simple produce of the common day," and a lamentation over the darkening of the child's vision of "celestial light" into "the light of common day."⁸ Both *The Recluse* and the "Intimations" Ode provide important contexts for *Songs of the Common Day*, the former by proclaiming the close "fit" between the "external world" and the "individual Mind" and the latter by affirming the persistence or advent in maturity of gifts that compensate for the loss of intense, childhood vision—namely, a "primal sympathy" between man and nature; the positive results of "human suffering"; and "the faith that looks through death, / In years that bring the philosophic mind." It is perhaps the inevitable result of Roberts's broad and deep debt to Wordsworth that each of these gifts (and most obviously, though by no means exclusively, the "primal sympathy" or "communion" between "Nature and the heart of Man")⁹ are abundantly evident in the *Songs of the Common Day*. It is nevertheless worth remarking, however, that the "sane and clear" "vision" for which the Canadian poet petitions in "Across the fog . . ." is one which will not only perceive the aesthetic ("beauty") and spiritual ("soul") dimensions in "common forms" but also—as the final sonnet in the series and companion poem to the "Prologue" makes clear—"look . . . through death" to a life to come. "When comes the hour to break this 'prisoning shard, / And reunite with Him that breathed me forth," the poet tells the moon in the final lines of "O Solitary of the Austere Sky," "Then shall this atom of the Eternal Soul / Encompass thee in its benign control!" (38).

From a consciousness of personal limitation to an affirmation of individual human “worth” (38), from an appeal to the moonlit “Night” for assistance to a certainty of the soul’s ultimate triumph over the mere “things” of nature—these are some of the main shifts and developments that occur in *Songs of the Common Day* as part, it might be said, of an overall and resonantly Wordsworthian movement from the “primal sympathy” of the early “season-sonnets” to the sonnets of “human suffering” and the “philosophic mind” that constitute the later stages of the series.

As readers with an interest in feminist issues will probably have observed, there is an element of sexual power politics evident in the shift between, on the one hand, Roberts’s chivalric deference at the beginning of *Songs of the Common Day* to the personified “Night” (“Mysteriarch,” Muse) whose help he requests and, on the other, his concluding and strongly patriarchal certainty that, when eventually “reunite[d] with Him that breathed [him] forth,” he will “Encompass” and “control”—albeit “benign[ly]”—the very moon (“Pale presence”) whose light he had previously found so revelatory and desirable. Though it will not be pursued here into a feminist analysis of *Songs of the Common Day*, the observation that Roberts tends in his poems to view his world in sexually stereotypical terms—to type the moon (and, for that matter, the earth) as female because they are the passive and intermittent receptors and reflectors of light from the (active, “inextinguishable,” and therefore *obviously* male) sun—has value for the present discussion because it lays bare the sexual dimension that is evident even in the titles of the first facing—not to say copulatory—pair of sonnets in the series: “The Furrow” and “The Sower.” In the first of these, the earth—specifically an arable “glebe” (“field”) in an as yet “unverdured” early spring landscape—“rests patient for its joy to be,” a passive, but, for the present, pre-sexual, female entity that incurs only the “scorn” of the “breaking sun” on account of the “grey monotony” (2) of its unploughed state. Joy and, at least as important, aesthetic appeal for the (male) sun and (male) percipient, comes to the “glebe” through the efforts of a “ploughman” whose blade, drawn by a “serious” and excited “team” (“The sea air thrills their nostrils”), cuts the “first slow furrow” in the “lea,” effecting a sexual initiation that brings with it the promise of future efflorescence and fecundity:

In the early chill the clods fresh cloven steam,
And down its griding path the keen share goes:
So, from a scar, best flowers the future’s sweet. (2)

While the words "cloven" (woman: the cloven sex) and "griding" (to gride: to pierce) maintain the sexual dimension of the ploughing of the furrow at the level of innuendo, the final line of this passage requires a sexual reading to make sense. For how, other than with reference to a sexual initiation, can "the future's sweet" be said to "best flower" from a "scar," at least in the primary sense of this last word as a mark left after the healing of a wound or sore? Although the final line of "The Furrow" participates in Roberts's habit, so distasteful to many modern critics, of explaining the meaning of the scenes and events described in his sonnets, the explanation offered in this instance is not a comfortable, Victorian moral but, rather, an explicit invitation to see the sexual dimension of the poem and, in so doing, enter into a "primal sympathy" with external nature.

To the extent that it tempers reticence with frankness, decorum and conventionality with "universal and original impulses" (*SP*, 266), "The Furrow" fulfils the function of conveying the reader from the "artificial to the natural" that Roberts—a modern from the late 1880s at least in his view of art as a healthy reaction to Victorian, middle-class culture—repeatedly ascribed to the poetry (and later the prose) of wild and relatively wild nature.¹⁰ But Roberts's treatment of sexual matters in varying degrees of "indirection" (*SP*, 281) in such poems as "The Furrow" (and see also "The Waking Earth," and "The Cow Pasture," 4-5) constitutes only one prong of his attack on the "drawing-room" values of his "breathless age," with its "small cares seen in too close perspective" (*SP*, 266, 274, 280). The other prong, as the mere presence in *Songs of the Common Day* of both "season" and "ideas" sonnets already attests, was aimed at expanding the spiritual and emotional scope of his Victorian readers in directions not likely to be encountered in the "drawing-room" or, at any rate, in the work-a-day world of "shop-worn utilities."¹¹ As well as being asked to contemplate Emersonian "Ideals whereto our Real must attain" (22), readers of the series are also introduced to "regions of luminous calm" and "Large, contemplative wisdom" (even the phrasing echoes "In the Wide Awe and Wisdom of the Night") to which Roberts saw Wordsworth as "the surest guide we have" (*SP*, 274). That the two prongs of earthiness and wisdom with which Roberts hoped nature poetry would pitchfork its Victorian readers beyond the confines of their drawing rooms are evident, not only in the bipartite structure of *Songs of the Common Day* and many of its constituent Petrarchan Sonnets, but also in the plea of its "Prologue" for eyes to see *both* the "beauty . . . / In common forms" and "the soul / of unregarded things," can be taken as further

evidence of what might be called the dualistic coherence of the series: its continuous and dialectical use of patterns of contrast and affinity to draw from "common scenes" the "penetrating and . . . illuminating message" (*SP*, 276) that will expand the reader both (or perhaps first) physically and (then) spiritually. If this sounds (as it has been deliberately phrased to do), like a male program directed towards a female reader, that is because, in my view, Roberts's masculine assumption extends as much to the audience implied by *Songs of the Common Day* and related works as to the treatment of nature and the conception of art in the series, lending in their own cocksure, phallogocentric way, another level of coherence to the poem.

As might be expected, few poems in *Songs of the Common Day* are as straightforwardly earthy or abstractly philosophical as "The Furrow" and "In the Wide Awe and Wisdom of the Night," the opening sonnets, respectively (and surely not fortuitously) of the season "sequence" and the ideas "group" in the series.¹² Indeed, "The Sower"—in a manner predicted by its place in the series (x_2 to the x_1 of "The Furrow")—both carries forward the earthy quality of its companion poem and departs from this in the human and spiritual direction towards which the series as a whole moves. Recalling "The Furrow" in its primal, sexual aspect in "The Sower" is the "hillside" which, though still "sad-coloured" (earlier the "slope" was a sombre and unattractive "grey" [2]), is now "brown" and "bare," "deep and fine," as a result of the "frequent" action of a "harrow" (3). But, while the sower himself is certainly characterized in phallic, fertilizing terms as he "grows great in his employ" of spreading "the blind / Pale grain from his dispensing palm" on the "yielding soil," the dominant note in his presentation is not sexual (if it were, he would be an absurd and onanistic figure), but spiritual: against a background of "far-off spires," the "Sower" (capitalized, note) is "unwittingly divine"—"Godlike, [as] he makes provision for mankind" (3). In this context, the "glebe" that had been an arable and passively female field in "The Furrow" asks to be given a less sexual and more ecclesiastical meaning as a tract of land "associated . . . with the church" and, as such, seen as an intimate participant in the post-fallen but profoundly spiritual, even "sacramental,"¹³ activity upon which Christ based the Parable of the Sower and the Seed (Matthew 13.3-23).

Much of the same serial relationship of affinity and contrast that operates between "The Furrow" and "The Sower" can be discerned in the ensuing pair of facing sonnets: "The Waking Earth" and "The Cow Pasture." Moreover, and as again predicted by the serial relationship

and perceived by Precosky, "The Waking Earth" also exhibits affinities and contrasts with "The Sower" and, to an extent, with "The Furrow." Liberated as it were into adolescence by the warm (male) sun of early "Spring," the "glad" and "wise" earth becomes in "The Waking Earth" the answer to a young man's fancy—a child-woman whose "brooks sparkle and run" with "shy bright clamour," whose "air" is "Beaded with bird-notes thin," whose "days / Grow round, grow radiant," whose "bare fields / . . . of furrow and sod" yield a sensual, "potent" and magical "perfume" (4). Little wonder that "The sap flies upward" and the speaker exclaims "Praise for the new life! Praise / For bliss of breath and blood beneath the sun!" As Roberts says of "Summer is icumen in, / Lhude sing, cuccu" in "The Poetry of Nature": "This is the poet's answering hail, when the spring-time calls to his blood" (*SP*, 279). In "The Waking Earth" as in "The Sower," however, the poet's "primal sympathy" with external nature modulates towards the spiritual, finding an analogue in the realm of "soul" for his participation in spring's liberation of the natural world from the confines of winter: ". . . lo, the bound of days and distance yields; / And fetterless the soul is flown abroad, / Lord of desire and beauty, like a God!" A reader with feminist sympathies would be forgiven for thinking that in "The Waking Earth," as in earlier and later poems in the series, mother earth brings forth her daughters primarily to satisfy the aesthetic and spiritual needs of the male poet.

The sense of a blending—some might say, confusion—of the physical and the divine that emerges strongly in the sestet of "The Waking Earth" is elaborated in "The Cow Pasture," which now treats the landscape as a female space that longs for its emptiness to be filled, a prospect that generates a "strange thrill" in the poet and a consequent meditation on the "power"—the sexual/spiritual "need"—that "works / Through incompleteness":

The empty flats yearn seaward. All the view
Is naked to the horizon's utmost blue;
And the bleak spaces stir me with strange thrill.

Not in perfection dwells the subtler power
To pierce our mean content, but rather works
Through incompleteness, and the need that irks,—
Not in the flower, but effort toward the flower.
When the want stirs, when the soul's cravings urge,
The strong earth strengthens, and the clean heavens purge. (5)

Unlike the "red cattle" (mentioned before this passage begins), creatures that presumably remain content in the "mean" (poor, unattrac-

tive, circumscribing) "Pasture" of the sonnet's title, the poet is no bovine moderate, no believer in the happy mean, no *homme moyen sensuel et spirituel*, but rather, a man of powerful and vexing physical and spiritual desires ("need[s]," "want[s]," "craving[s]") that partake of the extremes of the "earth" and the "heavens," gaining strength from the former and purity from the latter. Although the words "clean" and "purge" in the final line of "The Cow Pasture" reveal that Roberts has not transcended the Victorian habit of seeing the lower (earthly) desires as unclean, sinful, and, indeed, dirty, it is evident that the thrust of the sonnet is towards a removal of such slurs and an affirmation of the integrity of desire, conceived as both physical and spiritual.

Following "The Waking Earth" and "The Cow Pasture" are two sonnets, "When Milking Time is Done" and "The Frogs," which treat as both inevitable and desirable the periodic cessation of sensual stimulation and physical activity and their replacement by a calm concentration on less mundane and more purely spiritual matters. In the former, a "farmstead" and its inhabitants and surroundings—the "plough-horses" and "cattle," "pasture-lots" and "grey wilds"—gradually "fade . . . from view" in the twilight, leaving the evening first to "night-jars" and "frogs" and then to the stars, which, "gleam" by Tennysonian "gleam" (6), emerge in what the "Frogs" sonnet, in anticipation of "In the Wide Awe and Wisdom of the Night," describes as "the wide bright heavens" (7). Of course, the mere presence of "frogs" as "cool-fluting ministers of dream" (6) in "When Milking Time is Done" and the sonnet that bears their name reveals the close affinity between the two pieces. But the latter poem also recalls "The Cow Pasture" in its more obviously dualistic depiction of a cool evening spent contemplating the "bright heavens" and "solitary sky" as an antidote to "life's unstilled complaint," particularly "the unrest of passion" construed as a cognate of "noon's derisive visions" and "midday[s] soil and taint" (7). Subtext aside, however, "The Frogs" and, with it, "When Milking Time is Done" clearly evince Roberts's belief that nature and the literature of nature alike could serve the therapeutic purpose¹⁴ of bringing the victims of a "restless age, troubled with small cares seen in too close perspective," into liberating contact with a "large, contemplative wisdom" (*SP*, 280)—a belief shared, of course, by his fellow Confederation poets and frog-fanciers, Bliss Carman and Archibald Lampman.

In the next pair of sonnets (and the last from the seasons "sequence" that there is space to examine here), Roberts introduces a variation of his search for aesthetic and spiritual significance in the "common

forms" of "unregarded things" while also modulating the series away from the "primal sympathy" of the early nature sonnets towards the concern for "human suffering" and "philosophic" issues that becomes increasingly prominent in the course of *Songs of the Common Day*. In the terms that he himself uses in "The Poetry of Nature," it is as if in "The Salt Flats" and "The Fir Woods" (and the sonnets that succeed them, from "The Pea-Fields" [10] to "In September" [18] and beyond) Roberts begins to emphasize less the "power in nature . . . which excites in us emotion . . . or desire" and more the "power . . . which excites . . . imagination, or poignant association . . . [or] memory. . . ." (*SP*, 276). It is also as if, and as Mallinson has long since shown,¹⁵ Roberts begins to set his "imagination" and "memory" increasingly to work, in such sonnets as "The Salt Flats," "Burnt Lands" (12) and "The Winter Fields," on filling in the gaps created in external nature by the "absence" of things and people. While it would clearly be folly in considering a post-Romantic (or post-Lockean) poet to draw any firm distinctions among "imagination, poignant association, . . . [and] memory," it can be said that many of the sonnets in the central portion of *Songs of the Common Day* roughly divide themselves into poems of "imagination" and poems of "memory." "The Salt Flats" and "The Fir Woods" are cases in point, for whereas the former focusses on some "now unvisited . . . flats" where once the "tumbling floods of Fundy flow[ed]" in order to recall the "murmurs of [an Acadian] past that time has wronged" and to conjure the "ghosts of many an ancient memory / . . . by the brackish pools and ditches blind" (8), the latter finds the poet using the gaps between the "stirred branches" of some "Fir Woods" as "gates of wonder" through which "from the far-off shores of dream" comes the stuff of imaginative fantasy:

Mystic dream-dust of isle, and palm, and cave,
Coral and sapphire, realms of rose, that see
More radiant than ever earthly gleam
Revealed of fairy mead or haunted wave. (9)

As has been argued elsewhere¹⁶ with particular reference to "Tan-tramar Revisited" and "The Pea-Fields," with its "wayward blossoms . . . / And pale green tangles like a seamaid's hair" (10), imaginative fantasies provided one means of egress for the claustrophobic and freedom-loving Roberts from the confines of his Maritime life and landscape. As he says at the close of "The Fir Woods": "The vision lures. The spirit spurns her bound, / Spreads her unprisoned wing, and drifts from out / This green and humming gloom . . ." (9).

By permitting the poet to move beyond the here and now of whatever scene or season he finds himself in, memory and imagination are crucial to the development of *Songs of the Common Day* away from earthy and earthly concerns towards more abstractly human and philosophical matters. This is so because, by remembering the past or imagining the future—and especially by thinking of spring and summer in the midst of fall or winter as he increasingly does as the season “sequence” nears its climax (see “The Mowing” [9], “The Winter Fields” [24], “In an Old Barn” [25], and “Midwinter Thaw” [26])—the poet can discern and emphasize a cyclical pattern of renovation in nature that may have profound and comforting philosophical implications in the direction of an analogous rebirth or resurrection for the human spirit. As has already to an extent been seen, when memory and imagination first enter *Songs of the Common Day*, they do so in the somewhat tangential form of historical memory (“The Salt Flats”) and imaginative fantasy (“The Fir Woods”), or—to quote from only a little further along in the series (“The Mowing”)—a perhaps deceptively playful handling of the idea of imagining forward and remembering back:

... all noon long the sun, with chemic ray,
 Seals up each cordial essence in its cell,
 That in the dusky stalls, some winter's day,
 The spirit of June, here prisoned by his spell,
 May cheer the herds with pasture memories. (11)

In defending Roberts, “The Mowing,” and, particularly, the phrase “chemic ray” against negative comments by Desmond Pacey and others, Gerald Noonan has argued that these and other passages in *Songs of the Common Day* have an “ecological aspect” that reflects the poet’s “post-Darwinian spirituality,” his attempt to “fuse evolutionary theory with Christianity” (453, 459, 452). Noonan’s defence is a welcome one, and it places such poems as “The Mowing” in a light that is penetrating enough to bring into view the question of whether, in the passage just quoted at least, the strands being brought together are not “evolutionary theory [and] Christianity” but, rather, biology (photosynthesis, the process being poetically described by Roberts, was fully explained in the 1860s by Julius Sachs)¹⁷ and hermeticism or alchemy, the occult science whose vocabulary the “essence,” “spirit” and “spell” of the passage recall.

Roberts becomes less playful (and notice the pun—“pasture” / past year—in the final line of “The Mowing”) in his approach to the theme

of remembering forward the rebirths of past years in the two pairs of sonnets that conclude his seasonal "sequence" ("The Winter Fields" and "In an Old Barn," "Midwinter Thaw" and "The Flight of Geese"). As he does so, his thinking becomes even more obviously a combination of biological and occult science. Included in these sonnets are references to "the germ of ecstasy—the sum / Of life that waits on summer, till the rain / Whisper in April and the crocus come" (24) and to "Some shy foreteller . . . / Some voyaging ghost of bird, some effluence rare" that "prophesies," not merely the eventual return of spring, but also, "with a sanction and an awe profound, / . . . unknown, foreshadowed things" (27). That Roberts is at his most Carmanesque in lines such as these may be no coincidence, for Carman (to whom the *Songs of the Common Day* volume is dedicated) was also intrigued by occult ideas from at least the 1890s onwards, finding in the rebirth of nature in April an analogue for the rebirth of the soul after death. Indeed, Carman could be describing his cousin's apparently occult reading of nature towards the end of the season "sequence" in *Songs of the Common Day* when he says of the ancient Greeks and early Britons in *The Friendship of Art* that, in observing the seasonal cycles, they "would grasp quickly at the poetic analogy between the life of man and the life of nature through the seasons' progress. Seeing all nature die down and revive, they would eagerly guess at a future for the soul, and eternal springtime supervening upon the autumn of mortality."¹⁸ Perhaps Roberts even knew directly the passage of Karl Otfried Müller's *History of the Literature of Ancient Greece* upon which Carman's account of the "poetic analogy" between man and nature appears to be based. "The changes of nature," Müller writes, "must have been considered [by the Ancient Greeks] as typifying the changes in the lot of man . . . [I]t was a natural analogy which must have early suggested itself that the return of Persephone [symbol of the seed committed to the ground, and . . . the queen of the dead] to the world of light also denoted a renovation of life and a new birth to men."¹⁹

With Carman's "poetic analogy" and Müller's "natural analogy" in mind, it becomes even more possible to recognize that, though superficially separated by content and form, the seasons "sequence" and "ideas" "group" in *Songs of the Common Day* are, in fact, intimately related by Roberts's not altogether comfortable, because markedly Christian, probing of the possible relationship between the "renovation of life" in nature and "a new birth to men." Having looked portentously towards this "renovation of life" in "The Flight of Geese," the poet does not follow an occult route towards Persephone

and the Eleusinian mysteries, but, rather, continues to look upward at the “night” (27, 28), discovering a pattern that is of a different (though, the context suggests, perhaps related) order than the predictable cycles of rising and falling, going and coming, that he had observed in the “season-sonnets”:

In the wide awe and wisdom of the night
 I saw the round world rolling on its way,
 Beyond significance of depth and height
 Beyond the interchange of dark and day.
 I marked the march to which is set no pause,
 And that stupendous orbit, round whose rim
 The great sphere sweeps, obedient unto laws
 That utter the eternal thought of Him. (28)

Like the animal and vegetable life of the “season-sonnets,” the “round world” obeys cyclical and linear laws laid down by God, laws which “Man” alone can understand and, by so doing, come at once to know God directly and to appreciate the great potential of human beings:

I compassed time, outstripped the starry speed,
 And in my still soul apprehended space,
 Till, weighing laws which these but blindly heed,
 At last I came before Him face to face,—
 And knew the Universe of no such span
 As the august infinitude of Man. (28)

Roberts’s philosophical position here is neither obviously occult nor narrowly Christian, but more closely aligned (if a traditional category were to be sought) with the tenets of Natural Theology, which holds on the basis of such passages as Romans 1.20—“the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead”—that it is possible for man, by using his natural (that is, God-given) powers of observation and reason, to arrive at an understanding of God. To the extent that he goes beyond this in asserting, contrary to 1 Corinthians 13.12, that he has seen God “face to face” on this side of the grave, Roberts stretches the bounds of orthodoxy (not to say credibility), though hardly as far as Carman even in an innocuously mild piece of pantheism such as “Vestigia” (“I took a day to search for God. . .”).²⁰ On the evidence of “In the Wide Awe and Wisdom of the Night,” then, it would appear that *Songs of the Common Day* is an investigation rather than an endorsement of the “poetic” or “natural” analogy between renovation in nature and resurrection in man—that Roberts, for all his sense of “kinship” and “primal sympathy” with

external nature looked, at least in the early 1890s, not merely at but *through* the created world in his search for "Nature's God."²¹

The inevitable consequences of the recognition of clear distinctions among nature, man and God in "In the Wide Awe and Wisdom of the Night" are twofold: first, the sense of detachment from the external world that is evident in "The Herring Weir," "Blomidon," "The Night Sky," "Tides" and "The Deserted City" (29-33); and, second, the sense of human sympathy, of "passionate memory" (34) for people dead or absent, that develops through these sonnets to become the central concern of "Dark," "Rain," "Mist" and "Moonlight" (34-37). By turns meaningless (except as a source of food) and hostile to man in "The Herring Weir" and "Blomidon," external nature provides neither a passable connection to the infinite in "The Night Sky" ("O deep of Heaven, no beam of Pleiad ranging / Eternity may bridge thy gulf of species!" [31]) nor a comforting analogue for man's life in "Tides":

Yet soon for them [the tidal channels] the solacing tide returns
To quench their thirst of longing. Ah, not so
Works the stern law our tides of life obey!
Ebbing in the night watches swift away,
Scarce known ere fled for ever is the flow;
And in parched channel still the shrunk stream mourns.²² (32)

Dotting the closing sonnets of *Songs of the Common Day* and typifying their concern with bridging the gaps between, on the one hand, man and God and, on the other, man and his fellow humans, are interjections of address and emotion: "O deep of Heaven . . .," "Ah, not so. . .," "O tender singer . . .," "Ah God! If love had power . . ." (35), "And ah! that life, ah! . . ." (36), and "O solitary of the austere sky . . ." (38). That neither of these types of interjections appears elsewhere in the series except in the address to the "grave Mysteriarch" in the "Prologue" poem indicates as much as anything else the movement of *Songs of the Common Day* along a trajectory that leads from "primal sympathy" to more definitively human and philosophical concerns.

In view of the emphasis on male attraction to the female throughout *Songs of the Common Day* (as well as what is known about Roberts's sexual proclivities),²³ it is predictable that the human sympathy and suffering of the final pairs of sonnets in the series belong to the poet and various women who are absent from him in time and space. In "Blomidon" and "The Deserted City" Roberts's "passionate memory" of women loved and lost is relatively stylized and impersonal; in the former, it is directed towards the Acadian heroine Evangeline and, in the latter, towards an unnamed and resonantly mythical woman

whose recent death has stilled and silenced the city of the title. In "Dark," "Rain," "Mist" and "Moonlight," however, human sympathy and suffering are more personally focussed on the poet and his beloved, an unnamed woman whom he addresses across "time . . . distance" (35) and circumstances as "Dear" (34), a capitalized term which itself echoes back to the "Godlike" "Sower" of the second sonnet and anticipates Roberts's manner in the syncretic love poems of the *New York Nocturnes* volume of the late 1890s.²⁴ Spoken from the dark and rainy night of a soul and body that urgently desire "communion" (34) with an absent loved one, the personal love poems near the end of *Songs of the Common Day* borrow heavily from Tennyson and Dante Gabriel Rossetti²⁵ to express their feelings of yearning and entrapment. Yet they seem also to be authentic *cris de coeur* and, certainly, they carry forward from earlier sonnets in the series a concern with linear-cyclic times as destructive rather than reparative: "that the heart and brain / Might keep their mist and glamour, not to know / So soon the disenchantment and the pain!," exclaims the poet in "Mist," "But one by one our dear illusions go, / Stript and cast forth as time's slow wheel revolves" (37).

But, as Lampman also knew in his more optimistic moments, the end of life need not be simply human suffering in its various guises, from entrapment and yearning to "disenchantment and . . . pain" (36). "Our dear illusions" (37) may be "Stript and cast forth" by time, but the "heart" and "brain" will nevertheless (and by means of what a Freudian critic would doubtless describe as sublimation) find the ways to soothe, if not satisfy, their desires and hopes. No more than any other aspect of external nature does the "moon" in "Moonlight" provide the poet's heart with an answer to his yearnings and frustrations—an answer that can only come from within, through love's ability to turn "longing" and "desire" to imaginative ends:

In vain
 These aching lips, these hungering hearts that strain
 Toward the denied fruition of our bliss,
 Had love not learned of longing to devise
 Out of desire and dream our paradise. (37)

Nor, ultimately—which is to say, at the eschatological level towards which the poet repeatedly looks in the "philosophic" sonnets of *Songs of the Common Day*—can the moon, external nature, the created world, provide the answers which, in his humble yet—from the Christian perspective—justifiably proud way, man knows will come in due time to him and to him alone:

How small am I in thine [the moon's] august regard!
 Invisible,—and yet I know my worth!
 When comes the hour to break this 'prisoning shard,
 And reunite with Him that breathed me forth,
 Then shall this atom of the Eternal Soul
 Encompass thee in its benign control! (38)

Man is both a part of and apart from the universe that he inhabits: like all things animate and inanimate, he moves in linear and cyclical time, but, unlike everything else in creation, he is a "living soul" constituted by God with the "breath of life" (Genesis 2.7)—a rational and spiritual creature whose suffering and confidence alike stem from the fact that he need not follow "blindly" (28) the patterns of the nature with which he nevertheless (and to his advantage) has a "primal sympathy," but can look both at and through these patterns and, in the final analysis of "O Solitary of the Austere Sky," can transcend them. What Roberts thus leads the reader to recognize in the course of *Songs of the Common Day* is that the most important "soul" of all the "unregarded things" examined in the "series" is the "soul" of man, which must be seen, not as a product of mere nature like the "frogs," "weeds," "cattle," "trees," "geese" and, indeed, sun and "moon light" that the sonnets purport to be about, but as an exhalation of the "Eternal Soul" and, as such, more powerful and important than even the most "august" of its fellow-travellers in space and time—not to say the only one capable of writing and reading the "*poetry of earth* (*SP*, 276)," the "Songs" of the day and night that all God's creatures have in common. This is the stated and implied terminus at which the "philosophic" and, it must be said, religious mind arrives in *Songs of the Common Day* after learning what it can from the "kinship of earth" and the pain of "human suffering."

If *Songs of the Common Day* does, indeed, as argued here, move towards the position that man has a unique, privileged and God-given place in the universe, then it sets itself somewhat apart from the type of "nature-poetry" that Roberts describes as characteristic of the latter part of the nineteenth century in his 1897 essay on "The Poetry of Nature." Precosky is perfectly correct in seeing gestures towards Roberts's own "series of sonnets" in the emphasis in the early part of this essay on the sources of "the poetry of earth" in both the sanctioned ("paradisaal," beautiful, sublime) aspects of external nature and in "the most common scenes, the most familiar facts and forms"—"a bleak pasture lot," "a road-side thistle patch," "the drop of dew on a grass-blade"—that can be made equally the vehicles of nature-poetry's

“most penetrating and illuminating message” (*SP*, 276). But once the essentially religious and relatively orthodox quality of Roberts’s own “message” in *Songs of the Common Day* has been recognized, it becomes possible to perceive degrees of detachment and equivocation in his discussions towards the end of “The Poetry of Nature” of latter-day developments in English “nature-poetry,” especially “the note of nature-worship” or “pantheism” that he finds in Shelley (“He saw continually in nature the godhead which he sought and adored”) and perceives as “allied to that which colours the oldest verse of time . . . particularly . . . ancient Celtic song.” Pronouncing the Shelleyan “revival” of “nature-worship” “significant and stimulating” (today he might have said “interesting and provocative”),²⁶ Roberts proceeds to describe briefly and straightforwardly two related developments:

a revival of that strong sense of kinship, of the oneness of earth and man, which the Greeks and Latins felt so keenly at times, which Omar [Khayyám] knew and uttered, and which underlies so much of the verse of these later days.

The other unity—the unity of man and God, which forms so inevitable a corollary to the pantheistic proposition—comes to be dwelt upon more and more insistently throughout the nature-poetry of the last fifty years. (*SP*, 280-281)

As is the case with *Songs of the Common Day*, the degree to which Roberts was both a sympathetic and uncertain participant in these developments, a detached and, at most, agnostic assessor of the claim that external nature can provide answers to the ultimate questions of man’s spiritual origin and destination, does not fully emerge until the final sentence of “The Poetry of Nature” (*italics added*): “And whosoever follows the inexplicable lure of beauty, in colour, form, sound, perfume, or any other manifestation,—reaching out to it as *perhaps* a message from some unfathomable past, or a premonition of the future,—knows that the mystic signal beckons nowhere more imperiously than from the heights of nature-poetry” (*SP*, 281). In *Songs of the Common Day*, most notably in “The Flight of Geese,” Roberts certainly “reach[es] out” to external nature for the kind of message and “premonition” described here, but he does so within a framework that is more Christian than pagan (Celtic, Greek, Latin, Persian) and which, therefore, finds its answers to ultimate questions neither in “the pantheistic proposition” nor in a “sense . . . of the oneness of earth and man” but in a faith that looks with apparent confidence through nature and death to God.

NOTES

1. *Songs of the Common Day and Ave: an Ode for the Shelley Centenary* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1893) [iii]. All subsequent quotations from *Songs of the Common Day* are from this first edition, hereafter cited in the body of the text by page numbers only.
2. "The Need that Irks": Roberts's Sonnets in *Songs of the Common Day*," *Canadian Poetry: Studies, Documents, Reviews*, 22 (Spring/Summer, 1988): 31.
3. Roberts gives the poem this title in his *Selected Poems* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1936), a practice followed by W. J. Keith in his *Selected Poetry and Critical Prose, Literature of Canada: Poetry and Prose in Reprint* (Toronto and Buffalo: U of Toronto P, 1974). That "Across the fog the moon lies fair . . ." functions as a "Prologue" to the miscellaneous poems as well as the "sonnets" in *Songs of the Common Day* (and perhaps even also for *Ave*) is an implication of its initiative position in the 1893 volume which does not argue against its having a special relationship with the "series of sonnets" that it immediately precedes.
4. "'The Poetry of Earth': a Note on Roberts' Sonnets," *Studies in Canadian Literature* (Summer, 1976): 249, 251-53.
5. See "Kingdom of Absence," *Canadian Literature*, 67 (Winter, 1976): 31-38.
6. Though see W. J. Keith, "Introduction," *Selected Poetry and Critical Prose*, xxiv-xxv.
7. *Poetry and Criticism*, ed. A. Dwight Culler, Riverside Editions (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961) 161.
8. *Selected Poems and Prefaces*, ed. Jack Stillinger, Riverside Editions (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965) 45-46, 187-90.
9. "The Poetry of Nature," *Selected Poetry and Critical Prose*, 274. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Roberts's essays are from this edition, hereafter cited in the body of the text as *SP*.
10. See especially Roberts's "Introduction" to *Poems of Wild Life* (1888), "Wordsworth's Poetry" (1892), and "The Poetry of Nature" (1897), *ibid.*, 265-70, 271-75, and 276-81, from which most of the quotations in this paragraph above are assembled.
11. It is worth quoting at a little length from the source of this phrase: Roberts's "Introductory: The Animal Story," *Kindred of the Wild* (1902; Boston: L. C. Page, 1935) 29: "It frees us for a little from the world of shop-worn utilities, and from the mean tenement of self. . . . It helps us to return to nature. . . . It leads us back to the old kinship of earth. . . . It has ever the more significance, it has ever the richer gift of refreshment and renewal, the more humane the heart and spiritual the understanding which we bring to the intimacy of it." Although Roberts is referring here to the animal story, he could equally well be talking about the poetry of nature or, indeed, *Songs of the Common Day*.
12. The fact that "In the Wide Awe and Wisdom of the Night" is the first sonnet in the series to be printed without a space between the octave and the sestet (or after the first two quatrains) is a signal to the eye of an important shift in emphasis in the series.
13. Gerald Noonan, "Phrases of Evolution in the Sonnets of Charles G. D. Roberts," *English Studies in Canada*, 8 (December, 1982): 457.
14. For a discussion of the rise of the notion of art as therapy in late nineteenth-century North America, see T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), *passim*, but particularly 190-95. Roberts's conception of the social role of the animal story (see previous note 11) accords especially well with the "notion that art could provide release from bourgeois anxieties . . ." (191), a notion which, as intimated above, has wide implications for the poetry of Bliss Carman, Archibald Lampman and other Canadian writers of the period addressed by Lears.
15. See particularly "Kingdom of Absence," 33-35.
16. See D. M. R. Bentley, "The Poetics of Roberts's Tantramar Space," *The Proceedings of the Sir Charles G. D. Roberts Symposium*, ed. Carrie MacMillan (Halifax: Nimbus, 1984) 17-41.
17. I am grateful to Dick Greyson of the Department of Plant Sciences, University of Western Ontario, for taking the time and trouble to guide me through the steps leading to the full understanding by scientists of the process of photosynthesis.
18. *The Friendship of Art* (London: John Murray, 1905) 259.

19. *A History of the Literature of Ancient Greece*, trans. G. C. Lewis and D. W. Donaldson, and continued after the author's death by John William Donaldson (London: Longmans, 1858) I, 305-6.
20. *Poems* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1931) 41. I am grateful to Tracy Ware and R. M. Stingle for sharpening my awareness of the distinction between pantheism and panentheism.
21. Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, IV, 332, quoted from the one-volume edition of the Twickenham text of *The Poems*, ed. John Butt (London: Methuen, 1965) 546.
22. Following *The Collected Poems*, ed. Desmond Pacey and Graham Adams (Wolfville: Wombat, 1985) 88, I have emended the original text's "are" to "ere" in the penultimate line of this quotation.
23. See John Coldwell Adams, *Sir Charles God Damn: The Life of Sir Charles G. D. Roberts* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: U of Toronto P, 1984), *passim*. In the late 1880s and early 1890s, when the love sonnets included in *Songs of the Common Day* were written (see *The Collected Poems*, 422 ["Dark"], 429 ["Rain"], 417 ["Mist"], and 450-51 ["Moonlight"]), Roberts was seriously involved with at least two women in addition to his wife May, including Mrs. Louise Wilde, whose sudden death probably lies behind several elegiac poems in the *Songs of the Common Day* volume, from "The Deserted City" in the sonnet series to "The Valley of the Winding Water," "Severance," and "Grey Rocks and Greyer Sea" in the "Poems" section. It is worth wondering, however, whether the date of "May, 1893" ([iii]) on the "Prefatory Note" to the volume is not a punning acknowledgement of Roberts's wife.
24. See D. M. R. Bentley, "Half Passion and Half Prayer: the New York Nocturnes," *The Sir Charles G. D. Roberts Symposium*, ed. Glenn Clever, *Reappraisals: Canadian Writers*, 10 (Ottawa: U of Ottawa P, 1984) 54-75.
25. Compare the "hungering hearts" of "Moonlight" (37) with the "hungry heart" of Tennyson's "Ulysses" (*The Poems*, ed. Christopher Ricks, *Annotated English Poets* [London: Longman, New York: Norton, 1969] 562) and observe the similarity of tone between the sestet of "Rain" (35) and such lines as the following from "The Blessed Damozel": "To one, it is ten years of years. / . . . Yet now, and in this place, / Surely she leaned o'er me—her hair / Fell about my face. . . . / Nothing . . ." (*The Works*, ed. William M. Rossetti [London: Ellis, 1911] 3).
26. Indirect support for the argument being offered here is provided by L. R. Early's astute observation that in *Ave* "Roberts's praise is for Shelley, but his essential kinship is with the poet of Grasmere," a point which he expands into a brief consideration of the Wordsworthian echoes in *Songs of the Common Day*, particularly in "its title and prologue"; see "Roberts as Critic," *The Sir Charles G. D. Roberts Symposium*, 179-82.