

## MAN VS PROGRESS AS DEPICTED BY EDWARD A. ROBINSON'S POEM THE MILL

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With a reference to a short-story by A. Daudet & the play MATEO by Armando Discépolo.

Robinson wrote to a friend, 'I prefer men and women who live, breathe, talk, fight, make love or go to the devil after the manner of human beings. Art is only valuable to me when it reflects humanity or at least human emotions.'

His 1920 poem *The Mill* lives up to his aesthetic code. At first sight though, if we consider the title, it is an object which stands out. A quick reading furthers the impression: personal pronouns without reference; the importance attached to the impersonal 'it' towards the end; the functions of people involved, the miller and the miller's wife, taking pride of place instead of names; above all. Life and Time handled as abstract notions rather than breathing realities. From this perspective, the mill suggest the wheel of life which, by coming to a halt, has allowed death, eternity, to settle in. So we infer from the contrast between 'waited long' 'cold tea' 'dead fire' 'any more' at the beginning; and the 'warm mealy fragrance of the past' half-way through the poem -when the mill was still at work and scented the ground corn, the scent of a 'living' mill, i.e. of life -reinforced by the last part, as from line 18, where commonplace images of death (dark, black, night, stillness) introduce the undifferentiated, the 'same as ever', eternity.

Yet, this cosmic interaction between Life and Time is lived through the particular lives of two human beings (identified by their socio-economical roles, the miller and the miller's wife, the latter also implying an affective tie) facing a conflict of some kind (hinted at by words such as 'wrong' and the

characters' attitudes and assumptions which evince defective communication, insecurities) at a certain place and time (the mill is out of work and that situation is irreversible, as shown by 'the past' 'anymore'). The conflict unfolds into a tragedy (the couple's suicide). Their motivations are made clear (the lack of work and its manifold consequences) and the general facts serving as background to the poem are well known. Written at the height of the naturalistic influence in literature, this poem seems built on a 'fait divers', a piece of news out of a Sunday newspaper (cf. a sordid drama, realistically described as in 'sick with fear' hanging from a beam').

The progress brought about by automation eased the way from an economy based on the work of the land to the finances regulated by industry and speculation. This change demands an adaptation of human attitudes and activities which some people find hard to achieve; their inability estranges them from the world; breeds anguish and loneliness (of the fire was dead at home, but the mill kept the warmth) and arouses the question of survival. As the miller's wife puts it 'one way of the few there were' is death, for it can 'hide her' (from shame and remorse) and does not leave any 'mark' (of the wound suffered, i.e. the mental pain). And this aspect furthers the issue by raising psychological and moral questions.

Man's fight for survival is spurred by the need of food, mate and territory. Those he spiritualizes into work, wife and dignity as he grows from animalism up towards humanity. When work (i.e. food) is threatened, his life is. Moreover, the acceleration associated with the machine both in the functioning of the thing itself as in the changes wrought, demands from man a quick response to the new situation which some are unable or unwilling to produce for it means a step backwards, a reversal into a primitive stage of development where everything is to be done anew. Worse still, man has to quit his old world, to resign a set of accepted values, a tradition to which he is affectionately bound. A refusal to this demand is a refusal to survive. Thus the miller 'lingering at the door' 'so long that it seems yesterday' fails to produce the adequate response. His reluctant farewell to his home, the loveless world; his return to the past, the now useless mill, is his farewell to life.

This poem curiously recalls two instances of the same theme.

An antecedent, in all probability well known to the poet who was a proficient reader of French literature, is provided by the short-story *Le Secret de Maître Cornille* by Alphonse Daudet, published in 1869. The story parallels that of the poem; only the tone is different, lighter, humorous; and it is highly descriptive of the landscape, people and traditions of the South of France, with a love interest interwoven and a happy ending. Yet, in the

accents of Maitre Cornille when his 'secret' has been discovered, namely, that his mill turned grainless, we recognize the feeling,

Maintenant, je n'ai plus qu'a mourir...le moulin est deshonoré...  
(Now, there's nothing left for me to do but die... the mill has been dishonoured).

while another character refers to the past as 'au beau temps des meuniers', the 'millers' good ol 'times', an irrepressible longing for the times when the affective link between work and workers found justification in the sense of dignity attached, the 'honour' to be deduced from the functions performed, a feeling unknown in industrial society.

Nearer in time and place, we have found an echo in MATEO, the play by Armando Discépolo, staged in 1923 -only three years after publication of Robinson's poem -where the main character, Miguel by name, who makes a living out of a horse -drawn coach, finds himself outdated by the automobile. When urged to adapt by his family by becoming a car-driver, he bursts out,

Yo chofer? Ante de hacerme chofer -que son lo que me han quitado el pane de la boca- me hago ladrón! Yo voy a morir col látigo a la mano e la galera puesta, como murió mi padre, e como murió me abuelo! Chofer...(Scene 1)

In his pidgin Spanish, the mixture of Italian and Castillian that went into the making of 'cocoliche', the immigrant re-enacts the miller's drama. This time it will be a symbolical death, the surrender of moral principles; he will express himself more fully than the miller; he will not be better heard or understood for that. And the outcome of the struggle will not differ greatly from that of the poem. When the police come to take Miguel away as he has fulfilled the promise, the wife cries out to him,

Miquele, perdoname, perdoname!... (Michael, forgive me...)

The names of the poem and the play make an interesting comparison. The mill is the place of work but it is also the foundation of self-respect, the territory one has been unable to defend. Psychologically we are all attached to our place of work: that's my school, shows the student proudly; in our firm / factory, may casually mention both white and blue collars alike. Therefore, it embodies in its physical and in its symbolical presence the

whole meaning of the poem. So with the play. Mateo is not the name of the protagonist but that of the horse which draws the coach, and it relates to Miguel not merely in an everyday man-animal friendship. When Miguel says,

Estoy cansado. Como Mateo...ya no sirvo...  
(I'm tired. As Mateo... I'm no use...)

his identification is relevant to Mateo's function as breadwinner and becomes thus the acknowledgment of failure. It expresses what Robinson, in a far more impersonal, not less moving because of its bareness, puts as.

There are no millers anymore

The reference to time (anymore) is echoed in the play in that same passage. When the coachman's son, who works as car-driver, brings his mother the money so earned, she receives it with the words,

Era tiempo (it was high time)

just meaning they were at the end of their resources, but the father starts at the irony.

Era tiempo...y qué tarde que es! (It was high time...and it's so late!)

for the police are coming for him, but his family does not know yet. Worthwhile noticing the stage direction at that point 'mirándolos largamente' which compares with 'lingering' and 'so long'.

The wife, as with the miller's wife, does not seem to take in the situation, either. And, as we have seen, both in their own ways fail along with their husbands, and in their reaction we see the anguish and guilty feelings produced by their failure.

Suicide, either actual or symbolical, occur as a desperate move of man to assert himself, to hold his own when cornered by forces he feels unable to control for, as Pascal wrote, the Universe crushes Man; but it crushes him blindly whereas Man dies but dies knowingly and in this awareness lies his greatness.

The reference of one work to the other seems to emphasize the universality of man's predicament when confronted by change, and clarify the nature

of his suffering. But it also goes to duly appraise the accomplishment of the poet. He produces a melodrama devoid of sentimentality with in the synthetic compactness of a poem, told in plain realistic language -as different from the poetic conventions of his time as possible- where he makes meaningful one of man's basic problems of existence while arousing the kind of emotion that the other authors take time and pages to awake.

The poem, a suitable form to impress us, readers of the 80ies, forever pushed onwards, containing a poetic message we are only too well prepared to understand.

As a conclusion we would like to stress the fact that the language chosen by these artists, enroled as they were in the naturalistic movement of literary expression, implies that beyond their nostalgic longing for the beauty of an irrecoverable past, and notwithstanding their ability to seize on and convey human suffering, they kept an extraordinary vitality. A vitality which, opposite to that of their creatures, allowed them to adapt to the times, to survive as creators and generously point forwards, towards the open way, 'one of the few there were', the always valid way of Art.

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### *The Mill*

The miller's wife had waited long,  
 The tea was cold, the fire was dead;  
 And there might yet be nothing wrong  
 In how he went and what he said:  
 "There are no millers any more,"  
 And he had lingered at the door  
 So long that it seemed yesterday.  
 Sick with a fear that had no form  
 She knew that she was there at last;  
 And in the mill there was a warm  
 And mealy fragrance of the past.  
 What else there was would only seem  
 To say again what he had meant;  
 And what was hanging from a beam  
 Would not have heeded where she  
 went.

And if she thought it followed her,  
She may have reasoned in the dark  
That one way of the few there were  
Would hide her and would leave no  
mark:  
Black water, smooth, above the weir  
Like starry velvet in the night,  
Though ruffled once, would soon appear  
The same as ever to the sight.

### Bibliography

1. **Selected Poems of Edward Arlington Robinson**, ed. by Dawen Zabel, N.Y. 1965.
2. **Edwin A. Robinson**, by Hoyt Franchere, N>Y> 1968
3. **Mateo** by Armando Discépolo, Bs. As., 1976
4. **Lettres de Mon Moulin**, by Alphonse Daudet, Paris, 1935.

### RESUMEN

**EL HOMBRE FRENTE AL PROGRESO SEGUN EL POEMA "EL MOLINO" DE EDWARD A. ROBINSON.** Con especial referencia a un cuento de Alphonse Daudet y a la obra MATEO de Armando Discépolo.

Esta presentación propone una comparación entre tres obras pertenecientes al movimiento naturalista en literatura, a saber **Le Secret de Maître Cornille**, un cuento de 1869; el poema **El Molino** de Edward Arlington Robinson tomado de **The Three Taverns**, publicado en 1920; y **Mateo**, la obra llamada 'grotesco' de Armando Discépolo, puesta en escena en 1923, con especial énfasis en las dos últimas.

Su objeto:

- a) Poner en evidencia la comunidad de reacciones y actitudes humanas cuando se ven abocadas a la resolución de problemas idénticos, en este caso la necesidad de supervivencia.
- b) Analizar las motivaciones que pueden conducir al hombre, a renunciar a este llamado vital.
- c) Destacar la originalidad de Robinson en el tratamiento de este tema, por el cual el logra producir un melodrama desprovisto de sentimentalismo aunque cargado de la complejidad propia al planteo existencial, dentro de los

límites y las exigencias de un poema breve, capaz de provocar la clase de emoción que hace de la lectura del mismo una experiencia valiosa.

d) Señalar la vigencia del mensaje poético y exponer la paradoja entre el tema analizado -la historia de un fracaso- y la realidad artística obtenida: una obra de arte consumada.