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The Tragic Light In Edwin Arlington Robinson

Margaret L. Dauner

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FOREWORD

Edwin **THE TRAGIC LIGHT IN EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON:** is a leading
contemporary **The Use of Symbolism in Robinson's Treatment of Failure** has been
called the creator of a new poetical language, which includes a new use of
vocabulary, rhythm, and imagery; the interpreter of twentieth century
America; the voice of modern New England; a "modern classic"; and, by all
critics, the poet of failure. It is, however, as a poet who finds his
most significant subject **Margaret Louise Deuner** to be a "failure"
that he is to be studied here; particularly, with emphasis upon his
standards for determining such failure. This standard has been tried to ex-
press in the term "the tragic light".

This study, then, hopes to point out with some degree of accuracy
first, the criterion by which Robinson judges toward personality (or its
effectiveness or lack of it); second, what the limitations of his failures

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of English**

character exists. If a specific application of the principle of the light
to distinct representative cases, it will be possible to establish some
interrelated stages of the light itself, and to regard it as a "tragic
reagent." A **Division of Graduate Instruction** of **Sutler University**
philosophy will also be a **Indianapolis** it should be stated that, how-
ever, that this study is no more postulates the light as a philosophical
principle, but regards it, on the contrary, as a "tragic light" itself.

I shall try to define exactly what the term "the tragic light"
means for Robinson, as I have explained it above, according to its

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presence or absence, I shall analyze those of his characters who best illustrate its freighted and tragic working-out in their individual destinies. It should be stated FORWARD: thesis was entirely completed

before the writer had access to the latest critical work on Robinson, Edwin Arlington Robinson is admittedly one of America's leading contemporary poets. As such, he has been variously hailed. He has been named the creator of a new poetical technique, which implies a new use of viewpoint, rather than poetical, as in this study, Miss Kaplan's work has covered much of the same ground, and often arrives at similar conclusions. America; the voice of modern New England; a "modern classic"; and, by all means, therefore, he is cited occasionally in this study, where cross-critics, the poet of failures. It is, however, as a poet who finds his own, difference of viewpoint, or substantiation may be interesting or most significant subject-matter in the personality termed a "failure" valuable.

that he is to be studied here; particularly, with emphasis upon his I wish to express my deep appreciation for the assistance rendered standard for determining such failure. This standard I have tried to examine during the preparation of this manuscript; particularly, to Dr. Allegre press in the term "the tragic light".

Thank you, for your constant kindness, critical guidance, and advice. I am also indebted to Dr. John S. Harrison, head of the Department of English, first, the criterion by which Robinson judges human personality for its effectiveness or lack of it; second, what the limitations of his failures are, and how these limitations operate in the peculiar world in which the character exists. By a specific application of the principle of the Light

to nineteen representative poems, it will be possible to establish some interpretations of the Light itself, and to examine it as a character reagent. A concluding implication as to the quality of Robinson's philosophy will also be a natural result. It should be stated here, however, that this study in no wise postulates the Light as a philosophical principle, but regards it, on the contrary, purely as a poetic symbol.

I shall try to define exactly what the term "the tragic light" means for Robinson, as I have applied it here; and, according to its

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presence or absence, I shall analyze those of his characters who best illustrate its freighted and tragic working-out in their individual destinies. It should be stated that this thesis was entirely completed before the writer had access to the latest critical work on Robinson, "Philosophy in the Poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson", by Estelle Kaplan, a 1940 Columbia University Press publication. Though philosophical in viewpoint, rather than poetical, as is this study, Miss Kaplan's work has covered much of the same ground, and often arrives at similar conclusions.

It will, therefore, be noted occasionally in this study, where cross reference, differences of viewpoint, or substantiation may be interesting or valuable.

I wish to express my deep appreciation for the assistance rendered me during the preparation of this manuscript; particularly, to Dr. Allegra Stewart, for her constant kindness, critical guidance, and advice. I am also indebted to Dr. John S. Harrison, head of the Department of English, to Mrs. Alice B. Wesenberg, to Mr. Don Sparks, and to Dr. Elijah Jordan, head of the Department of Philosophy, for valuable and stimulating suggestions.

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that, then, were the prevailing characteristics of the times¹ and the locality into which Robinson was born. That were some events pertinent to the formulation of his poetic and moral concepts. To answer these questions, it is necessary to examine the circumstances themselves; for it is against these "darkened" **BEHIND THE FAILURES** poem's parade of failures is to march.

A. Robinson's New England

Robinson's times and locality may be defined from a passing glance at the world of Gardner,² Maine, in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Particularly the "poet of failures". His poems deal preeminently with the problems of men and women who err through their various limitations, and typical "old" New England towns, in the years just prior to the poet's birth, who usually err tragically. Since this is true, it is necessary to survey a backward glance is necessary; for Robinson is a poet of hard and briefly, and attempt to classify, the materials from which the analyses changing times; and since he so often details the confusion of change, is for this study will be drawn. Such a survey will follow immediately in is important, for a fuller understanding, to take the milieu out of which a subsequent chapter.

Each change has arisen. Even though the lower towns are set in "a peculiarly generalized locality,"³ and though his characters might well look to his own reactions to life for some explanation of his particular be of any race, or any time, still, his settings pre-eminently carry the views of life, and of his unique emphases. For often such views and such grayed tones of a declining New England grandeur, and his people carry emphases are a more or less direct result of the experience which has that New England in their hearts and being,⁴ conditioned them.

The New England of 1810, then, a dozen years before Robinson's Such would seem to be the case, at least, with the work of this

poet. Without leaning too heavily upon some conveniently-apparent facts in Robinson's life, it nevertheless appears probable that certain near-Baltimore; John Mackinnon, 1810, tragic circumstances, coupled with a decided New England heritage, environment, and temperament, were factors that intensified his interest in the "founded" some with their years before Edgar Lee Masters' "poet of failures" problems of failure; and that these factors predisposed him naturally toward such emphasis in the character conceptions set forth in his poems.

What, then, were the prevailing characteristics of the times¹ and the locality into which Robinson was born? What were some events pertinent to the formulation of his poetic and moral concepts? To answer these questions, it is necessary to examine the circumstances themselves; for it is against these "darkening hills" that Robinson's parade of failures is to march. Robinson's times and locality may be deduced from a passing glimpse at the world of Gardiner,² Maine, in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Further, Gardiner must also be regarded, as representing a very typical "old" New England town, in the years just prior to the poet's birth.

A backward glance is necessary; for Robinson is a poet of hard and changing times; and since he so often details the confusion of change, it is important, for a fuller understanding, to note the milieu out of which such change has arisen. Even though the longer poems are set in "a peculiarly generalized locality,"³ and though his characters might well be of any race, or any time, still, his settings preeminently carry the graying tones of a declining New England grandeur, and his people carry that New England in their hearts and brains.⁴

The New England of 1850 then, nineteen years before Robinson's

1. For the general social backgrounds, the chief source is Robert P. Tristram Coffin, New Poetry of New England, --Frost and Robinson, Baltimore; John Hopkins Press, 1938.

2. Gardiner is also important here for its being generally accepted as the prototype for Robinson's "Tilbury Town", which, incidentally, was "founded" some eighteen years before Edgar Lee Masters' "Spoon River".

3. Coffin, op. cit., p. 39.

4. Coffin, p. 30.

birth, was still a landscape which differed materially from the scene as it would present to the wide eyes of a sensitive boy who walked the streets of Gardiner, or sauntered, during the '70's and '80's, along its then-empty and rotting wharves. In 1880, the Western Atlantic was dotted with the white sails of ships; the horizon was wreathed with smoke from the new steamboats. And New England was still new England. Amy Lowell writes of Robinson's own town: "I know of no place in America so English in atmosphere as Gardiner".¹ Mr. Coffin adds that "the most fundamental concepts of older New England seem...traditionally English and definitely old-fashioned".² First year, was a thriving mill-town, a center for shipping; with houses were mansions, formal, pillared, spacious, furnished with treasures from London, Paris, Venice; and the "best room" was "dedicated to high moments",--the funeral or the courtship. Furniture was of plush, silk, or haircloth, and stood "proud, severe and uncommon". Farms were prosperous and orderly, their attic-storerooms stocked with apples, popcorn, jellies, jams--the setting of "Snow-Bound"--and farms were everywhere. The farmer himself had "supreme confidence in the rightness of his life and his neighbors", and in the rightness of the patterns of his religious and moral beliefs".³ The neat, precise white churches of the old New England were full of such confident people, who arrived in their best carriages, and came for the day with their abundant and healthy families.

1. Amy Lowell, Tendencies in Modern American Poetry, Houghton Mifflin Company, Riverside Press, Cambridge, 1917, p. 11.

2. Coffin, op. cit., p. 4.

3. Ibid., p. 14.

America. In 1850, the "American doctrine of unlimited opportunity" was at its height. People still believed in "basic, sure, unchanging principles". Life was to improve, by generations, and to expand, individually. Everything was growth. The "doctrine of improvement was a vital adjunct to Emerson's philosophy of the Superior Man... The Transcendentalists preached a philosophy... of becoming".¹ These people were sure of their ancestors, of themselves, of their children. And, says Mr. Coffin, "their economic and social foundations made it easy for them to keep the faith".² and Cyrus Gardiner itself, whither the Robinson family had moved at the end of the poet's first year, was a thriving mill-town, a center for shipping; with names in the town which echoed the grandeur of an Elizabethan world--York, Howard, Tudor, Talbot, Lancaster. On Dresden Street, colonial homes possessed the grace and dignity of their created family silver, and ivory and lacquers recalled the China from which sea-faring ancestors had brought them. There was an active, commercial side to Gardiner, also; for in its industrial symphony, it blended the tones of screaming saws, mill-wheels, tugs on the Kennebec River. And then, always, there was the nine o'clock curfew, the determining voice of Puritan New England.³

Gardiner--a pertinently typical town of "old" New England--had its aesthetic interests, too. It read the standard English poets; it boasted citizens who had had correspondence with learned societies in

1. Magnolia, pp. 111, 112, 113.

2. Coffin, op. cit., p. 9.

3. Ibid., p. 15.

4. Coffin, op. cit., p. 9.

5. Hermann Hagedorn, Edwin Arlington Robinson, A Biography, New York, the Macmillan Company, 1938, pp. 50-52.

America and Europe; it even "wrote" itself--casually, or in contribution to "St. Nicholas", and other magazines; or in the girls' stories of Laura Richards,¹ daughter of Julia Ward Howe and Samuel Gridley Howe.² It wrote verse, as old New England, and America, was writing--refined, genteel, patterned verse, in the tradition of the older poets who "wore their best clothes all the time".³ Furthermore, says Amy Lowell, in writing of American poetry from 1830 to the Civil War, this was a tradition of "racial homogeneity", in that Wordsworth, on the one hand, and Byron, on the other, were "main springs". In as much as America was still a literary province of England, the New England Six--Whittier, Bryant, Emerson, Longfellow, Lowell and Holmes--might well be called "English provincial poets".⁴ Poetry then was calm. "To be a poet was to be on a rostrum".⁵ The poet might touch humble life, but the "village blacksmith became as eloquent as the man in the pulpit, and his devotion to work was linked with the whole pattern of a beneficent universe".⁶ Poetry was also romantic. Steeped in the fogs from the Atlantic, carrying with it a vision of out-bound sails bellied in the wind, it was natural that the

1. We are indebted to Mrs. Richards for one of the most intimate sketches of Robinson, her E A R, printed by the Harvard University Press, in 1936.

2. Hagedorn, op. cit., pp. 50-52.

3. Coffin, op. cit., p. 4.

4. Lowell, op. cit., p. 5.

5. Goffin, op. cit., p. 5.

6. Ibid.

poetry of old New England should be poetry of adventure; tinged with yearning for the remote and the singular. Love, when it appeared, and in contrast to a later "exploration of minor and private moods",¹ was "a wistful and unfleshy passion".²

Such then, restrained, Puritan, elegant, picturesque, confident, and genteelly bustling on streets and wharves, were the spirit, the scene, the poetry, of the old New England.

A single generation was to reset the stage in a dimming light, and to replace the sturdy citizens, serenely sure of a purposive universe, with eccentric, frustrated, and bewildered remnants of a now outmoded tradition and class. For major events had occurred, or were to continue to occur until American history reached the golden commercial apex of the 1890's. The Civil War had left its bloody marks on North and South. The accelerating rhythm of westward-marching feet is recalled in Robinson's poem, "The Klondike"--the song of

... five men together,
Five left o'twelve men to find the golden river.³

Sensitive and increasingly bewildered provincial ears were catching ever more frequently the metallic crescendo of more and more mechanically turning wheels. We remember the individual industrial tragedy lined in "The Mill".⁴ There was, too, the fact of the increasing barrenness and fatigue of the

1. Coffin, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Original sources for this study are Robinson's Collected Poems, New York: The Macmillan Company, edition of 1939, p. 189.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 460.

New England soil. All of these were to exact their toll of the gracious ways of life in conservative and elegant old New England. It was a darkening scene which unfolded before the contemplative gaze of Robinson between the years of 1870 and 1890--the years of his boyhood and young manhood. It was a transition period for American poetry, too; for while "in New England their great group of writers was still in... its noon, the afternoon of its decline was upon it".¹ Says Miss Lowell again, "The robustness of Byron gave place to the sugared sentimentality of Tennyson; the moral strength of Wordsworth made way for the frozen didacticism of Matthew Arnold... Technique usurped the place of emotion, and words... were exalted out of all due proportion... Our poets were largely phonographs to greater English poets dead and gone".² It was during this twenty years that Robinson became so imbued with the now-minor tones of his native New England, that that quality is inextricably woven into the emotional texture of his poetry. It was in the streets of Gardiner that he was to encounter and ponder the paradoxes of human personality, particularly that type of personality in which the town was "rich in legendry".³ There was, for example, Sedgwick Plummer, the town's outstanding failure, who came down from driving two dashing horses and living in an expensive manse, to shuffling along Water Street, sleeping at night in

1. Bruce Weirick, From Whitman to Sandburg in American Poetry, New York: Macmillan Company, 1924, p. 72.

2. Collected Poems of Miss Lowell, p. 5-6.

3. Lowell, op. cit., pp. 5-6.

4. op. cit., p. 2, Gardiner and Tilbury Town.

area-ways, and stealing in the dark to the back door of the local hotel for the basket of food which the proprietor set there for him.¹

But Sedgwick Plummer was only one stark example out of many. For now, says Mr. Coffin, "the sons of families who had once had everything from ships and money, to minds that were sure they had an important part to play in the world" were become the "sons of families dispossessed both of material and spiritual wealth". They were "sons of rulers" who no longer ruled.² Ill at ease in an increasingly mechanized world they did not understand, and ever fewer in number, they were retreating into "empty houses and long silences". They were "aristocrats both in their ideas about the means to life and the purpose of it."³ Their qualities were the qualities of Flammone, of Richard Cory, of Aunt Imogene⁴--charity, reticence, tenderness, courage. But the world which created them had passed; and they were left "without any life to shape to the code".⁵

Three forces had reshaped the New England spirit and scene to its then-diminished mould. They were the "disintegration of an economic fabric" which occurred with the passing to West and South of New England leadership in sea trade and manufactures; "the coming of a new kind of knowledge" in the development of the new science; "the insufficiency of the New England code itself"--a code "not founded on standards that are

1. Hagedorn, op. cit., pp. 53-54.

2. Coffin, op. cit., p. 31.

3. Ibid., p. 33.

4. Collected Poems of Robinson, pp. 3, 82, 184.

5. Coffin, p. 33.

wide enough for a whole world to grow by".¹ To this three-fold instrument for change the very setting responded negatively. Mr. Coffin remarks that the houses along Robinson's Kennebec River are not so well painted now, nor in repair. "Whippoorwills...are

The wild is coming back. You may come upon porticoed houses falling into ruins in the perpetual shade of enveloping trees that have grown from their very floors. There are fewer farms than were fifty years ago. There is more wild land in Maine than there was one hundred years ago...Familiar old landmarks, covered over slowly, years by year. A roadway lost. Another light gone out for good in the house across the valley...Whippoorwills singing nearer the house each spring. Stonewalls are lost among the maples. A deer comes upon tame apple trees in the very heart of his forests...The deer eats the apples some man designed for his grandchildren. But the man is under the earth now, and his grandchildren are in a distant place, or have never come to being. A man can come upon a graveyard in the thick woods. The headstones are slanted, and some have fallen under the powerful twisting of live hemlock roots. An old man stirs uneasily in his bed in a house too big for one old man.²

The people are keeping pace with the land, developing queer negative tendencies. They are the people of Robert Frost, as well as of Robinson--the Hill wives--who inhabit the back hills; who do not "live" but simply "stay". They develop odd patterns of behavior; strange fears-- of the twig at the window. They grow to like their loneliness. Or they become restless automatons, like John Everaldow;³ or they are fascinated by rotting wharves; or called, like Luke Havergal,⁴ by dead voices.

"Children sacrifice themselves for elders; aunts for nephews".⁵ Their

1. Coffin, op. cit., pp. 36-37.

2. Ibid., pp. 17-18.

3. Collected Poems, p. 73.

4. Ibid., p. 74.

5. Coffin, op. cit., p. 40.

"houses are too big for people growing smaller."¹ Sheltering a dozen children a generation ago, now these houses harbor two spinster sisters of what it was that happened there, and what no mortal knows, who live years together without speaking, and far off a westerly shriek, and then there was a light that showed the way for men to seek.

On the river, there is nothing moving at all. "Shipyards...are gone as completely as towns of the Indians...Ice-houses have sunk into the earth. There are wharves and warehouses rotting away in Gardiner, and Hallowell, Bowdoinham and Beth."² The sea beyond the Kennebec is empty, too. "The coast that once was the cradle of captains is empty today...Maine has always bred her best children for other states farther West. Empty cradles are everywhere in Maine; in towns, in houses, in minds."³

This, then, is the world of Robinson; these are some of the scenes and types of people which the new New England offered the growing poet. They cast a shadow over him; they impregnated his poetry with a sense of fatality, of decline, of futility and frustration, that was never to be outgrown. For his last poems carry it as poignantly as do his first ones. One has only to glance through his worlds to find, time and again, a swiftly sketched landscape, or a vividly etched characterization, which bears the note of reality, experienced and absorbed into a poet's consciousness.

Among the most obvious poetical re-presentings of the New England scene and its twisted, thwarted characters are such poems as "Stafford's

1. Coffin, op. cit., p. 40

2. Ibid., p. 18.

3. Ibid., p. 19.

Cabin¹, where an unsolved death occurred: a mechanized and commercialized world.

An apple tree that's yet alive saw something, I suppose,
Of what it was that happened there, and what no mortal knows.
And Some one on the mountain heard far off a master shriek,
And then there was a light that showed the way for men to seek
"broken flutes": They are here, too. They are revealed in the vastitudes
of Luke Haverton
7 We found it in the morning with an iron bar behind,
And there were chains around it; but no search could ever find
7 Either in the ashes that were left, or anywhere,
A sign to tell of who or what had been with Stafford there.

Or there is the "Dead Village",² where there is "penance of the vast"

appeared for ...nothing but the ghosts of things,-- is "she lives" and
No life, no love, no children, and no men;

"Death forgets". It is she is the poor relation of New England or of any
"The Tavern"³ mocks us with its sinister mystery:
other land--"unthought, unthought-of and unheard".

Whenever I go by there nowadays
There And look at the rank weeds and the strange grass, essentials
The torn blue curtains and the broken glass,
I seem to be afraid of the old place; strange part of time,
And something stiffens up and down my face,
"Aunt Leggett" For all the world as if I saw the ghost with a smile
Of old Ham Amory, the murdered host,
With his dead eyes turned on me all aglaze.

"The Wilderness"⁴ is burdened with the grimness of bleak November in New
There is the "Dark House" itself, which confines so many of these isolated
England, with its "frost along the marshes", its "frozen wind that skins
souls about when Robinson writes:
the shoal where it shakes the dead black water", its "moan across the

lowland". "Pass Thalassa Thalassa"⁵ recalls those doughty men who went
down to the sea--but the men are lost, and the sea is empty. Perhaps the
lost soul of the old New England itself, its inability to continue in the
old way a gracious existence, is lamented by Robinson in "The Ballade of
Broken Flutes"⁶--where "the broken flutes of Arcady" lie on forgotten
activity from agency in time, with clearly and visibly portrayed time

1. Collected Poems, p. 14.

2. Ibid., p. 88.

3. Ibid., p. 93.

4. Ibid., p. 99.

5. Ibid., p. 335.

6. Ibid., p. 77.

ground, hushed forever by the iron blows of a mechanized and commercialized world.

The miller's wife had waited long;
The less she said, the firer was dead.

And what of those who even yet continue to strive to play the "broken flutes"? They are here, too. They are revealed in the wistfulness of Luke Havergal waiting by "the western gate" for the voice of his dead "any more". She enters the mill with its "scent and smell" of the love; in the ageless poignance of the "Poor Relation"¹ fearful of bothering her few relatives, who leave her gladly, their "penance or the past" soon "black water smooth above the weir" appears as untroubled as ever, appeased for the time. Her laughter is gallant while "she lives" and

So New England, old and new, passes silent and vivid. It is not "death forgets". But she is the Poor Relation- of New England or of any other land--"unsought, unthought-of and unheard".

Robinson became, in the words of Robert Frost, "a man lost in the world of seduces".² Certainly it seems logical to assume that, confronted daily are a man alone in a gray house--alone with a strange fear of time. During his most impressionable years with such wistful reminders of a past "Aunt Imogene"³--the traditional spinster aunt--covers with a smile grace and glory, he was led to his creative endeavors, toward such subjects

That hungering incompleteness and regret--
as his failure--That passionate ache for something of her own.

There is the "Dark House"⁴ itself, which confines so many of these twisted

souls about whom Robinson writes: arrived by the time the United States entered its full era of pride and commercial splendor; he was approaching the country in Burns a lamp as in a tomb; April 5. And I see the shadow glide Back and forth of one denied Power to find himself outside.

It is a universal prison-house; it is also peculiarly New England's. Again, nowhere is the shift from human labor to machinery, from small town to city activity, from serenity to chaos, more cleanly and swiftly portrayed than

1. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

1. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 184.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

3. W. W. Rouse Ballou in America, "Poetry Magazine," Vol. 1-11, June 1905, p. 107.

in "The Mill"¹

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The miller's wife had waited long;
The tea was cold, the fire was dead.

She tries to still her fears; but she remembers how he lingered at the door; and she hears again six significant words, "There are no millers any more". She enters the mill with its "warm and mealy fragrance of the past", and finds him hanging from a beam. Nothing matters any more to her; soon "black water smooth above the weir" appears as unruffled as ever.

So New England, old and new, passes silent and vivid. It is not to be wondered at that it spread its shadow over a sensitive spirit; that Robinson became, in the words of Robert Frost, "a man cast in the mold of sadness".² Certainly it seems logical to assume that, confronted daily during his most impressionable years with such wistful reminders of a past grace and glory, he was led in his creative endeavors, toward such subjects as his failures.

Summarizing the period of Robinson's life, it has been written:

Born in 1869, he reached his twenties by the time the United States entered its full era of pride and commercial splendour; he was approaching fifty when the bursting prowess of 1917 announced the country in its new role of world-savior; death overtook him on April 5, [1935] when the outlook of both hemispheres--already darkened by the doubts of economic and political desperation--had reached a new crisis in profound pessimism.³

With such a background it would have been remarkable if he had not reflected life in a minor key.

1. *Ibid.*, p. 460.

2. *Coffin*, p. 43.

3. M. D. Z., "Robinson in America," *Poetry Magazine*, Vol. XLVI, June 1935, p. 157.

E. Edwin Arlington Robinson

Another factor, is significant for an explanation of Robinson's interest in failure. That factor appears in certain crucial events in his own life--¹ events which made him feel for years that he must include himself in the ranks of those fated creatures who were becoming so peculiarly his poetic own.

When another New England poet, Oliver Wendell Holmes, answered the query of a conscientious mother who inquired how she could guarantee her son's becoming a gentleman with the words, "You must start with his grandfather, Madam", he was only implying again that ancestral patterns have perhaps already determined in large measure an individual's capacities and directions. Probably the Robinsons who settled at Newcastle, Maine, would have contemplated with some unease, certainly with bewilderment, the quiet and apparently aimless lad who was destined, seventy-five years later, to add an entirely new gleam of honor to the ancestral name. Honor there had always been, of a sturdy and unobtrusive sort; the honor which comes to a family whose pride in workmanship had helped launch many a worthy sea-going vessel into Maine waters. Yet if those practical, competent ancestors might have shaken dubious heads at their strange descendant, he was nevertheless bone of their bone, and blood of their blood. For he, too, was to continue their tradition of worthy work,

painstakingly fashioned. And if his creations were to be less concrete achievements than their graceful hulls, being cast in the slighter moulds

1. The biographical material is largely taken from Hagedorn (op. cit.) and Laura Richards' E A R, cf. Footnote 11, p. 6.

of verse, they none the less were to bear the Robinsonian touch of skilled and polished craftsmanship; and they were none the less fashioned by a loving hand, and measured against the uncompromising standards of their own New England Puritan consciences. They were often needlessly torn between the spirit and the flesh; they were playing Robinson's immediate roots struck deep into the earth where both they must justify their existence in terms which the common sturdy citizenry and poetical sensitivity flourished. His father, Edward

Robinson, had settled at Head Tide, Maine, where he opened a general

store, and where, more important, he met and courted Mary Palmer. A justice, and restrained passion, and stern practical ambition, came, as Palmer had been a founder of Rowley, Massachusetts. Pearsons, with whom December 22, the shortest day of the year, 1829, a true son of the New England their efforts had helped establish. He was an alien, externally, and maintained the tradition for one hundred and seventy years. Thomas He was the fiber of their stock, spiritually. His inheritance, and Dudley, an ancestor of Mary Palmer, had been a governor of the Massachusetts most of all, the darkest circumstances of most of his life, from an old-Bay Colony, and one of his daughters, Anne Bradstreet, was New England's square explanation, if any be needed, for the red line which led into which first post.

His political fury was to pour itself, in a tradition of practical

For two hundred years behind Edward and Mary Robinson, Palmers, addresses who were failures, and failures who yet achieved a great kind of success. Robinsons, Pearsons, and others of their ilk had

of success. What was that environment? What, briefly, were the air-manufactured, traded, hunted, fought, ploughed their fields, built houses and ships, read books and written them, debated, quarrelled, governed themselves and served God according to the light that was in them... Most of them were over-serious, being mindful of devils, large and small in ambush for the unwary... They were haunted by a sense of incomprehensible and inescapable destiny; and the wisest at times suffered from spiritual indigestion. They were not without humor, though it was like their own chipmunks, elusive and

1. Mr. Robinson's exquisite carefulness is aptly illustrated by the following, related by his friend, Louis Ledoux: "Once a year he brought his summer's work and asked to have it read aloud to him. Occasionally he would interrupt with 'Did the stenographer leave out the comma? I didn't hear it'." (Quoted from Ledoux article, "Psychologist of New England," Saturday Review of Literature, Oct. 19, 1935, pp. 3, 4, 16-18. He replied, "Well, you see, now and then I like to talk to someone that's got sense". 2. Hagedorn, op. cit., pp. 1-6.

abrupt. They were neighborly...but they mistrusted any form of enthusiasm, and repressed illicit passions as their sea-faring men...repressed mutiny. They were inclined to believe, indeed, that all emotion was of the devil, and the expression of it, self-indulgence and a sin; and chose, as a rule, to keep the part of them that suffered and aspired, imprisoned behind straight lips and unrevealing eyes. They were often needlessly torn between the spirit and the flesh; they were plagued by the Protestant philosophy of success, the sense that they must justify their existence in terms which the common man would understand. But wherever they went, they laid firm foundations.¹

Out of them--out of their industry, and uncompromising sense of justice, and restrained passion, and stern practical ambition, came, on December 23, the shortest day of the year, 1869, a true son of the New England their efforts had helped establish. He was an alien, externally. He was the flowering of their stock, spiritually. His inheritance, and most of all, the darkened circumstances of most of his life, form an adequate explanation, if any be needed, for the peculiar mold into which his poetical fury was to pour itself, in a tradition of practical successes who were failures, and failures who yet achieved a queer kind of success. What was that environment? What, briefly, were the circumstances which, for the poet, were to be so significant? They were particularly those of his childhood and early manhood.

When Robinson was born in the "story-book village" of Head Tide, his father,² a personage in the community, with over \$80,000, was ready

1. Ibid., pp. 6-7.

2. Hagedorn says that Edward Robinson was a typical bearded New England philosopher, with the New England combination of kindly heart, calculating mind, and a dry sense of humor. He liked to whittle and to talk, occasionally conversing with himself. Asked why once, he replied, "Well, you see, now and then I like to talk to someone that's got sense". (p.10)

to retire. Existence for the Robinsons was proceeding smoothly, in the lives of the parents and two brothers, Dean, aged twelve, and Herman, aged four. But the mother had wanted a girl. The new baby proved an immediate disappointment; and from the first, circumstances contrived to distract attention from him. Shortly after Edwin's birth, Herman fell off a lumber pile and nearly killed himself. Mary Robinson lay very ill for weeks. For six months the baby whose name was to head the list of America's twentieth-century poets had no name.¹

A little later, the family went to a new home, in Gardiner. The home environment, though unsensational, was significant for the post-to-be. Poetry was in the air, both in Gardiner, and at the Robinson home. There was always time for talking and for reading. In the evening, the family would gather about the kerosene lamp in the parlor, each with a book. The boy early discovered the medical books which his brother Dean was studying, and was soon convinced that he was suffering from all the diseases detailed therein. He discovered rocking-chairs at an early age; and, in a chair many sizes too large for him, would rock himself for hours, and "wonder", he wrote Amy Lowell, forty years later, "why the deuce I should ever have been born".

1. Robinson's name was achieved on a visit to South Harpswell. Guests had been attracted to the quiet child with the shining eyes. They proposed drawing lots for a name. "Edwin" was drawn from a hat. "Arlington" was the name of the town from which the proposer of the scheme hailed, and Mrs. Robinson acquiesced. Ledoux says (*op. cit.*), however, that Robinson preferred to be called simply "E A", remarking that, when all of his name was spoken, "it sounded like a tin pan bumping down uncarpeted stairs". (p.3)

2. Hagedorn, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

Though the Robinson home was pleasantly located, the funeral train passed regularly each week. The cemetery was "as his own back-yard". And if his pre-occupation with the reminders of the ultimate end of man was not enough, the death at eleven of Harry Morell, his close friend, may have wakened in him the questioning he was always to have "on suffering, failure, death, tragedy".¹

He seems to have become early aware that he was different from the others. He was extremely sensitive, and his family, whom he adored, did not always understand. "I guess the trouble was," he mused years later, "that I was born with my skin inside out."² He grew to like to listen to old men talking, better than to join in the activity of boys of his own age.

Isaac and Archibald were two old men I knew them, and I may have laughed at them A little; but I must have honored them, For they were old, and they were good to me.³

Bright-eyed and open-eared, he must have lain often under a venerable elm, munching apples--of which he was always inordinately fond--listening to old talk, and carrying on his "childish ruminations upon the ways of men".⁴

By the age of ten he had already begun to discover words. At eleven he was beginning to write verse. He was perpetually dreamy--a characteristic which was to account for much suffering during most of his life. For at the public school, his teacher, annoyed by his dreaminess, struck him a sudden, sharp thrust under the ear. He complained later of

1. Richards, op. cit., pp. 12-13.

2. Hagedorn, p. 196.

3. Collected Poems, "Isaac and Archibald", p. 169.

4. Ibid., p. 180

ear-ache. It was to develop into a necrosis of the bone, and become a very material personal devil for forty years thereafter. By now the personalities of the family were clearly defined. "The father was the strength, the mother the light". Dean was a Bowdoin College, studying medicine. Herman, seven years younger, was "all activity and self-will". One was the student, the other the man of affairs. And Edwin-- was the problem. Said his mother to a friend, "I am not worried about Dean and Herman. They will make their way in the world. But I don't know what is going to happen to Win."¹

He knew, least of anyone. And he was always lonely. For his father was conscientious, but distant--an agent of superficial discipline; and his mother had turned over the rearing of her sons to her husband, and so had lost the intimate contact necessary for understanding. Yet there was always the river, in which he loved to swim, or beside whose banks he walked and thought. There was his small group of intimates with whom he played games, and ranged from mill-pond to mill-pond, storing up fragments of places and occasions which were to reappear in sometimes tragic guise years later in his poems. He cherished it all--particularly in times when he returned home, more fatigued than anyone ever knew from these boyish rambles. He was a pleasant companion, though "more ready with chuckles than with laughter". He collected stamps; he did the usual chores; he loved books--especially Dickens, with his sympathy for the social mis-fits. At the high-school, he day-dreamed. He loved Vergil; and in his

1. Hagedorn, p. 23.

third year, he amazed his class-mates by turning Cicero's first oration against Cataline into English blank verse.¹ He was amused by chemistry; he did not like mathematics. He developed an original resource to keep class from becoming boring by drawing tiny pictures in pencil or pen and ink; of thumb-nail size or smaller. They were "done in an instant, with light swift touches; profiles, portraits, and half-portraits, random and eccentric, but always escaping the grotesque; tiny but vivid, and surprising in their completeness". They might well have seemed prophetic of the portrait-quality of his poems.² to "write a sonnet in twenty minutes, and to All the time, of course, he was secretly writing poetry; in the hay-loft, or the old sleigh, or at the oat-bin in the harness room. But he did not like the old, formal, poetic diction of Bryant and his colleagues. "Why not write as the clerks talked in the stores on Water Street?"³ Instinctively, he knew that the world he was beginning to mirror, the people toward whom his interests naturally turned, could not be adequately represented in the forms which were his poetic heritage. This was the germ for the individualistic technique⁴ which was to bring him such quantities of rejection slips while he was struggling a decade later for an audience.

1. There is no doubt but that Robinson's perfection of verse forms received early training and discipline in these early endeavors; so that before his first poems were published, his technical apprenticeship had long been served.

2. Richards, *op. cit.*, pp. 24-25.

3. Hagedorn, p. 31.

4. Cf. post p. 27

He met a physician, Dr. Alanson Schumann, who at thirty had been visited, if not permanently, by the Muse, and who was an expert versifier, if not a poet by instinct. Schumann became Robinson's technical mentor, and introduced him to two fellow-townsmen, Caroline Swan, of Atlantic Monthly essay ability, and Probate Judge Henry Sewall Webster, who read his Horace and Greek Testament daily. They met together once a week. Now Robinson learned to chisel and hammer his verses, as his ship-building ancestors had planed and chiselled and hammered, with loving exactitude, the hulls of their ships. He learned to "write a sonnet in twenty minutes, and to work over it for twenty days".¹ But at home, the clouds were gathering. Dean, who had been practising medicine at Camden, was home with the curse of narcotics upon him. Suffering from neuralgia from the bitter weather he was daily exposed to, and determined not to neglect his patients, he had "reached for the narcotic that would make it possible for him to carry on".² Edward Robinson, nearly seventy, had at last fallen victim to old age. And Edwin, now a graduate of his high school, was unprepared for college, and quite incapable of accepting a practical "job". He went back to highschool, to study Horace and read Paradise Lost. He was plagued with the devil of indecision. What to do? But of course; he must write poetry. There seemed to be no choice. Even Dr. Schumann saw that. "I guess you will have to write poetry or starve," he said. "You may do both, though I don't think you will starve, not altogether."³

1. Ibid., p. 37.

3. Ibid., p. 46

2. Ibid., p. 39.

Now, too, the first of the two recorded hints of romance in his life was pursuing its minor way. He had developed the habit of calling on the sister of a friend, and her two sisters. They read poetry, or he brought the eldest music to play--"Faust," or "Martha". But he told her "he did not think he would be able to make a living out of poetry, yet writing poetry was all he could do". Says Hagedorn, "her father, a practical man, ended what had barely begun".¹ It was now that Gardiner, or Tilbury Town, became his best teacher. Distracted, convinced that he was destined for failure, he took to walking along Water Street, trying to understand what made the failures who shuffled along its length. He looked into "the cold eyes of Tarbox, the town miser", or watched "another Tarbox, who never could leave the women alone, lurking in doorways, dishevelled and furtive-eyed, on the lookout for a woman who would have him. What did it mean to be such refuse? Here...was abject, ultimate failure." Gardiner closed its eyes in horror at such sights, but young Robinson looked and pondered, gripped by a sharp, uncomprehending pity".²

And there were others--New England "individualists"--who fascinated him. "There was Peg-Leg Falbot, the disreputable "tin-knocker", who repaired stoves; Wash Benjamin, who had a mistress down the road and cursed the Episcopal Church every chance he got; Squire Whitmore, who was so close he kept only one hen, which, he said, could lay all the eggs he and his sister would want to eat".³

1. Hagedorn, p. 49.

3. Ibid.

2. Ibid., pp. 52-53.

All the time, at home, circumstances were growing darker. Robinson's ear was giving him constant pain. He brooded over the tragedy of the brother he adored. His father was helpless, and the young man suffered to see the disintegration of old age, and his mother's attendant grief. His friends had gone away to college. His own life was haphazard. He studied stenography, and gave it up. He raised a mustache, and cut it off. He dreamed of Harvard, and awoke again to practical reality. He ate apples, and practised the clarinet, receiving encouragement when the cat finally stayed in the room; and his hope of improvement perished when he realized that the cat had merely gone deaf.

He alternated nursing his father with assisting a civil engineer, and in winter, keeping time for a local ice-house. He wrote innumerable wistful letters in which he recalled "the fellow down east who never seemed to amount to much in school (or anywhere else), but who was proud to believe that he was not altogether a nincompoop. He never had a great many friends, this fellow, but those he did have he has never forgotten, and never will".¹ It was a time when,

with all his humour, his pungent good sense, he was ploughed by emotions as yet uncomprehended and unsubjected--simple human longing for comradeship, crossed with a hunger for solitude; compassion for the suffering, physical and mental, which he saw in his own home; compassion, the more devastating because it was impotent; troubled speculations on death and on life; a restless mysticism, assured even in its questioning; and a psychic sensitivity, that, he suspected, might develop any instant into psychic experience.²

All the time, he was reading and writing. A visit to a friend at

1. Hagedorn, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

2. Hagedorn, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

Bowdoin College revived his collegiate ambitions. His father and Dean were opposed to any more higher training in the family; but his ear fought for him, for an examination at Boston showed that the drum was destroyed and the bones diseased. "If the ailment could be arrested, there might be no further complications, but if it moved farther inward, there would be 'the devil to pay'".¹ Herman, though spiritually uncomprehending, was kind-hearted, and came to his brother's support. He would have to have treatments in Boston. Why not Harvard, after all? In 1891, Robinson left Gardiner for Cambridge.

So closed the first main period in the poet's life. Already he had accumulated prototypes for many of his most "Robinsonian" poems. Already he had experienced, and persistently and futilely questioned, some living ironies and tragedies in his world. Subsequent experience was but to emphasize further the tragic ironies, and to intensify his questions.

Harvard provided Robinson with a congenial atmosphere and a few select fellow-spirits, including a brilliant Harvard Law student, whose amputated feet stirred in Robinson the old pity and brooding over the incomprehensibility of life. But Harvard seemed almost joyously oblivious of his literary presence. There were, of course, some compensations--the favorite Old Elm restaurant; the Latin Quarter; the Mussum Exchange, opposite the Boston Museum, where he went to watch William Warren, Junius Brutus Booth the younger, and other theatrical people, and where, perhaps, he laid the foundations for Ben Jonson and his Man from Stratford.² But

1. Hagedorn, *Op. cit.*, p. 61.

2. Collected Poems, "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford," p. 20. Cf. p. 94, for analysis here.

the Boston-bred Harvard Monthly, to which he sent verses, would have none of him; though the Harvard Advocate did publish a few of his less distinctive poems. Harvard was plentifully supplied with literary talent at the time; furthermore, that talent was writing according to tradition, not strange stuff which did not seem either the material or the form of poetry. And--a not insignificant item--the Harvard student-literary-list included such names as William Vaughn Moody, George Santayana, Robert Morse Lovett, William Lyon Phelps, as well as Before the year closed, however, Robinson was back in Gardiner for the death of his father. The next year he returned to Harvard. He continued to make little or no literary impression, and though not ever communicative, he said at that time, "I have forgotten how to laugh". At the end of his second year, he left permanently, for Herman, though brilliant and lovable, was not a business man, and the family fortune had practically disappeared. Harvard was both a pleasant and a disappointing interlude. But of the two years Robinson said, in 1893, "It was there that I discovered and cultivated what is best and strongest in my nature--which--I fancy--is not much".

In 1896 he experienced one of his most tragic years when his mother died under peculiarly distressing circumstances. She contracted black diphtheria. No one would come near the house. Her sons did the necessary things, for even the doctor had deserted them. In forty-eight hours she was dead. The undertaker left the coffin on the verandah. The oldest son, Dean, and Edwin, the youngest, carried it into the house and laid her in it.

1. Hagedorn, p. 83.

Then, since no one would even drive the hearse to the cemetery, one hundred and fifty yards away, the three boys put the casket in a wagon and drove it to the grave. For five months no neighbor came near. It was many years before Robinson could express the burden of the hour in "For a Dead Lady".¹

Ironically, too, her death had preceded by less than a week the appearance of his first evidence of achievement. For, disgusted by the rejections of his work by the Atlantic, Century, Harpers, Scribners, as well as by newspapers generally, he had gotten together forty poems which he called "The Torrent and the Night Before",² and published them himself. Fifty-two dollars got him three hundred copies, "in an inconspicuous blue-covered little pamphlet, dedicated 'to any man, woman, or critic who will cut the edges of it. I have done the top!'"³ When Robinson left Gardiner for New York, in 1897, many of the little books were left behind in the family home, "where they made pleasant doll-houses, set edge to edge, with others laid atop for the roof. After a while they disappeared".⁴

At Gardiner, Robinson had sent them out; to friends in Gardiner and Cambridge; to literary critics who wrote reviews; to readers who might be expected to know poetry. The literary world remained disturbingly unperturbed. "If only they had said something about me!" he said, years

1. *Collected Poems*, p. 355. The circumstance is recorded by Laura Richards, p. 39-42.

2. Published at Gardiner, Maine, 1896.

3. It is interesting to know that recently \$1500 was offered for one copy.

4. Laura Richards, pp. 45-47.

later. "It would not have mattered what. They could have called me stupid or crazy if they liked. But they said nothing. Nobody devoted as much as an inch to me. I did not exist."¹

These then, were the years when, particularly, "his acute personal sense of failure, according to the standards of Tilbury Town but of his whole New-England inheritance, made him sympathetic to failure in others, and avid of indications of spiritual victory behind the worldly defeat."²

A very good and obvious reason, however, lay behind the consistent rejection of his poetry. Its very strength, its "new technique"³-- the qualities which were, twenty years later, to place Robinson at the head of the poet's list in America--now accounted for the almost dismay, certainly the lack of interest, with which it was greeted. Editors were used to the content and form "arbitrated" by Bryant, Longfellow, Tennyson--and "the blessing of Queen Victoria". But Robinson was employing a drastic, if unconscious, right-about-face in technic; getting rid of the pomposity, the ornamentation, the artificiality of "poetic language". He was, in fact, breaking completely with tradition.

His phrases were short, often staccato; for plain speaking demanded a plain style.⁴ Furthermore, these phrases and lines were not always measured carefully, foot by foot. Often they ran over; or the rhythm would

1. Rolfe W. Brown, Next Door to a Poet, New York: D. Appleton Century Co., 1937, p. 66.

2. Hagedorn, p. 89.

3. Cf. ante p. 20.

4. Coffin, op. cit., p. 79.

break and change according to the mood of the moment. An excellent example of this tendency is found in the poem "Isaac and Archibald", which, says Mr. Coffin, shows the "almost complete disappearance of the caesura".¹ Then there was the matter of Robinson's imagery, which may be said to hold the technical secret of his peculiarly effective irony. Says Mr. Coffin again, Robinson "has a combination of intense concentration upon dark emotional stress and... clean-cut, homely imagery by which he follows its complex progress".² He puts high and low together, mixing the splendid and the homely; one recalls the boy's dream of Isaac and Archibald as two bearded and enthusiastic angels, playing High-Low Jack. Robinson's irony is also evident in his use of names, which prance in romantic splendour across his pages, or which are grave with the dignity of Biblical prestige. They are, often, names of great heroes, or of tribal heads. But they do not live heroes' lives; and their tribes inhabit only the vast deserts of memory. Llewellyn and Priscilla³ find domesticity together unupportable, and Priscilla fades alone for twenty years. Mr. Flood⁴ portrays a new and ironic New England chivalry, winding a less silent and less shining horn on his lonely road. Mr. Coffin thinks that Robinson was himself his greatest irony, suggesting that he found his best relief must be a source of quiet amusement to him. "The reason order in the old chivalric world, which thus became an escape for

1. Coffin, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

2. This influence is mostly apparent in Robinson's letters, where, for example, Coffin, *op. cit.*, pp. 81-82, "great and unrelievable old rat-catcher, the Jay of Living." quoted from *Selected Letters of R. B. Robinson*, ed. by 3. *Ibid.*, p. 87. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1940, p. 116.

3. *Collected Poems*, "Llewellyn and the Tree", p. 50.

4. *Ibid.*, "Mr. Flood's Party", p. 573.

5. *Collected Poems*, p. 91.

him.¹

There is, too, the element of his humour, of which it has been written, "He uses humour as a means to saying some of the saddest things a little more pleasantly." From that on, with this final commitment to that can be said about ourselves and our times".² It is a wry humour; the only thing he had ever believed in for himself, the story of the early but it is also indomitable, and often, even impudent.³ Added to it was a capacity for indirect oblique approach, as in "The Mill",⁴ and a capacity for freighted understatement, and restraint. "There are no millers any more."

In addition, Robinson was using the monosyllabic line; sloughing off archaism and circumlocution. Editors looked askance at the sonnet entitled "The Clerks",⁵ in which the octet has but five words but seventy-two of more than one syllable, and said nothing as "common" as this could be poetry; and they sent it back to its author. These then, were some of the factors behind the long arid years of his un-acceptance.

For a year, he tried to give up writing poetry, and wrote short stories; but neither would the magazines have them. Finally, he destroyed the manuscripts--and surrendered. It was his last effort at retreat; and

of fall. Horace Gregory, amusingly adds, "Robinson's portrait of the American failure is so complete that the fact many of his books become best sellers must be a source of quiet amusement to him." "The Weapon of Irony," *Poetry Magazine*, Dec., 1934, p. 161.

2. Coffin, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

3. This impudence is mostly apparent in Robinson's letters, where, for example, he mentions "that intermittent and unreliable old rat-catcher, the Joy of Living." Quoted from *Selected Letters of E. A. Robinson*, Ed. by Ridgely Torrence. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1940, p. 116.

4. Cf. ante p. 13

5. *Collected Poems*, p. 90.

now he could write, "I shall never be a Prominent Citizen, and I thank God for it, but I shall be something just as good perhaps, and possibly a little more permanent."¹ From then on, with this final commitment to the only thing he had ever believed in for himself, the story of the early years was to be repeated as a theme with minor variations.

It is a matter of history now how desperately discouraged, how perennially poor he was, until his first bit of substantial encouragement came in the nature of a "manufactured" post as a Special Agent of the United States Treasury, in the United States Custom House; this, through the machinations of President Theodore Roosevelt, to whom his son Kermit had sent a copy of Robinson's second volume, "The Children of the Night."² Not that that cleared the path to success, by any means. But the presidential--and providential--letter arrived at a time when Robinson was, in his own words, "dragging along, scraping bottom." Dean was dead; sensitive, brilliant, defeated. Herman, who had taken to drinking, was separated from his family, and Robinson felt them as his responsibility. His inability to aid them materially, as he wished, added again to his own sense of failure.

He had been living from hand to mouth, having exhausted what little had remained of his inheritance, and he was borrowing as he could. He owed months of room rent, and had to save painfully to buy a pair of trousers. Once, in a restaurant, he looked so forlorn that a waiter offered to lend

1. Hagedorn, p. 103.

2. 1898.

him two dollars. One day he had received word of a possible position. It was that as "a checker of tip-cart loads of shale in the construction of the New York Subway."¹ It was ten hours a day, of checking the work-men in, in the morning, and out, at night. "In the dreary hours between, he paced the dark tunnel, heavy with the odor of damp clay and sickening gases, checking the loads of material as they were dumped at the gaping tunnel-mouths."² The pay was two dollars a day. He had kept the dreary job for months, and as the work became more and more of a horror, he turned to the only immediate relief accessible. Every night he visited the saloons. He had stopped writing poetry. He had stopped writing to his friends. He was pretty thoroughly convinced that at the end of the dark tunnel lay only a complete darkness for him. Finally the job expired, and Robinson had learned at least one thing--that he could not hold a job and write. He tossed on "the horns of his perpetual dilemma." He had to live. But he had to write poetry. Apparently, the two were incompatible. A friend offered him a compromise: ten dollars a week to assemble material for advertisements for a Boston dry-goods store, the work to consume one-third of Robinson's time. He accepted. It was in such circumstances that he had walked wearily one evening

1. Lucius Beebe, "Dignified Faun," The Outlook and Independent, Aug. 27, 1930, p. 647.

2. Hagedorn, p. 202.

into his dark rooming house. There was a letter¹ for him--a letter that was to mark for the first time, the top of the long hill. It was the winter of 1905. What is more, "Uncle Ananias" had been accepted a few days before, by Richard Watson Gilder, "the first acceptance by any magazine other than the Globe or the Harvard Monthly in eight years; the first paid acceptance since Lippincott's had taken his sonnet on Poe eleven years before; and Gilder had accepted the poem not for the main part of the "Century," but for the department of frivolities called 'In Lighter Vein.'² It was at best an indication; but even the most tenuous bits of encouragement meant much after so many years of being ignored. Success did come, beginning in 1916, with the publication of "The Man Against the Sky,"³ which jolted American critics into the realization that they were harboring, practically unrecognized, a major poetic talent. From then on, Robinson's history reveals a quiet but persistent crescendo of achievement, and finally, of acclaim, culminating in 1919, when a nation-wide circle of friends, admirers, and colleagues gather to pay

1. Mr. John L. ...
 2. Hagedorn, op. cit., p. 212.
 3. Collected Poems, p. 60.

tribute to America's foremost contemporary poet on his fiftieth birthday.¹

Yet, except for a deeper experience and suffering, the temperament that received those poetic laurels, and the technique and subject-matter that had combined to earn them, were relatively unchanged at the poet's meridian from what they had been when that first slender volume of verses created not a critical ripple in 1896.² The dominant interest in and sympathy for failure was to be only more intensified and enlarged in Matthias and Cavender than it was in the prophetic projections of Richard Cory and Flammonde.³ For the brand of tragedy had burned too deeply into the poet's soul. The early years, that did so much to mould his reactions to life, and the heritage of his native New England, could never be erased. The Failures that people the Robinsonian universe are the inevitable products, one feels, of the years of his days; and of the sturdy Puritan shades of his ancestors, still walking, in the poems of their descendant, their chosen New England hills, or launching one more worthy vessel into the cold Maine waters.

secondary is an abiding interest in highly complex characterization and

1. Mr. John Drinkwater begins his critical essay on Robinson thus: "When recently Mr. Edwin Arlington Robinson reached his fiftieth birthday, he was publicly greeted by nearly every poet of any distinction in America as the master of them all." Quoted from The Muse in Council, The Riverside Press, Cambridge, 1925, p. 248.

2. Cf. Pt. II, The Tragic Light, p. 60, for Clement Wood's comment pertinent here.

3. Collected Poems, "Matthias At the Door," p. 1077; "Cavender's House," p. 961; "Richard Cory," p. 82; "Flammonde," p. 3.

2. Sanford Aiken says, "Mr. Robinson's heroes think, and feel... but they do not act." "Tristram," The New Republic, May 20, 1927, p. 22.

CHAPTER II

THE FAILURES

For the children of the dark are more to name
than are the wretched,
Or the broken, or the weary, or the baffled
or the shamed;
There are builders of new mansions in the
Valley of the Shadow,
And among them are the dying and the blinded
and the maimed.¹

Robinson is generally regarded as a writer of narrative poems. Certainly, such works constitute the bulk of his writing. There are some thirteen long poems, dating from "Captain Craig" (1902), and concluding with "King Jasper" (1935); many shorter "character-poems" such as "Nicodemus" and "The Three Taverns"; and, in his earliest work, numerous short poems like "Richard Cory" or "Aaron Stark" which, in a few stanzas, sketch the facts and implications of a life.

But apparent as the narrative quality is, it is nevertheless usually secondary to an abiding interest in highly complex characterization and psychological interpretation.² A survey of Robinson's poetry becomes a moving pageant of human life; a kaleidoscope of constantly changing patterns, as those patterns shift back and forth in the movements of countless color-atoms which are presented as individual men and women. To repeat,

1. Collected Poems, "The Valley of the Shadow," p. 456.

2. Conrad Aiken says, "Mr. Robinson's heroes think, and feel... but they do not act." "Tristram," The New Republic, May 25, 1927, p. 22.

the characters themselves are more significant than the stories of the single reiterated message is simply "man has failed." Louis Untermeyer lives they lead; or, to turn it about, their narrative patterns are the failures that message in even more specific terms when he adds, "In an age inevitable results of their complicated personalities."

These characters are subject to a certain amount of formal external failure. Not to these concepts, and for present purposes, another with classification. There are those like Cassandra, drawn from Greek or Roman mythology and legend; those like Nicodemus, Lazarus, St. Paul, taken directly from the Bible. Merlin, Lancelot, Arthur, and his courtly men and women re-appear from the time-honored pages of the Arthurian cycle; Tristram and Isolt are steeped in the Celtic wistfulness and sense of fatality. Ben Jonson, John Brown, Shakespeare, Rembrandt, step fresh from the Elizabethan stage, the pages of history, the book of art. There is the group who live in Tilbury Town--Richard Cory, the town's aristocrat; Mr. Flood, who tips his lonely jug under two moons; Miniver Cheevy, the romanticist born out of time; Reuben Bright, the butcher, with his unexpected sensitivity; Captain Craig, Tilbury's indigent philosopher-humorist; Isaac and Archibald, those two engaging old men. Then there is the group so peculiarly Robinson's own--the heroes of his long poems--those "faceless" characters who live in no particular town, and at no particular time, and are set against a grey landscape where all the trees bear the same kind of leaves, and where the architecture is of no specific period or design. This is the group of Roman Bartholow, Avon, Cavender, Nightingale, Matthias, Talifer, Amaranth, Fernando Nash, King Jasper.

But various as these groups appear, and drawn as these characters are from widely differing sources, they have a single common characteristic. All are "failures," in a highly specialized sense. Thus Robinson is usually recognized as primarily the poet of failures. Says Clement Wood, "his

the characters themselves are more significant than the stories of the single frustrated message is simply "man has failed." Louis Untermeyer lives they lead; or, to turn it about, their narrative patterns are the failures that message is even more specifically taken when he adds, "In an age inevitable results of their complicated personalities."

These characters are subject to a certain amount of formal external failure. But to these contexts, and for present purposes, another useful classification. There are those like Cassandra, drawn from Greek or Roman definitive sources; those like Nicodemus, Lazarus, St. Paul, taken directly from the Bible. Merlin, Lancelot, Arthur, and his courtly men and women re-appear from the time-honored pages of the Arthurian cycle; Tristram and Isolt are steeped in the Celtic wistfulness and sense of fatality. Ben Jonson, John Brown, Shakespeare, Rembrandt, step fresh from the Elizabethan stage, the pages of history, the book of art. There is the group who live in Tilbury Town--Richard Cory, the town's aristocrat; Mr. Flood, who tips his lonely jug under two moons; Miniver Cheevy, the romanticist born out of time; Reuben Bright, the butcher, with his unexpected sensitivity; Captain Craig, Tilbury's indigent philosopher-humorist; Isaac and Archibald, those two engaging old men. Then there is the group of social eminence. By his own admission, Robinson was more interested in a so peculiarly Robinson's own--the heroes of his long poems--those "faceless" characters who live in no particular town, and at no particular time, and are set against a grey landscape where all the trees bear the same kind of leaves, and where the architecture is of no specific period or design. This is the group of Roman Bartholow, Avon, Cavender, Nightingale, Matthias, Talifer, Amaranth, Fernando Nash, King Jasper.

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single reiterated message is simply 'man has failed'.¹ Louis Untermeyer reduces that message to even more specific terms when he adds, "In an age which exalts the successful man, Robinson lauds or at least lifts the failure."² But to these comments, and for present purposes, another more definitive comment must immediately be added. It is that for Robinson the terms 'success' and 'failure' are entirely applicable to spiritual endeavor and competence. He opposes then his particularized 'definition' to that of the commercialized world in which he lives--a world which often interprets them in the opposite way.

If then, Robinson so often seems fascinated by that type of character, simple or complex, which the world judges by its own hasty standards and labels "failure," his interest seems to proceed from the fact that he is very apt to find in the social failure a citadel of strength or a sensitivity of perception which becomes ultimately an intangible "success mark," and which often actually accounts for the character's lack of social eminence. By his own admission, Robinson was more interested as a poet in "people who struggled and failed than the ones who succeeded." He said, "There is more to write about."³ But with the same insight with which he re-appraises the social failure to its final advantage, he also likes to deflate the so-called success, finding in him a tragic inadequacy which all the material successes are devoted to spiritual failure, through the

1. Clement Wood, Poets of America, New York: Dutton and Company, 1925, p. 119.

2. Louis Untermeyer, American Poetry Since 1900, New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1923, p. 49.

3. Rolfe W. Brown, op. cit., pp. 79-80.

makes him, in the Robinsonian sense, a failure. ^{different way.}

For Robinson, then, there would seem to be two basic types of failure. First, there is the "social" failure, exemplified so well by Captain Craig; the type whom the world easily classifies on the basis of its apparent and external social inadequacy. Second, there is the failure whose weakness is spiritual rather than social; who fails as completely in his ultimate comprehension as did Avon or Cavender; or who fails in spite of a degree of wisdom because he is after all human and not god, as did Merlin. According to Robinson, the common basis for failure, however, is the degree of perception of the Light possessed by each individual. From this point it may be stated that actually there is but one kind of failure with which Robinson is really concerned, and that is the failure of the spirit; and further, that the two apparent types of failure are but two facets of existence, and become for Robinson simply the two modes for failure. ^{positively or negatively.}

To repeat, failure is in direct proportion to the degree of spiritual light or insight which the character possesses. It has nothing at all to do with worldly position. So that it can not conveniently be said that all the social failures inevitably are spiritual successes, though Captain Craig undoubtedly was just that to his creator; nor can it be assumed that all the material successes are doomed to spiritual failure, though the majority of them are. The general statement here is this; for this poet, all men must fail, if success be interpreted to mean a state of ideal perfection; since men are human, hence fallible; and that each man, then, falls short, by his very humanity, of the perfect ideal. This perfect ideal is, however, the same for no two men; being based always on the

individual capacity. Each man then fails in a different way.¹

Thus Robinson's characters each reveal an individual in a specific situation which differs from all other possible situations in its details. Yet, if "he was concerned almost solely with individual character and with the clashes of clearly analyzed personalities that react upon one another and yet are bound fatally by what they are,"² still, it is also true that "he concentrated the blaze of his insight on the fundamentals of human nature which vary comparatively little with time and place."³ If, then, each character is highly individual, he yet possesses qualities which bestow upon him a kind of universality. For his hour he becomes thereby, in a small way, representative of humanity. And his degree of success or failure (I use these terms now with a spiritual connotation only) is determined by his reaction to the universal principle of the Light—a principle applicable to all men, and one to which each man must respond, either positively or negatively.

Thus, an effort to arrive at a primary and basic classification of the Robinson characters appears difficult. For they are a heterogeneous group; an indiscriminate gallery of individuals whose social status ranges from that of the poverty-stricken room of Captain Craig, to the golden and forever lost horizons of Merlin. Here are the Mr. Floods, shabby in moral fibre as well as in garments; the John Evereldowns, mechanically following the voice of sensual desire; the Miniver Cheevy's, blaming fate for their

1. Cf. post, p. 49.

2. Louis Ledoux, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

3. *Ibid.*

ineffectual yearnings, and accepting them; the Cassandras, crying out in
 a commercialized world where "none heeded and few heard"; the Carmichaels,
 with their subtle kind of horror. Here too is the man Flammonde, distin-
 guished, generous, intuitive, one "who held his head as one by kings
 accredited"; yet there is in him a "small satanic kink" which makes him
 "a Prince of Castaways". Here is Matthias, who "glowed with honors earned";
 to batter down with his two hands the doorway to oblivion. Here is Richard
 Cory, who effectually contradicts popular opinion, which wished itself in
 his place, by the swift sure gesture of a bullet through his head. Here
 is King Jasper, the rich and ruthless capitalist; and Merlin, the mighty
 wizard, who, with all his wisdom, is not immune to the weaknesses of his
 flesh. Here, in fact, is humanity; a world of big and little people, all
 of whom fall short, in greater or less degree, of the only real success
 for Robinson--the realization of significant spiritual value. Or, even
 having realized such value theoretically, as some of them do, they still
 fall short, being but human in their ability successfully to shape life
 to a perfect ideal pattern. All fall short, according to the degree to
 which they have perceived and obeyed, the guiding principle of the Light.
 Here then is the basic classification for this study. The Robinsonian
 characters fall into two main groups. In their author's parlance, they
 are those who have "seen" too much, or too little, of that Light which is
 the only Path out of the Wilderness.

Though it is not the primary problem of this study, the problem
 of the Path, though difficult of finding, is not impossible of achievement.
 In Robinson's own words,

There's a way out of every wilderness
For those who dare or care enough to find it.¹

Many of his most "distinguished" failures, like Cavender, or Nightingale, or Matthias, or Fernando Nash,² do find that Path at last. It is a suggested way of redemption; for each, a different way, by none ever actually achieved, and for none ever obvious or conventional. But it is there, by implication. Its beginning is clearly enough marked, if its end yet remains misty, and leading to a far and still-receding horizon.³

But the problem of redemption is a separate one in itself, if intimately linked with its preliminary, the failure. Of the failure there can be no question. "It comes down many roads in the singing, but its coming is sure."⁴ Failure is, with the starkness which Robinson saw when he wrote:

There is Ruin and Decay
In the House on the Hill;
They are all gone away,
There is nothing more to say.⁵

How that ruin and decay enters into the Robinsonian lives, and its connection with his white and tragic Light, is the central issue of this study. It is

1. Collected Poems, "Merlin," p. 262.

2. Collected Poems, "Cavender's House," p. 961; "The Glory of the Nightingales," p. 1011; "Matthias At The Door," p. 1077; "The Man Who Died Twice," p. 921.

3. Implications of Robinson's optimism, which his suggested redemptions directly infer, will appear in the individual analyses of the chapter on "The Tragic Light," post p. , and also in the general Conclusion.

4. Clement Wood, op. cit., p. 122.

5. Collected Poems, "The House on the Hill," p. 81.

also the crucial problem for those bewildered and complex man and women who people the Robinson universe; those whose excess or diminished spiritual sight contributes directly to their human and spiritual deficiency.

THE LIGHT SYMBOL AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

"It is the faith within the fear"

Allusion has been made to the Robinsonian symbol, the light, in whose perception hinges the failure of his characters. Before proceeding further, it is advisable to attempt some analysis of the meaning and significance of this symbol. Primarily, it is to be studied here as the criterion for Robinson's peculiar technique of character-creation. I have tried to express this test for character-value in the phrase "the light of light." It is a phrase with double suggestiveness.

First, the light symbol is perhaps not only the most consistent image in Robinson's poetry (though he interchanges it synonymously with the "word"), but it evokes and implies the heart of his conception of life, and of character effectiveness.

For those that never burn the light
 the darkness is a colder thing,
 and they, the children of the light,
 seem lost in fortune's slanders.¹

These rhymed verses show words at the outset of his career as an artist, his adherence to the importance of the light symbol consistent through his subsequent life. Furthermore, the light is an eternal part of nature

1. "The Children of the Light," *Robinson's Poetry*, pp. 11-12.

philosophy¹ guides and shapes the ultimate expressions of his narrative patterns and his characterizations.

The word "philosophy" may be too large and firm a word

CHAPTER III

to be accurately applied to his theories of the meaning of life, or to

his "answers" to the questions with which he was preoccupied both in his life and in his poetry. "It is the faith within the fear" does not answer the

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Allusion has been made to the Robinsonian symbol, the Light, on whose perception hinges the failure of his characters. Before proceeding further, it is advisable to attempt some analysis of the meanings and significances of this symbol. Primarily, it is to be studied here as the criterion for Robinson's peculiar technique of character-estimation. I have tried to express this test for character-value in the phrase "the tragic light." It is a phrase with double suggestiveness.

First, the light symbol is perhaps not only the most consistent image in Robinson's poetry (though he interchanges it synonymously with the "sord"), but it strikes at and implies the heart of his conception of life, and of character effectiveness.

For those that never know the light
The darkness is a sullen thing,
And they, the Children of the Night
Seem lost in Fortune's winnowing.¹

Though Robinson writes these words at the outset of his career as an artist, his adherence to the importance of the Light remains consistent throughout his poetic life. Furthermore, the Light is an integral part of whatever

1. "The Children of the Night," title poem to first published volume. Quoted from Amy Lowell, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

philosophy¹ guides and shapes the ultimate expressions of his narrative
patterns and his characterizations.

The word "philosophy," however, may be too large and firm a word
to be accurately applied to his theories of the meaning of life, or to
his "answers" to the questions with which he was preoccupied both in his
life and in his poetry. Many critics feel that he does not answer the
"big" questions at all; that he is too fatalistic, pessimistic, negative,
indefinite, ever to permit of attaching to his attitudes the word
"philosophy". These terms, however, would appear to be convenient, if not
hasty and perhaps superficial labels; labels which, moreover, Robinson
himself consistently and vigorously rejected.

Actually, he considered himself in the ranks of the joyous of the
earth--though his was highly specialized kind of joy, very different from
what he called "the nauseating evasions of the uncompromising 'optimist'."
For him, true optimism was closer to "a willingness to be honest, with
never the suggestion of surrender--or even of weariness"; and he considered
it "the most admirable thing in life or in Art"². One feels that Amy
Lowell wrote aptly when she said of Robinson, "He has raised for himself
a banner, and it bears upon a single word, 'Courage'."³ The motto on the

1. The most complete critical work on Robinson's philosophy. Miss Kaplan's recent study, (cf. Foreword, ante p.ii) includes a chapter titled "Lights, and Shadows," p. 43, in which the Light is studied as a philosophical concept applied to four major poems.

2. Letter to Richard Watson Gilder, Dec. 22, 1906. Selected Letters, op. cit., pp. 64-65

3. Amy Lowell, op. cit., p. 24.

other side of the banner, she adds, is "Success through failure."¹ But this is not to say that Robinson ever obliges by presenting a neat package and conveniently labelled. On the contrary, he all but rejects a philosophical implication for his poetry. Perhaps the critical confusion in part has originated at exactly this point: Robinson insisted that he was not a philosopher; that as a poet, he dealt not with logical concepts, but rather with emotion; and obviously he dealt primarily with the effect of experience upon the spirit. These elements, however, are not the primary stuff of philosophy; and to attempt to force them into such a mold is to confuse the issue, by confusing the essence of poetry with the essence of logic.²

Witness, for example, Robinson's answers on two occasions to students who were preparing theses on his poetical philosophy: In 1930 he wrote, "There is no philosophy in my poetry beyond an implication of an ordered universe, and a sort of deterministic negation of the general facility that appears to be the basis of 'rational' thought."³ Again, in 1931, he wrote,

I am sorry to learn that you are writing about my "philosophy," which is mostly a statement of my inability to accept a mechanistic interpretation of the universe and of life. As I see it, my poetry

1. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

2. Miss Kaplan has applied the poetic symbol of the light as a philosophical concept in her analyses.

3. Letter to Helen Grace Adams, Jan. 1, 1930. Miss Adams, (*Notes to Selected Letters, op. cit.*, p. 190) had asked for a statement in regard to Robinson's "theory of poetry and philosophy of life in general."

"He is not pessimistic, nothing of an infinite nature can be proven or disproven in finite terms--meaning words--and the rest is probably a matter of one's individual ways of seeing and feeling things. There is no sense in saying that this world is not a pretty difficult place, but that isn't pessimism. The real pessimist sees too much of one thing, and the optimist is too likely to see only what he wishes to see--or perhaps not to see at all beyond the end of his famous nose. I still wish that you were writing about my poetry--of which my so-called philosophy is only a small part, and probably the least important."¹

In a letter to Dr. Will Durant, Robinson again avows his own kind of optimism and idealism: "If a man is a materialist, or a mechanist,

...I can see for him no escape from belief in a futility so prolonged and complicated and diabolical and preposterous as to worse than absurd; and as I do not know that such a tragic absurdity is not a fact, I can only know my native inability to believe that it is one...There is apparently not much that anyone can do about it except to follow his own light--which may or may not be the light of an ignis fatuus in a swamp.

Again, Robinson's own definition of poetry, recorded by Joyce Kilmer in an interview for the New York Times, in 1916, definitely precludes any possibility of his actually revealing his literary scaffolding. "Poetry," he said then, "is a language that tells us, through a more or less emotional reaction, something that cannot be said." He added that it had two characteristics, one of which is "that it is, after all, undefinable."³ Perhaps, too, Robinson's unwillingness or inability to commit himself to the dangers of absolute statement grows out of the fact that

1. Letter to Bess Dworsky, Nov. 4, 1931, Selected Letters, op. cit., pp.165-166.

2. Ibid., Sept. 18, 1931, p. 164.

3. Mark Van Doren, Edwin Arlington Robinson, New York: Literary Guild of America, 1927, p. 13.

"he sees life in that profound perspective which permits of its being observed from two angles at once. He sees it realistically, at the same moment that he sees it ideally. Ideally, the world for him is filled with pure white Light... Obviously the most important existing thing for him."¹ This double view-point is already that of his early "Credo."² The Light,

That I cannot find my way; there is no star
In all the shrouded heavens anywhere;
And there is not a whisper in the air
Or any living voice but one so far
That I can hear it only as a bar
Of lost, imperial music, played when fair
And angel fingers wove, and unaware,
Dead leaves to garlands where no roses are.
No, there is not a glimmer, nor a call,
For one that welcomes, welcomes when he fears,
The black and awful chaos of the Night;
For through it all, above, beyond it all--
I know the far-sent message of the years,
I feel the coming glory of the Light.

This is a youthful poem, belonging to the publication of 1896. Yet its author's "double perception" was already permanently established. At sixty-four, he could still write of the Light with conviction and joy:

It is good... to know that you have a light, for without one
a fellow is either comfortably blind, or wretchedly astray. I
have always had one to keep him going, though I fear that you...
have thought at times that it was burning pretty low. Maybe it
was, but it never went out... and I think there is oil enough in
it to last me for the rest of my journey, which can't be a very
long one now.³

Again, and to revert once more to the old charge of pessimism

directed against Robinson, because "I can't subscribe to their ready-

1. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

2. *Collected Poems*, p. 94.

3. Letter to Hermann Hagedorn, Sept. 17, 1933. *Selected Letters*, p. 172.

made little notions of things," he said, "I am more of an optimist than any of them, for when I look at this life without the rosy spectacles and try to see it as a thing in itself, as the final word, it is too absurd to be thought of. You've got to add something, just to make sense."¹ One feels justified in saying that Robinson added the Light.

That, however, hardly amounts to postulating the Light as a philosophical principle.² On the contrary, the temper of the Light as a poetic symbol is definitely mystical, and even shadowy, rather than logical and philosophical. The Light, then, cannot be defined in a single term; both by virtue of its very lack of concreteness, and because Robinson was singularly averse to downright explanation. He preferred always to imply, rather than to state, leaving the reader the duty and delight of drawing ultimate conclusions for himself. Furthermore, though he was habitually concerned with what he called the "Whyness and the Whenceness," he chose, for the most part, to speculate on problems, rather than to propose answers for them--except, again, by poetic implications. For he dealt, after all, with peculiarly amorphous material; feeling that "the essential drama of life lies in the inward effect of

1. Rollo W. Brown, op. cit., pp. 56-57.

2. It is perfectly possible, of course, to find in the "inspirational intuition" of transcendentalism a link to the poetic symbol of the Light. That, however, is a different emphasis, since the light here, again, is to be studied as a basis for characterization; furthermore, the matter of Robinson's "philosophy" has been carefully analyzed and presented by Miss Kaplan, (op. cit.) particularly the chapter titled "Royce and Schopenhauer," p. 25. Other critical efforts to "place" the poet philosophically include Lloyd Morris, (q.v., footnote #1, following page)

experience upon the spirit, and that action is important only in so far as it provides a release back into the external world of those forces which it has generated."¹ This goes far to explain why so often the action or narrative patterns of his poetry seem quite secondary, being sublimated to a profound exploration of the capacities of the spirit under a variety of stresses and problems. Which, in so far as his characters are each unique, again explains the apparent haziness of the Light symbol, and the necessity for deriving from each set of circumstances the exact value and definition of the Light for each individual.²

This far, however, we can go at present, in an attempt to deduce some general meanings and values of the Light symbol. For Robinson, it represents an implication, a poetic objectification, of whatever he felt, suspected, or of necessity came to know, as a positive force or principle counteractive to the distress of life--a distress with which he was personally, persistently and acutely acquainted. Nearly all of his poems deal with the "big" questions. He chose "griefs instead of grievances to write about."³ Since this is true, since the basic problems with which he deals are tragedies of frustration, failure, death, he is of necessity bound to propose some acceptable, convincing, or

1. Lloyd Morris, The Poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson, New York: Geo. H. Doran Co., 1923, p. 23.

2. Cf. post p. 71

3. Coffin, op. cit., p. 146. In his Introduction to Robinson's "King Jasper," Robert Frost further explains this difference. "Grievances are a form of impatience. Griefs are a form of patience." (New York: Macmillan Co., 1935, pp. viii-ix). The effect of grievances upon personality is exemplified in the character of young Hebron (q.v. post p.) whose own violence destroys him.

persuasive resolution for those problems, if the characters whose lives they comprise are to attain any universality of stature; any interest or significance beyond that of the mere individual case history; if, in other words, they are to have anything of value for those who might conceivably furnish parallels within their own experience. That resolution, whether it be solution, or compromise, is suggested in the Light symbol.

Obviously, each of Robinson's characters finds a different answer to his basic difficulty--the failure which his excess or diminished perception of the Light has made his.¹ For each, then, the Light is a different light. Yet, in the same way in which blue, for instance, becomes an attribute of green, while yet maintaining its own identity as blue (in what Spinoza calls the relation of "mutual implication"), so does each individual instance of the light, possessing at the time its own specific unique spiritual quality, its own "attribute," ultimately merge with and identify itself with the one universal and original great Light.

So, specifically, the Light may suggest a dream-vision of an ideal state of mens' being, never on this earth to be fully realized. Such Dagonet, Arthur's Fool, recalls, in speaking of the "Siege Perilous" of the Grail. Says he:

There was a Light wherein men saw themselves
In one another as they might become--
Or so they dreamed...²

Or it may bequeath, as it did to Merlin, a fortifying sense of power, and

1. Cf. ante p.38, footnote 1.

2. "Merlin," Collected Poems, p. 306.

reaction with ... a mystic and intrinsic peace
Of one who sees where men of nearer sight
are so close. See nothing...¹

Conversely, the Light may bring its own demon with it. So Captain Craig
questions,

Is it better to be blinded by the lights
Or by the shadows? By the lights, you say?
The shadows are all devils, and the lights
Gleam guiding and eternal? Very good;
But while you say so do not quite forget
That sunshine has a devil of its own,
And one that we, for the great craft of him
But vaguely recognize...²

But the "demon" is also the first pre-requisite for spiritual adequacy.

Again it is the philosophic Captain speaking--this time, on his death-bed.

Forget you not that he who in his work
Would mount from these low roads of measured shame
To tread the leagueless highways must fling first
And fling forevermore beyond this reach
The shackles of a slave who doubts the sun.
There is no servitude so fraudulent
As of a sun-shut mind; for 't is the mind
That makes you craven or invincible,
Diseased or puissant...³

The foregoing examples will serve to illustrate the inherent
variety in the Light image; the fact that it must be interpreted directly
and anew with each set of circumstances. The detailed interpretation of
the Light and its relation to specific failure is the heart of this study
and will follow in due course.

Although not directly related to the Light in its intimate con-

1. "Merlin," *op. cit.*, p. 304.

2. "Captain Craig," *op. cit.*, p. 131.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 166.

In "The Diary of the Lightkeeper," Melory's journey of revenge, connection with Failure, several other light values and attendant symbols with its varying intensities of passion, is made against a corresponding background of light and time, as afternoon waxes into the diminished characteristic Robinsonian uses of light is as a purely natural phenomenon. light-world of twilight and night, and even dawn comes prison and bloody, to intensify emotion in a given situation. Consistently, with this purpose as befits a day for an intended double deed of blood, Melory's bitter pose and effect, Robinson uses day and night, light and shadow, as an in the hour spent before Agatha's womb, verges with her name, in emotional "back-drop." One is reminded of Shakespeare's similar use of Nature, so effectively does Robinson touch with light or shadow the canvass upon which his characters' words and passions are revealed. He suggests then definite emotional overtones by his use of varying and corresponding degrees of light intensity.

Such a physical and psychical use of the light is particularly apparent in "Avon's Harvest," where no light appears at all, Avon's world being a completely shadowed existence dominated by hate, fear and remorse. There is the lurid gleam of the fire of hate and terror that burns in Avon's haunted eyes. But fire, for Robinson, is usually suggestive of darkness, signifying both spiritual torment, and the blackness of the anger, blood, violence, destruction. It has none of the steady illumination or the constructive qualities of Light. So the climax of the poem is intensified by the use of darkness--the absence of light--against which the scene moves to its conclusion. Says Avon,

For time was hidden out there in the black lake
Which now I could see only as a glimpse
Of black light by the shore. There were no stars
To mention, and the moon was hours away
Behind me. There was nothing but myself
And what was coming...²

1. Cf. analysis of "Avon's Harvest," post p. 103

2. "Avon's Harvest," Collected Poems, p. 568. note p. 107

In "The Glory of the Nightingales," Malory's journey of revenge, with its varying intensities of passion, is made against a corresponding background of light and time, as afternoon wanes into the diminished light-world of twilight and night; and even dawn comes crimson and bloody, as befits a day for an intended double deed of blood. Malory's bitterness in the hour spent before Agatha's tomb, merges with her name, in

A dimness in a light that faded slowly
 Into a twilight that would not last long.¹

Likewise, a crimson sunrise echoes his vengeful mood, as he tramps to his last meeting with Nightingale, on a day which, he plans, will be the last on earth for either of them.

Like a fire to burn the world, with all its anguish,
 And with all its evil evidence of man,
 Malory saw the sun and saw it rising
 For the last time, he said. And that was well.²

Cavender, too, works out his destiny in his spiritual dark house of remorse, the light here, as in "Avon's Harvest," being its opposite, darkness, signifying both spiritual torment, and the blackness of the night against which it is enacted.

Into that house where no man went, he went
 Alone; and in that house where day was night,
 Midnight was like a darkness that had fingers.³

Later, the moonlight lies between him and a chair in which Laramie, whom he has murdered, used to sit. Erie, cold, remote, now it penetrates the dark places of his mind, intensifying the cold triumph of his now-tortured

1. "The Glory of the Nightingales," p. 1022.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 1026.

3. "Cavender's House," *op. cit.*, p. 961; also post p. 107

conscience.

Tristram follows the thread of his fate through a world alternately lighted by the flame of his tragic love, or darkened into dull grays or into night, as the complex pattern of his destiny is shaded for final dissolution.

He strode along...
 Until there was no moon but a white blur,
 Low in a blurred gray sky, and all those lights
 That once had shone above him, and Isolt,
 Were somewhere miles away among the ages
 That he had walked, and counted with his feet,
 Which he believed, or dreamed that he believed
 Were taking him through hell to Camelot.

Perhaps nowhere in Robinson's poetry is his sensitivity to the emotional possibilities of light and color more evident than in the Vivian-Merlin scenes, where their mutual passion rises to a fiery pinnacle, then gradually chills, as riotous autumn colors shrivel into the withered brown of winter. On Merlin's arrival at Broceliande, he is showered with

...the cherry blossoms falling
 Down on him and around him in the sunlight.²

Vivian first appears to him as a "slim young cedar," with a complexion

...where blood and olive made a wild harmony
 With eyes and wayward hair that were too dark
 For peace if they were not subordinated.

There is the richness of a Rembrandt, with its contrast of light and shadow, in the scene of their first evening. Merlin, now in royal purple, and Vivian in a crimson "sheath," relax in a "flame-shaken gloom." Flaming

1. "Tristram," Collected Poems, p. 634-35; also, post p.

2. Ibid., "Merlin," p. 261; also post p.

3. Cf. analysis of the poem, post p.

3. Ibid., p. 264.

silver candlesticks etch her "dusky loveliness" against a deepening shadow, while Merlin and Vivian "twin" golden goblets. But a vision of Camelot comes to Merlin.

...there came. This is the quality revealed in Keats's
 Between him and the world a crumbling sky
 Of black and crimson, with a crimson cloud
 That held a far off town of many towers,
 All swayed and shaken, till at last they fell,
 And there was nothing but a crimson cloud
 That crumbled into nothing...¹

When Time and Fate and Change have inevitably overtaken the love-lyll, Merlin finds a "misty twilight" intercepting the sun which for him is Vivian. He leaves Camelot at the last in a fierce wind and a gloom that deepens into unrelieved night... "And there was darkness over Camelot."²

These, then, are a few examples out of many of Robinson's constant use of light for emotional intensification.

As for specific light symbols, one of the most frequent of such representations--what might be called the symbol of a symbol--is in the concrete image of the sun. Here, through a transference of qualities, the Light itself suggests universal, omnipotent, and blinding comprehension of life. Such understanding is vouchsafed to but a few, and for them exceeds human capacity to long sustain, as witness Merlin.³ For, with respect to those who see too much, it has been written of Robinson, "In his passionate skepticism he refuses to agree that any vision is the

1. Robinson's allusion for Keats's *Hyperion* is "the red the sun" as indicated by the "red" in the second line of the poem's first stanza.

1. "Merlin," p. 277.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 314.

3. Cf. analysis of the poem, post p. 69

universally valid one.¹ The sun image then, is a particularly apt one; for the Light is the way to peace and grace and spiritual life;² but inherent in its saving intensity is also the scorching heat that may shrivel its object into nothingness. This is the quality revealed in Tristram's remark born of knowledge won too late: the dark dove and kills himself.

This I can feel only the sun behind me now-- the light may be
Which is a fearful thing if we consider it
implied, and too long, or look too long into its face.³ where symbolically

It is: There is an obvious physical corollary to the sun image in the opposite symbol, which appears frequently, namely, darkness. The interpretation here is perfectly clear, darkness representing ignorance, fear, hate, -- whatever, in fact, the personal defects of the individual under consideration are, at the time of his distress. To say it another way, darkness actually is absence of the light, with all the emotional and spiritual confusion entailed thereby.

Another interesting aspect of the light image is in the fact that Robinson becomes so thoroughly identified with this innate poetical symbol that he transfers its physical implications to his characters themselves. Often the only physical descriptions given his otherwise "faceless" men and women is of the eyes, which thus come to have an intense expressive capacity, as well as a spiritual connotation. So the eyes of Garth,⁴

... of ideas, the dimming of the light, when there became involved in

1. Mark Van Doren, op. cit., p. 57.

the north, ... of the world, ... is better ... than whether there

2. Robinson's epitaph for Captain Craig is, "He had the sun"-- an implication suggesting the secret both of Craig's social failure and spiritual success.

3. "Tristram," op. cit., p. 664. ... 135

4. "Matthias at the Door," op. cit.

Matthias' mentor, lacked failures, or approval successes; the failures are paradoxical; A lustre that was right. They had seen more virtual successes, Perhaps, than eyes of men are meant to see or the scope of earth and earthly works.¹ Virtual houses are built, as they It is no surprise when Garth caricatures himself as "only a lost dog... too tired to bark," and goes off into the dark cave and kills himself.

This is to say further, that the presence of the Light may be implied, and supplied, even in such poems as "Talifer"² where symbolically it is quite absent; for Robinson again suggests it through transferring its quality--the essence of vision--to the eyes which do, or do not, perceive it. There appears then the frequent image of eyes whose vision is dim, or blinded. This deficiency again may become a basis for failure. It goes without saying that the majority of Robinson's characters see through a glass darkly. Only a few, as in life, bear the terrific responsibility of excessive vision or insight into the nature of things. But, and here is the full implication of the "tragic light," in either case, whether because of too dim, or too acute vision, tragedy in the life of the character results. Or, it has already come to pass at the point where his psychic history begins to be revealed. So Robinson uses the presence or the absence of the Light as a constant character re-agent. Thus his vision is essentially tragic, in that it stresses the degeneration of ideas, the dimming of the light, when these become implicated in the rough action of the world.³ It matters not then whether these

1. *Ibid.*, p. 1079

2. "Talifer," *Collected Poems*, p. 1331. Cf. post p. 138

3. Mark Van Doren, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

characters are obvious failures, or apparent successes; the failures are paradoxically explained, not infrequently as imminent spiritual successes,¹ or the successes, like Matthias, whose spiritual houses are built, as they ultimately realize, on sand, collapse in obvious failure, from which there may or may not be an arising.

... and the faith
Which has the soul and is the soul of reason--
And again, the Light, and the persistent question, what is it?

Freighted with its tragic implication, perhaps it is no single quality at all, more than the capacity to see life wholly; to reduce all of life's individual aspects to a proportion, where each part will be commensurate with the other parts, and all parts with the Whole, which embodies then the true meaning of existence. It is, too, the ability to realize life for exactly what it is, without either illusion or cynicism. Or it is sheer moral strength to regard the panorama of existence, no matter how desperately disturbing the view, with a high and enduring courage, as did Robinson himself, of whom Coffin says, "he can see life through because he can see through it."²

All of these qualities, capacities, meanings, signify the Light for Robinson--the Light which may be regarded then as a key to his evaluation and manipulation of character. That the Light will be more variously and specifically interpreted will be apparent when it is balanced against the life-patterns of specific characters for whom it is a major issue. Of this, at least, we are relatively sure: For Robinson himself, the Light became, as it did for Fargo and Amaranth,³ the "escape from despair";

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1. Of such are Captain Craig or Fernando Nash.
 2. Coffin, *op. cit.*, p. 45.
 3. "Amaranth," *Collected Poems*, p. 131.

the "courage to face disaster";¹ --the "flower that never fades."²

PART II

To look once again at Captain Craig, who, it is asserted, presents as plainly as his author ever spoke much of Robinson's own reaction to life, perhaps the Light is finally no more complex than these:

For wisdom, courage, knowledge, and the faith
Which has the soul and is the soul of reason--
These are the world's achievers...³

As previously stated, Robinson is particularly interested in

portraying two aspects of failure: that resulting from excess vision of

1. Coffin, op. cit., p. 45.

the Light, and that caused by dimness, or complete blindness of spiritual

2. "Amaranth," op. cit., p. 1392.

vision. Such failure is, as in, directly related to the degree of indi-

3. "Captain Craig," p. 132; also cf. Conclusion, post p. 179

vidual perception; and it is a basic theme in the treatment of a widely

varying group of characters. Finally, the failure motif in Robinson's

"philosophy" was something at least in his personal experience. The

Light will not be applied to nineteen poems, in which it will be inter-

preted as a fundamental concept or quality, whose excessive or diminished

perception accounts for specific failure. As the Light itself varies in

each case, so also will the type of failure vary.¹

It should be stated that analysis will be made of those representa-

tive characters belonging most distinctly and uniquely to the Robinsonian

world. The list will include Captain Craig (1917); Captain (1917);

Captain (1927); Ayn's Harvest (1928); Susan Fortinbras (1928); The Man

Who Died Twice (1944); Tristram (1927); Cavender's House (1927); The

Glory of the Fightmaster (1930); Hatching at the Deep (1931); Talifer

(1938); Amaranth (1934); King Jasper (1935). Other examples will be made

also of the earliest group of short poems typified by the short portrait of Richard Cory (1897). With the exception of the latter, these are the

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"heroes" of the long poems; the most typically Robinsonian characters,

CHAPTER IV

in that, except for the Arthurian figures, they derive from history but

his own observation and imagination. Where, the poem will not be treated in chronological order, for Robinson's poetry actually indicates

As previously stated, Robinson is particularly interested in little groups, except in the length of his later poems, where the implied portraying two aspects of failure: that resulting from excess vision of complexity of earlier characters receives obvious and complete development the Light, and that caused by dimness, or complete blindness of spiritual vision. Such failure is, again, directly related to the degree of individual change in his basic concepts or techniques. Days almost dead, individual perception; and it is a basic theme in the treatment of a widely varying group of characters. Finally, the failure emphasis in Robinson's "philosophy" owes something at least to his personal experience. The Light will now be applied to nineteen poems, in which it will be interpreted as a fundamental concept or quality, whose excessive or diminished perception accounts for specific failure. As the Light itself varies in each case, so also will the type of failure vary.¹

It should be stated that analysis will be made of those representative characters belonging most distinctly and uniquely to the Robinsonian world. The list will include Captain Craig (1902); Merlin (1917);

Lancelot (1920); Avon's Harvest (1921); Roman Bartholow (1923); The Man Who Died Twice (1924); Tristram (1927); Cavender's House (1927); The Glory of the Nightingales (1930); Matthias At the Door (1931); Talifer (1933); Amaranth (1934); King Jasper (1935). Brief mention will be made

1. Cf. ante pp. 38, 49.

also of the earliest group of short poems typified by the short portrait of Richard Cory (1897). With the exception of the latter, these are the "heroes" of the long poems; the most typically Robinsonian characters, in that, except for the Arthurian figures, they derive from nowhere but his own observation and imagination. Furthermore, the poems will not be treated in chronological order, for Robinson's poetry actually indicates little growth,¹ except in the length of his later poems, where the implied complexity of earlier characters receives obvious and complete development (or, as complete as Robinson characteristically gave). Also, there is no notable change in his basic concepts or technique. Says Clement Wood, "Acid drawings of human failure, a filed technique, a sense of crashing drama, an astounding felicity of phrase, were his from his beginning."² The grouping here then will be first according to the major division, and then, within the division, according to a basic similarity or contrast in theme or pattern.

If, for a complete study of failure, inclusion is made of five short characterizations drawn from history, and presented each in a situation rather than in a long narrative--such characters as John Brown, Rembrandt, St. Paul, Lazarus, Shakespeare--they deserve consideration failure, in the worldly sense, is for Robinson inevitable for one who

1. Miss Kaplan finds in Robinson's work four stages of growth, as the basic theme of tragedy deepens, and Robinson's outlook expands from an individualistic to a universal emphasis. Her four stages, however, would appear to be a superfine distinction of what is basically the same material; a somewhat arbitrary and personal division of a body of work which, after all, largely illustrates a single predominant theme, or emphasis, by many specific examples or individual facets. (Cf. Kaplan, Pt. I, Chap. IV, p. 35.)

2. Clement Wood, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

here because they, too, bear the Robinsonian imprint. For the poet has discovered in them qualities which heretofore may have escaped more casual eyes; qualities which, high-lighted, give new character-significance, and often the opposite value from that usually accorded.

A. Those Who See Too Much

Analysis will begin with those who fail in their various ways because they have seen too much of the Light.¹ The argument for this group is interesting and forcefully simple. When Robinson presents many of his most Light-diffused characters as failures, by virtue of their very excess perception of the Light, he is implying the impossibility of any man's achieving both material and spiritual perfection, in a practical and materialistic world. The incompatibility of the flesh and the spirit or of their equal fulfillment is not a new idea; nor is it a unique characteristic of contemporary times. There was the rich young ruler, with his timeless question; and Jesus and Socrates, to name but two makers of spiritual or intellectual history, have irrefutably demonstrated the point. But Robinson is not, after all, a social reformer. He accepts the world as it is, knowing that the problem is an eternal one. The problem is first that of the individual who "fails" grandly, because failure, in the worldly sense, is for Robinson inevitable for one who sacrifices his integrity for worldly success, and who thus fails spiritually in so doing.

(1) Richard Cory--(the early poems.)--Before beginning the first

1. I shall analyze first the "Richard Cory" poems, followed by "Captain Craig," "Merlin" and "Lancelot," from the Arthurian trilogy, and concluding the group with the five historical portraits.

important analysis, that of Captain Craig, who may well head the list of those who see too much, hence are specific types of failure, it is well to note briefly the prophetic "Tilbury Town" group drawn from Robinson's earliest poetic days, and well represented by that famous and polished and baffling gentleman, Richard Cory. These characters, unlike the later creations, are given no long-developed narratives; no psychological analyses--except by implication. Four stanzas suffice for Cory's brief and glittering walk across the pages of American literature; yet in those four stanzas is hinted (but never explained) the stark disillusion and sense of futility which, thirty-seven years later, are to lead Matthias to the door of his dark cave, and to intended suicide. For Richard Cory bears the unmistakable imprint of Robinson's sensitive and haunted touch. He is, in every sense, prophetic, which was more, apparently, than he had

the wit to see. Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
 We people on the pavement looked at him:
 He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
 Clean favored and imperially slim.
 And he was always quietly arrayed,
 And he was always human when he talked;
 But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
 "Good morning," and he glittered when he walked.
 And he was rich--yes, richer than a king--
 And admirably schooled in every grace:
 In fine, we thought that he was everything
 To make us wish that we were in his place.
 So on we worked, and waited for the light,
 And went without the meat, and cursed the bread,
 And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
 Went home and put a bullet through his head.²

whining class. Florence was gifted with an extraordinary sensitivity of

1. During the following analyses, the basic volume used is the Collected Poems previously noted. All page references will relate to that.

2. Collected Poems, p. 82.

It is not surprising that Richard Cory baffled early readers of Robinson. Why did he do it was the obvious question--and it remains unanswered until one has worked backward from the more developed characterizations. Then the chinks, where the poet's intuition has leapt the gaps of revealed fact, can be filled in. For if we cannot say that his despair was induced by an emotional disappointment, or by a material bankruptcy, or by some other obvious circumstance wedded, before Cory's time and experience, to nocturnal bullets, we may imply that he must have possessed enough of his author's "light" to have recognized himself at last for what he truly was; and so to have become aware of his spiritual deficiency. He must have realized, one day, the eternal discrepancy between the appearance and the realities of life-values. With then, just as much of the light of self-knowledge, or of Truth, as he had, which was more, apparently, than he had listened to by five or six young idealists for the spiritual resources to apply positively, the bullet became the inevitable answer for him. So Cory too, joins the group for whom the Light is too intense, and so tragic. And so, from the earliest poems, this freighted and burdensome ability to perceive Truth--or lack of ability to perceive it--is the single thread of fast color that runs through the many-colored fabric of Robinson's characters.

The Light is ultimately tragic, again, because never in this world can it be completely perceived or supported and its visionary still live unaltered--or perhaps, even live at all. As a case in point, there is another from this same early group, Tilbury's man Flammonde, of the shining clan. Flammonde was gifted with an extraordinary sensitivity of perception; he could detect, and foster, a talent hidden from more casual eyes. He possessed the rare quality of understanding of, and tolerance

for, those unfortunates shunned by his fellow-townsmen. He was a master of practical psychology. Yet, he too, had within him a "broken link" that withheld from him the achievement his inherent capacity for greatness suggested. Of him Robinson says conclusively,

Rarely at once will nature give
The power to be Flammonde and live.¹

This is, however, not an implication of defeatism, but an almost scientific acceptance of the fact that without the "small satanic kink" man would not be man, but god.

(2) Captain Craig.--That arch-humorist, Captain Craig, is another example of the working out of this principle of excessive Light, applied a little differently. Captain Craig "had the sun."² But Captain Craig, unlike Richard Cory, is of the social dregs. Yet he is discovered and listened to by five or six young idealists for

The spark in him...
Choked under, like a jest in Holy Writ
By Tilbury prudence. He had lived his life
And in his way had shared, with all mankind,
Inveterate leave to fashion of himself
Whatever he was not. And after time,
When it had come sufficiently to pass
That he was going patch-clad through the streets,
Weak, dizzy, chilled, and half starved,
Some nerveless fingers on a prudent sleeve,
And told the sleeve in furtive confidence,
Just how it was: "My name is Captain Craig,"
He said, "and I must eat." The sleeve moved on...³

1. "Flammonde," Collected Poems, p. 3.

2. Throughout this poem, the Light symbol appears as the sun.

3. "Captain Craig," Collected Poems, p. 113.

Captain Craig is a constitutional and consistent "failure," exuberantly overlooked by the town, which, in its "mug-faced failures," socially, this is his tragic...found it more melodious to about... Right on, with unmolested adoration, Citizen. To keep the tune as it had always been, To trust in God, and let the Captain starve, this ability to "put first things first," which has never allowed him to If, by the grace of his young pensioners, he does not completely starve, because depressed over his lack of interest in, hence lack of ability for, his ultimate history is disclosed in several philosophic letters, in a accumulation of the world's goods. Even now, during his last denuded number of conversations, and, finally, in an eccentric and triumphant days, he thinks of nothing death-bed scene.

But he is triumphant. For he had

He is a "dare...a joy to find it in his life
To be an outcast usher of the soul
For such as had good courage of the Sun
To pattern Love...²

So the Captain sits "like a king with an ancient ease" on his one chair, and presents the picture of a philosopher whose saving grace is the sense of humor, or the balanced vision, which discerns, without being defeated, the tragic joke that life is for most of humanity; and whose very capacity for "sun-grazing" has made him oblivious to practical matters, and brought him to his last physical and social indigence. He looks at a world which perverts

the courage of an infinite ideal
To finite resignation...³

and discourses of "a wiser kind of joy"--a larger fulfillment of man's spirit--that will come "Never, until you learn to laugh with God."⁴

1. Ibid., p. 114.

2. Ibid., p. 115.

3. Ibid., p. 118.

4. Ibid., p. 119.

The Captain has "laughed" all of his life; and in spite of, or at, a success-ridden world and its "smug-faced failures." Socially, this is his tragic flaw; that which has prevented his becoming an Eminent man, Citizen. He has "an irremediable cheerfulness"; and it is this quality, this ability to "put first things first," which has never allowed him to become depressed over his lack of interest in, hence lack of ability for, accumulation of the world's goods. Even now, during his last denuded days, he thinks of nothing

That is the forbear of all earnestness,
Fearless as he is, he has still beneath an ultimate Universe
That he would rather do than be himself
to his young Wisely alive...¹ off of his last Will and Testament. Confess-

He is a "decrepit pensioner," who "worshiping, line-questioning, and

fearing and ... cherishes the living light... goes to these "God's universes"
Forgetful of dead shadows...²

The secret of his failure and modesty--and that of most of Robinson's
He may not have much strength in his arms
strangely victorious characters--is revealed in his latest words:

...but he has eyes
And ears and he can read the sun...³

That first I sought, I might have made you hear
Yet the sunshine, says the Captain, like the dark, has a demon who is a
stranger to most of us, and. No man has ever seen

The face of honor that God promises,
...The quest of him is hard enough--
As hard as truth...⁴ too divine

For sacrifice, too fine for seeking,
Yet, out of this quest, achieved, comes at last the realization, and even

the possession of "the world's achievers"--wisdom, knowledge, courage,
faith, Love. Of such is the Captain's Light, secured
That I, in having somewhat recognized

The discord of infinity as love,
...an inward eye for the dim fact
Of what this dark world is...⁵

He continues, expressing one of Robinson's most powerful notions, and

Another key to the failure motif:

1. Ibid., p. 125.

3. Ibid.

5. Ibid., p. 137.

2. Ibid., p. 121

4. Ibid., p. 131. 5. Ibid., p. 133

But if these be indeed the Light, for him, and if the Captain has followed and captured its gleam, how can he be listed as a failure? He is such only in the accepted social and material sense. For Robinson, he succeeds, as a man, because of his perception of true values. So, slowly and almost majestically, he emerges as an example of Robinson's peculiar irony. For his, and his author's is

What kills us, for the spirit knows no guile,
 ...an ancient levity. Callings on which I live,
 That is the forebear of all earnestness.

Penniless as he is, he can still bequeath an ultimate Universe to his young friends--the stuff of his last Will and Testament. Confessed in his last hours of his "world-worshipping, time-questioning, sun-fearing and heart-yielding," the Captain assigns to them "God's universe!"² The secret of his failure and success--and that of most of Robinson's strangely victorious characters--is revealed in his latest words:

...If I had won for success. It is also another statement of
 What first I sought, I might have made you beam
 By giving less; but now I make you laugh
 By giving more than what had made you beam,
 And it is well. No man has ever done
 The deed of humor that God promises,
 But now and then we know tragedians--the light--
 Reform, and in denial too divine
 For sacrifice, too firm for ecstasy,
 Record in letters, or in books they write,
 What fragment of God's humor they have caught,
 What earnest of its rhythm; and I believe
 That I, in having somewhat recognized
 The formal measure of it, have endured
 The discord of infirmity no less
 Through fortune than by failure.³

He continues, expressing one of Robinson's most powerful notions, and another key to the failure motif:

1. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 149.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 150.

...What men lose
 Man gains; and what man gains reports itself
 In losses we but vaguely deprecate,
 So they be not for us; and this is right,
 Except that when the devil in the sun
 Misguides us, and we know not what we see;
 We know not if we climb or if we fall;
 And if we fly, we know not where we fly.¹

And yet--

...It is the flesh, and his wisdom, and his persistence of
 That ails us, for the spirit knows no quail,
 No failure, no down-falling; so climb high,
 And having set your steps regard not much
 The downward laughter clinging at your feet,
 Nor overmuch the warning; only know
 As well as you know down from lantern-light,
 That far above you, for you, and within you,
 There burns and shines and lives, unwavering,
 And always yours, the Truth,
 ...fly for truth,
 And hell shall have no storm to crush your flight,
 No laughter to vex down your loyalty.²

This, then, is the forthright and triumphant legacy of one who stands in
 the best Robinsonian sense for success. It is also another statement of
 the eternal conflict between the aspiring spirit and the constraining
 and dubious flesh.

For the Captain has discerned the Truth--the Light--even as "a
 scarred man among men." After that, there can be no thought of turning
 back. It must be so for any man, he says, for

...If there come
 But once on all his journey, singing down
 To find him, the gold-throated forward call,
 What way but one, what but the forward way,
 Shall after that call guide him? When his ears
 Have earned an inward skill to methodize

1. Ibid., p. 150.

2. Ibid., p. 151.

universal of The clash of all crossed voices and all noises individual
 How shall he grope to be confused again,
 representation As he has been, by discord? When his eyes their experiences
 Have read the book of wisdom in the sun,
 are again not And after dark deciphered it on earth, the timeless human
 How shall he turn them back to scan some huge
 efforts to end Blood-lettered protest of bewildered men, through "a...
 That hunger while he feeds where they would starve,
 finite and finite And all absurdly perish? ¹

So, out of his indigence, and his wisdom, and his perception of
 the Light, the Captain's most precious gift to his friends is his hope
 that all of them may find their "promise of the sun," which has enabled
 him to endure, unperturbed, the rebuffs of his fellow-men, and to meet,
 unafraid, even the ultimate failure of his flesh. Humorist and mystic
 as he is, the Captain's Light is of a sure and singing gleam. His wisdom
 is the wisdom of joy and of truth, and his final going is radiant and
 assured. ² and "Lancelot" in which experience has its roots its passion
 and its (3) Merlin.-- Another distinctive addition to the portrait
 gallery of those who fail by virtue of seeing too much of the Light comes
 in the figure of Merlin, the hero of the poem of the same name. In this
 poem Robinson has taken another step in the enlarging of his pictorial
 canvas, having begun with the Tilbury Town group, progressed to eminent
 historical characters, ² and now reached the heroic proportions of legend.
 Here, in three poems based on Arthurian legend, ³ is "the distillation and
 the synthesis of a rigorous observation of human character and experience
 in terms of what the poet has come to believe is their most abiding and

1. Ibid., pp. 156-157.

2. Cf. post pp. 82-97

3. "Tristram," "Merlin," "Lancelot."

universal significance.¹ These men and women are not pure individual representations then, but rather "eternal types"; and their experiences are again not so much individual, but concerned with the timeless human effort to understand and cope with "an infinite universe" through "a finite and fragmentary wisdom."² Furthermore, both *Merlin* and *Lancelot*³ were written against the disillusioning background of the first World War, a time when physical catastrophe and emotional chaos reached upwards through the murk of pessimism to the ultimate heights of a new spiritual idealism. Says Mr. Morris, the war "served to turn men's minds inwards, in a discovery of faith."⁴ He further points out that nowhere in Robinson's poetry "is there a more explicit illumination of that subtle concentration of experience into its ideal values than in these two poems, *"Merlin"* and *"Lancelot"*, in which experience has its roots in passion, and its meaning in a consecration of the spirit."⁵ One more characteristic of the Arthurian poems should be noted here, a comment pertinent to a study of the Light. Heretofore, and in forthcoming poems, the Light appears as a highly personal poetic symbol, with numerous interpretations. In the Arthurian poems, it is the pre-conceived light of the Grail. Said Robinson himself, "Galahad's light"⁶

1. Lloyd Morris, *The Poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson*, New York: Doran & Co., 1923, p. 46.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

3. "Merlin," 1917; "Lancelot," 1920.

4. Morris, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Letter to Harriet Robinson, 4-1-19, *ibid.*, p. 100.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

is simply the light of the Grail, interpreted universally as a spiritual realization of things and their significance." He added, "I don't see how this can be made any more concrete, for it is not the same thing to any two individuals."¹ It should be noted here, however, that while the Grail Light does gleam intermittently through "Merlin," Merlin's own light is revealed as the light of knowledge, wisdom, intelligence, and his own magical powers. For his, there can be no *grail* Merlin, after a ten years' love-idyll with Vivian in Brittany, has re-appeared at Camelot on the eve of the downfall of Arthur's court. At Arthur's call, he has returned, in spite of a previous negative decision. Years before, with his super-insight, he had foreseen the consequences of Arthur's marriage to Guinevere, who already loved Lancelot. He had warned the king, but Arthur would not heed his words. Now, betrayed by his wife, and by Lancelot, his best friend, surrounded at court by treachery in the person of Modred who covets both Guinevere and the throne, Arthur, as King of Camelot, as head of the Round Table, and as a man, numbers his days.

But the poem is primarily the wistful and shadowed story of Merlin, the once-mighty wizard, whose Light, super-bright, is yet inadequate to save Arthur and the doomed society of Camelot. Merlin goes away, a defeated and saddened man, the mere shadow of his wizard mightiness, in that he has foreseen tragic events to come, and recognized them as inescapable and beyond his magic ability to divert or forestall. The personal negative

resolution of his life, his failure, comes for Merlin in the course and

1. Letter to Hermann Hagedorn, Sept. 8, 1918. Selected Letters, op. cit., p. 113.

consequences of his love affair with Vivian. This is the situation which reveals Merlin's particular failure. ... his knowledge is actually

Perhaps "failure" is too emphatic a term to characterize Merlin's state at the end. For too much wisdom and clairvoyance, But surely Merlin pays a penalty for being too wise; But now there is a general feeling that Merlin is diminished in power and he can, and must, because of his Light, foresee the dissolution of his world. That is failure and penalty both; for he must witness the down- that his vision is dimmed. Merlin, they agree, will have "sounded and appalled" Arthur's anguish if he has his wisdom any longer. But has he fall of the world and of the king he has created. For him, there can be even to Arthur he is no greater personal failure. How does it come about?

... the form, lost Merlin, Merlin had existed, serene and competent, until he allowed himself A sign of brilliance, and a cypharite, to lose his sense of proportion, until he betrayed his intelligence, by he is, to the king's grieving weep, a "transcendent seer." On his face, falling in love with Vivian. Their affair is at first so satisfying that too smooth now for a wizard or a sage, he is quite willing to divorce himself from all further concern with the A method of a lost sublimity world he has left. Furthermore, up to this time, because he has followed the guiding Light of his intelligence, he has kept in harmony with his universe, and even, amazingly, retained his youth. In the end, Time and Fate and Change have overtaken even the wizard; old age has come, with its weariness of both love and the world.¹ Yet when Merlin first reappears at Camelot, he still, according to hearsay,

wears the valiance of an ageless youth
crowned with a glory of eternal peace.³

But, significantly, he has come back without his famous beard; an external change suggestive of an inward one. Once, Gawain asserts, "he knew every-
thing."³ At least, he "knew as much as God would let him know"--until he

1. Floyd Stovall, "The Optimism Behind Robinson's Tragedies," *American Literature*, March, 1938, p. 13.

2. "Merlin," p. 238.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 239.

met Vivian. It is an important "until." Bagonet, Arthur's Fool, implies that part of Merlin's penalty for excessive knowledge is actually

...being buried in Broceliande
For too much wisdom and clairvoyancy.¹

But now there is a general feeling that Merlin is diminished in power and that his vision is dimmed. Merlin, they agree, will have "sounded and appraised" Arthur's anguish if he has his wisdom any longer. But has he? Even to Arthur he is

...the fond, lost Merlin,
Whose Nemesis had made of him a slave,
A man of dalliance, and a sybarite.²

He is, to the king's grieving eyes, a "transmuted seer." On his face,

Too smooth now for a wizard or a sage,
Lay written for the King's remembering eyes,
A pathos of a lost authority
Long faded, and unconsciously gone.³

Merlin, says Arthur, has "gone down smiling to the smaller life."⁴

Of course, Merlin has not yet completely lost the magic gleam. He can still predict the coming of Arthur's "most violent years"; the "sounding of loud horns" striking for war. But he can, he says, see no farther now than once he did,

For no man shall be given of everything
Together in one life...⁵

Yet he sees the coming of Galahad, for whom he founded the Siege Perilous,-- Galahad, who is to be Lancelot's son, and who is to find the Grail. But

1. Ibid., p. 240.

2. Ibid., p. 249.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., p. 251.

5. "Merlin," p. 252. Cf. ante p.

neither Merlin nor Arthur shall see the Grail. Says Merlin, "with Arthur"

...Once I dreamed of it,
But I was buried. I shall see no Grail,
Nor would I have it otherwise. I saw
Too much, and that was never good for man.
The man who goes alone too far goes mad--
In one way or another.¹

Merlin's penalty for excess Light is then the madness--though an ecstatic
madness--of his love for Vivian. His failure as a magician, the result of
the love-idyll, comes when he is unable to save Camelot. For even Merlin,
like all "men who dream," has two heights; the distance between words,
even words of wisdom, and deeds, that "crawl so far below them."²

He must pay another price, too, for having seen too much; a price
voiced by Vivian for both of them. Admitting "her unquiet head" upon
his shoulder to be a curse to punish him "for knowing beyond knowledge,"
she adds that both of them are "out of tune with Time."³ They are,
neither of them, she says, "strung for Today."⁴ So she rationalizes
their belonging to each other:

...Vivian is your punishment
For making kings of men who are not kings;
And you are mine, by the same reasoning,
For living out of Time and out of tune
With anything but you...⁵

But Time will have its revenge. The change inevitable is shadowed
when Merlin leaves her to go to Camelot. When returns to Brittany, he
comes back to a "new loneliness; a "vague, soul-consuming premonition"; and

1. Ibid., p. 254.

4. Ibid., p. 281.

2. Ibid., p. 269.

5. Ibid.

3. Ibid., p. 280.

6. "Let Us," pp. 299-300.

now he wonders if his "avenging intellect" is to shine as a "twin mirror" with Arthur's dissolving kingdom.¹

...The man who sees
 May see too far, and he may see too late
 The path he takes unseen, he told himself
 When he found thought again. 'The man who sees
 May go on seeing till the immortal flame
 That lights and lures him folds him in its heart,
 And leaves of what there was of him to die
 An item of inhospitable dust
 That love and hate alike must hide away;
 Or there may still be charted for his feet
 A dimmer faring, where the touch of time
 Were like the passing of a twilight moth
 From flower to flower into oblivion,
 If there were not somewhere a barren end
 Of moths and flowers, and glimmering far away
 Beyond a desert where the flowerless days
 Are told in slow defeats and agonies--
 The guiding of a nameless light that once
 Had made him see too much--and has by now
 Revealed in death, to the undying child
 Of Lancelot, the Grail. For this pure light
 Has many rays to throw, for many men
 To follow; and the wise are not all pure,
 Nor are the pure all wise who follow it.
 There are more rays than men. But let the man
 Who saw too much, and was to drive himself
 From paradise, play too lightly or too long
 Among the moths and flowers, he finds at last
 There is a dim way out; and he shall grope
 Where pleasant shadows lead him to the plain
 That has no shadow save his own behind him.
 And there, with no complaint, nor much regret,
 Shall he plod on, with death between him now
 And the far light that guides him, till he falls
 And has an empty thought of empty rest;
 ...The man who saw
 Too much must have an eye to see at last
 Where Fate has marked the clay: ...I see the light
 But I shall fall before I come to it;
 For I am old, I was young yesterday.
 ...Time has won.'²

1. *Ibid.*, p. 285.

2. "Merlin," p. 163.

3. "Merlin," pp. 294-95.

4. An interesting variation of this theme appears in "Lancelot"
 post, p. 77.

It is Merlin's own epitaph for greatness that he voices. So Broceliande becomes for him a prison-yard, as Time takes a delayed revenge. "Merlin He feels that he must leave Vivian and return to Arthur; and he does. But on his second trip back to Camelot, he departs again without seeing the king; knowing now that Arthur must meet his destiny without further intervention from himself. Furthermore, he decides not to go again to Vivian. In the disaster-laden gloom that falls over the stricken court Merlin and Dagonet move away together. And if Merlin is now an impotent wizard, and a disillusioned and saddened man, it is because, he says,

I saw; but I was neither Fate nor God, refused to see and admit. I saw too much; and this would be the end, Were there to be an end. I saw myself-- the stake, the flames, A sight no other man has ever seen; And through the dark that lay beyond myself burns, rescue I saw two fires that are to light the world.¹

Merlin, killing a number of the knights, including two of Gawaine's brothers, Merlin's "two fires" are, of course, the destructive blaze of Camelot, and takes her to Joyous Gard, his castle. Gawaine leads Arthur into attacking Joyous Gard, and weary and fruitless fighting continues, until

Like all of humanity, Merlin may not exceed the limits of mortal power or experience without penalty.² He may begin a great work, and create in Arthur an example for coming ages; but the finishing is beyond his powers. Merlin has seen too much of the Light--in his case, the light of wisdom or intelligence. Vivian is his explicit punishment; and so punished, through the dimming of his powers, he has been rendered incompetent to save that which he has created and loved. It is his failure, and perhaps his human distinction,

king's dearest friend, saying that only Merlin and Dagonet, save Arthur, Lancelot agreed to aid, but he arrives at Dover too late.

Arthur and Mordred have slain each other. The knights are dead or fleeing.

1. "Merlin," p. 313.
2. An interesting variation of this there appears in "Lazarus," post. p. 77.

(4) Lancelot.--Analysis of the group who see too much is logically continued with a study of "Lancelot," written as a companion poem to "Merlin," each to supplement the incompletenesses of the other. "Lancelot" simply continues the story of Camelot, begun three years before in "Merlin".

Under the influence of the Grail Light, Lancelot has determined to leave Camelot and Guinevere, and to follow the lonely Gleam which the knights of the Round Table hailed as ultimate truth. His resolution to go yields to Guinevere's persuasion, however; and Arthur and his knights return unexpectedly from a hunting expedition, to find them together, and to be convinced at last of what Arthur has so long refused to see and admit. Lancelot flees, and Guinevere is to be burnt at the stake. When the flames are actually licking the faggots, Lancelot returns, rescues her, killing a number of the knights, including two of Gawaine's brothers, and takes her to Joyous Gard, his castle. Gawaine goads Arthur into attacking Joyous Gard, and weary and fruitless fighting continues, until Lancelot is ordered by Rose to surrender Guinevere to Arthur. But on returning from escorting her to Camelot, Lancelot finds Arthur's word of banishment awaiting him, and the realization that the war is to continue in France. Later, however, in a letter from Gawaine, Lancelot is advised that Guinevere has fled for safety to the Tower, and that Arthur is fighting Modred for his life and kingdom. Gawaine, on his death-bed, urges Lancelot to forget his enmity and remember only that he was once the king's dearest friend, saying that only Lancelot can now, perhaps, save Arthur. Lancelot agrees to aid. But he arrives at Dover too late. Arthur and Modred have slain each other. The knights are dead or scattered, and the dissolution of Camelot is complete. Lancelot goes to the

convent at Almesbury for one more sight of Guinevere, who has become a nun, then turns his face into the twilight and rides into the new world of his now-undimmed Light.

Lancelot is another example of failure through excess light.

Throughout the poem, the Light is simply the light of the Grail, which he has seen, but at the time been unable to endure. The whole poem, says Mark Van Doren, is "a study of various effects produced on men of the Round Table by the Holy Grail pursuit. The result of looking too long at the Light is, for Lancelot, confusion and darkness. Lancelot's tragedy is the peculiarly human one of achieving clarity without gain—until now, he is spiritually poisoned, his confusion overcomes him and putting strength." For Lancelot returns to Camelot from the Quest spiritually confused, and to be caught by his love for the Queen, who thus comes between him and the light of the revelation which he is not yet ready to follow or sustain.

He knows only that the Light has blinded him, and that there is really no place for him now in Camelot. There is for him only the place where the Light may lead him.² Gawaine urges him, long before the final catastrophe, to follow his Light, suggesting that Lancelot is himself.

...a thing too vaporous to be sharing
The carnal feast of life...³

To the Queen, Gawain advises that Lancelot
Has now inside his head a foreign fever
That urges him away to the last edge
Of everything, there to efface himself
In ecstasy, and so be done with us.⁴

1. *Ibid.*, p. 373.

1. Mark Van Doren, *op. cit.*, p. 71

2. *Ibid.*, p. 372.

2. "Lancelot," p. 369.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 371.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, p. 369.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 371.

Yet Guinevere can not, for her life, send him away; and Lancelot's resolution weakens. She reproaches him for his changed attitude toward her:

Are you the Lancelot who rode, long since
Away from me on that unearthly Quest,
Which left no man the same who followed it?¹

But he is at a spiritual impasse. He loves her, beyond reason. Yet he

knows that ruin will overtake all of them if he assumes longer that he has not seen what he has seen. Says he,

...There are no more lies
Left anywhere now for me to tell myself
That I have not already told myself
And overtold²

until now, he is spiritually poisoned. So confusion overcomes him; and out of it comes the long crescendo of tragedy that is to be the destruction of all their world--a destruction in which Lancelot and Guinevere are the comfortable and tradition-warmed old world is pursued of a perilous and moving internal forces, and Modred the external one.

Yet Lancelot does not fear most the "dark," for, says Guinevere, is Death in this world. This Lancelot knows, for he recalls

There is a Light that you fear more today
Than all the darkness that has ever been.³

It is true. Lancelot darkly questions the riddle of himself, of the vision which drives him from the Queen's love, of the Light itself, of Arthur. He questions the secret of the Court--why they all are there; and who Guinevere really is, with her fatal fascination for him. He even questions the social problem of kings--and "the millions who are now like worms."⁴ He wonders when, if ever, wisdom will come.

1. *Ibid.*, p. 373.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 375.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 379.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 384.

For, he says, ...When are they
To know that men must have an end to them
When men have seen the Light and left the world
That I am leaving now.¹

There is not much time left, he knows. Yet perhaps, he adds ironically,

Not the least part of Lancelot's despair comes when he realizes that his
there may be time for him to prove

his defect is his change from devotion to the Light to² attention to the
"How merry a man may be who sees the Light."

And the cry of his tortured conscience—and of his too-frail human spirit is
expressed in bitter words:

God, what a rain of ashes falls on him
Who sees the new and cannot leave the old!³

This is the key-note to Lancelot's failure; that he has seen the Grail,
symbolizing "the new," as none but one man else, Galahad, has; but Lancelot

is still a fallible human being, who as yet lacks the capacity to leave a
comfortable and tradition-worned old world in pursuit of a perilous and
unknown new one. For the price of perfect vision and the will to follow it
is Death in this world. This Lancelot knows, for he recalls

The triumph and the sadness in the face
Of Galahad, for whom the Light was waiting.⁴

In the words of Bore, his kinsman, Lancelot has seen the Light too
near for his salvation or his advantage. He has, in effect, been blinded
by two lights--the pure gleam of the Grail, which renders him out of tune
with this world, and the beauty of Guinevere. Now he lives in two kingdoms,

Now owning in his heart the king of either,
And ruling not himself...⁵

1. Ibid.

2. Ibid., p. 384.

3. Ibid., p. 385.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., p. 415

For, he says, reflecting on the downfall of Camelot, Practicality, and a
 voluntary resignation of human experience answer is the Voth's
 reply. "Once I had gone Where the Light guided me, but the Queen came,
 And then there was no Light..."¹

Not the least part of Lancelot's despair comes when he realizes that his
 basic defect is his change from devotion to the Light to devotion to the
 Queen, not hope for peace from "a living Voice that would not give him

peace." But The Light came, and I did not follow it;
 Then she came, knowing not what thing she did,
 And she it was I followed...² falls; a world has died
 For you, that a world she lives. There is no peace.

So it is that in the cold walls of the nunnery Lancelot finds at last "the
 end of Arthur's kingdom and of Camelot." It is the end, too, of his ordeal
 of confusion. Guinevere voices this finale in her own way:
 And in the darkness comes the Light,
 ...There is nothing now

So Lancelot That I can see between you and the Light
 That I have dimmed so long. If you forgive me,
 And I believe you do--though I know all
 That I have cost, when I was worth so little--
 There is no hazard that I see between you
 And what you sought so long, and would have found
 Had I not always hindered you. Forgive me--
 I could not let you go. ³

Another lesser interpretation of the light that has confused
 Lancelot here is, of course, the light of tragic love,⁴ which has blinded
 both the Queen and her lover.

...It is not good
 To know too much of love--
 ...life, as well as imagination

1. Ibid., p. 437.

2. Ibid., p. 439.

4. Ibid., p. 441.

3. Ibid., p. 441.

5. Ibid.

4. The tragic-love light is also the light of Tristram, q.v. post p. 98

say the whispering nuns after Lancelot's departure.¹ Practicality, and a voluntary resignation of one side of human experience answer in the Mother's reply, "We who love God alone are safest."²

So, with his grievously-won knowledge and a new fortitude, Lancelot goes on his journey, with a new consecration to his now-single purpose.

He may not hope for Peace from "a living Voice that would not give him peace." But he has the Voice, which thus reveals itself to him:

"where the Light falls, death falls; a world has died
For you, that a world may live. There is no peace."³

Neither is he to be free, for, continues the Voice,

You have come to the world's end, and it is best
You are not free. Where the Light falls, death falls:
And in the darkness comes the Light.⁴

So Lancelot rides into the darkness, with a vision of

The face of Galahad who had seen and died,
And was alive, now in a mist of gold.⁵

There were no more faces, then. There was nothing but the darkness. "And in the darkness came the Light."⁶

(5) Five Characterizations.-- In his insistence on the Light as a touch-stone for character-value and destiny, Robinson has not confined himself to characters of legend or of his own creation. He turns also to the worlds of art, politics, religion and history, to find there personages who fit into his individual pattern. Life, as well as imagination

1. "Lancelot," p. 447. 4. Ibid., p. 449.

2. Ibid. 5. Ibid.

3. Ibid., p. 448. 6. Ibid.

then, presents us with those whose spiritual eminence is for Robinson directly traceable to their super-vision of essentials. Yet often, as with Shakespeare, that eminence is tainted with a unique poison, in that, having possessed or achieved so much, it is yet by its very humanity inhibited from ideal achievement.¹

Among the historical notables who "see too much" are Rembrandt, John Brown, St. Paul, Lazarus, Shakespeare. These figures are not presented in long narratives, but simply in single situations where the value of the Light is quite apparent.

(a) Rembrandt is addressing his mirrored reflection, having turned from a self-portrait painted during happier days. It is the Amsterdam of 1645, three years after the death of his beloved Saskia, and during his now "discredited ascendancy." He has earned the wrath and indignation,

Of injured Hollanders in Amsterdam
Who cannot find their fifty florins' worth
Of Holland face

where Rembrandt has hidden it in his "new golden shadow."² It is for him a time of shadows. He has, he says, experienced a "dislocating fall, a blinding fall," but "there are no bones broken."³

That fall, Robinson implies, is the direct result of Rembrandt's "gleam" which comes, through darkness, at last, only for his portraits, for himself, and for a few believers,⁴--a gleam which even Saskia, had she

1. It is, of course, the old theme again, played this time on the characters of historical notables.

2. "Rembrandt to Rembrandt," Collected Poems, p. 583.

3. Ibid., p. 586.

4. Ibid.

lived, must perhaps have come to doubt. Here the Light is both a physical and a spiritual one; both the golden light of his new technique which Holland is too blind now to recognize, and the light of artistic truth which as an artist Rembrandt may not betray.¹ Like all who follow their gleam, he has suffered physically, socially, economically, because his fellow-Dutchmen have failed to understand that

...there was no malice
Or grinning evil in a golden shadow
That shall outshine their slight indentities
And hold their faces when their names are nothing.²

The devil of the present and of compromise whispers in his ear:

"What of it Rembrandt, even if you know?"
It says again; "and you don't know for certain.
What if in fifty or a hundred years
They find you out? You may have gone meanwhile
So greatly to the dogs that you'll not care
Much what they find..."³

Or another devil with a "softer note for saying truth not soft" whispers:

"You might go faster, if not quite so far,
...if in your vexed economy
There lived a faculty for saying yes
And meaning no, and then for doing neither."⁴

But Rembrandt's wiser spirit, his artist's conscience, speaks in rebuttal to these tempting voices. It urges Rembrandt to make as many portraits as he may, and to

1. The opposite situation, that of an artist who does betray his integrity, is treated in "The Man Who Died Twice," cf. post p. 122.

2. "Rembrandt," p. 589.

3. Ibid., p. 588.

4. Ibid., p. 589.

...hold your light
 So that you see, without so much to blind you
 As even the cob-web flash of a misgiving,
 Assured and certain that if you see right
 Others will have to see...¹

For there is a Rembrandt to be satisfied, says the spirit of his
 wisdom; one who is the servant, not the master. He is

One of the few that are so fortunate
 As to be told their task and to be given
 A skill to do it with a tool too keen
 For timid safety...²

Very faith is the guiding spirit of John
 Rembrandt, continues his Voice, must "bow" his "elected head" and whip
 his devils "each to his own nest in hell."³

So Rembrandt accepts the challenge and the penalty and the glory
 of his Light, and confidently addresses his own portrait:

We know together of a golden flood
 That with its overthrow shall drown away
 The dikes that held it; and we know thereby
 That in its rising light there lives a fire
 No devils that are lodging here in Holland
 Shall put out wholly, or much agitate,
 Except in unofficial preparation
 They put out first the sun...⁴

Furthermore, he realizes and accepts the fact that, as surely as Saskia and
 the old days are gone, so, too, the law that bids him see now alone likewise
 forbids his light from Holland eyes "till Holland ears are told of it."⁵
 His artist's conscience tells him that if he cannot accept the present
 social darkness as a toll inevitably exacted for remaining loyal to his
 Light, he had better seek the easiest way out in "the convenience of an

1. Ibid., p. 589-90.

4. Ibid., p. 597. *Brown*, p. 48

2. Ibid. *Brown*, "Collected Poems," 5. Ibid., p. 591. p. 430.

3. Ibid. v. *Labour*, 101. 111

easy ditch."¹

Rembrandt is a typical Robinsonian re-creation. His Light is the light of truth and artistic integrity. His problem is the eternal problem of gaining the world but losing his own soul. He prefers to lose the world; sure, with the faith of the martyr, that to preserve his integrity, even at the expense of all that a blind world may value, is eventually to insure his spiritual and artistic success.

(b) John Brown.-- That very faith is the guiding spirit of John Brown,² as he sits writing to his wife on the eve of his execution. He feels no bitterness; for his doctrine is that of Robinson himself, the doctrine "of forgiveness through understanding."³ He realizes that on him "God set the mark of his inscrutable necessity," and that for bearing that mark, some few will pity an old man

Who took upon himself the work of God
Because he pitied millions...⁴

He is content and patient, and indifferent to what men may say of him or fear to say.

...There was a work to be begun,
And when the Voice, that I have heard so long
Announced as in a thousand silences
And end of preparation, I began
The coming work of death. There is no other way
Than the old way of war for a new land
That will not know itself, and is tonight
A stranger to itself...⁵

His end is inevitable, he feels, for he has had the Voice, has seen the

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1. Ibid., p. 487. 4. Ibid., p. 485.
2. "John Brown," Collected Poems, p. 485. 5. Ibid., p. 486.
3. Louis V. Ledoux, op. cit., p. 4.

Light, when St. Paul.-- St. Paul,¹ on the way to Rome, is secretly meeting

four disciples...the major file
 See only what their fathers may have seen, 1
 Or may have said they saw when they saw nothing
 A voice made free...

It matters not to him whether history calls him mad, or finds the question
 A beholder of the "great Light" near Damascus, he is going where Caligula
 of him unanswerable.

He is that Paul "that fell, and he that rose, and he that

...Meanwhile, I was:
 And the long train is lighted that shall burn,

 Until at last a fiery crash will come
 To cleanse and shake a wounded hemisphere--
 And heal it of a long malignity ^{and pain} 2
 That angry time discredits and disowns. ^{there.} 4

He continues, comforting her to whom he writes, will but mark the beginning

of his work. I was the one man mad enough, it seems, find what he had
 To do my work; and now my work is over.
 learned to And you, my dear, are not to mourn for me still a universe
 Or for your sons, more than a soul should mourn
 where love In Paradise, done with evil and with earth. 3 Nevertheless,

he says, Here again is a Robinsonian success-in-failure; one "blessed"
 with too acute vision--this time, a social vision,--hence doomed physically
 and socially for ^{the same} ^{and fire,} they are "to plant, and then to plant

again"; for they ^{delving everywhere} ^{external fields.} 4 They all, he says,
 have eyes,
 For men with every virtue but the Vision.

John Brown's Light is the gleam of social justice, which he follows to
 the bitter end. The end is not too bitter for him, after all; for like
 every martyr to an as-yet unaccepted faith, he knows that his death is

but a beginning. "I shall have more to say when I am dead," he concludes. 5

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| 1. <u>Ibid.</u> , p. 487. | 4. <u>Ibid.</u> , p. 490. |
| 2. <u>Ibid.</u> , p. 488. | 5. <u>Ibid.</u> , p. 487. |
| 3. <u>Ibid.</u> | 7. <u>Ibid.</u> , p. 487. |

And though (c) St. Paul,-- St. Paul,¹ on the way to Rome, is secretly meeting four disciples at the Three Taverns. He is

A prisoner of the Law, and of the Lord
A voice made free...²

A beholder of the "great Light" near Damascus, he is going where Caesar awaits him. He is that Paul "that fell, and he that saw, and he that heard."³ And if, he says,

I give myself to make another crumb
For this pernicious feast of time and men--
Well, I have seen too much of time and men
To fear the ravening or the wrath of either.⁴

Like John Brown, he, too, realizes that Death will but mark the beginning of his work. He reminds the disciples that they may find what he has learned in what he has written; but that the world is still a universe where love and faith are perhaps little more than words. Nevertheless, he says, for the first time in history, the Gentiles have "love and law together, if so they will."⁵ And though Rome may yet hold for all of them a crown of thorns and fire, they are "to plant, and then to plant again"; for they are working in "the eternal fields."⁶ They all, he says, have eyes,

And we have then the Cross between two worlds--
To guide us, or to blind us, for a time,
Till we have eyes indeed...⁷

1. "The Three Taverns," Collected Poems, p. 461.

2. Ibid., p. 462.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., p. 464.

6. Ibid., p. 465.

7. Ibid., p. 466.

And though the power of evil is not to be minimized, and the Damascus
Light is not for all, nevertheless,

...When our eyes
Have wisdom, we see more than we remember;¹

But before they see, they must expect to suffer, he says.² He admonishes
them against false vanity or a "false light," and recommends to them a
constant faith as entrance to the Kingdom.

Obviously, As long as there are glasses that are dark--
And there are many--we see darkly through them;

Yet what may be as dark as a lost fire
For one of us, may still be for another
A coming gleam across the gulf of ages,
And a way home from shipwreck to the shore;
And so, through pangs and ills and desperations,
There may be light for all. There shall be light.³

He tells them to "Fight, and say what you feel"; to realize that they are
neither the first nor the last, and what

The best of life, until we see beyond
The shadows of ourselves...
...is in what we do not know.⁴

There are many to come who will be given both eyes and ears who are now
"incredulous of the Mystery. Further, he adds that

...Many that hate
Their kind are soon to know that without love
Their faith is but the perjured name of nothing.
I that have done some hating in my time
See now no time for hate; I that have left,

That we are from the stars...

-
1. Ibid.
 2. This is a favorite theme with Robinson, being implied constantly.
 3. "Three Taverns," p. 468-69.
 4. Ibid.

Martha quest: Fading behind me like familiar lights
 That are to shine no more for my returning,
 Home, friends, and honors--I that have lost all else
 For wisdom, and the wealth of it, say now
 To you that out of wisdom has come love,
 Mary, feeling: That measures and is of itself the measure
 Of works, and hope and faith...¹

So he leaves them, being but seven leagues from Caesar, a criminal
 ...for seeing beyond the Law
 That which the Law saw not...²

Obviously, Paul's Light, which has cost him so much, and finally is to
 cost him his life, is the Light of wisdom, of faith, and ultimately, of
 love; the spiritual outgrowth of the fiery flame he once saw on the
 Damascus Road. For it he willingly sacrifices everything, to present
 another heroic example of the Robinsonian "failure" who yet succeeds with
 ecstasy and grandeur.³

and then, (d) Lazarus.-- In the group of those who see too much,
 Robinson has provided an interesting variation on the "seeing" theme in
 his representation of Lazarus³ after his resurrection. Lazarus, come
 back from death, is speechless and remote. Mary and Martha, frightened
 and grief-stricken, voice a sad bewilderment.

Nothing is ever as it was before,
 Where Time has been. Here there is more than Time;
 And we that are so lonely and so far
 From home, since he is with us here again,
 Are farther now from him and from ourselves
 Than we are from the stars...⁴

1. Ibid., pp. 470-71.

2. Ibid., p. 471.

3. "Lazarus," Collected Poems, p. 530.

4. Ibid., p. 531.

Martha questions the Master's actions.

...Why did he wait

So long before he came? Why did he weep?¹

Mary, feeling her sister's arms about in a "fog-stricken sea of strangeness," can only gaze out into the twilight where Lazarus sits "like someone who was not," seeming to them alive "only in death again."² Martha entreats Mary to go out to him, to make him look at her, and to say once that "he is glad." Finally, as she holds his hands, Lazarus sighs and speaks her name. He reveals then, mistily, the secret of his silence and inability to readjust to a living world.

"...Who made him come,

That he should weep for me?...Was it you, Mary?"

.....
 "...I should have wept," he said,

"If I had been the Master..."³

And then, continuing, Lazarus adds,

"...I forgive you, Mary...

You did not know--Martha could not have known--

Only the Master knew...

.....
 ...and I may know only from him

The burden of all this"....⁴

Mary asks him if he, who has now felt everything, is afraid. He can only shake his head. He does not know.

When I came back, I knew the Master's eyes

Were looking into mine. I looked at his,

And there was more in them than I could see;

At first I could see nothing but his eyes;

Nothing else anywhere was to be seen--

1. Ibid., p. 530.

4. Ibid., p. 535.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., p. 533.

3. Ibid., p. 534.

Only his eyes. And they looked into mine--
 Long into mine, Mary, as if he knew.¹

"He cannot know that there is worse than death," says Mary. But Lazarus answers,

"Yes, there is worse than death."
 ...And that was what he knew;
 And that is what it was that I could see
 This morning in his eyes. I was afraid,
 But not as you are. There is worse than death,
 Mary; and there is nothing that is good
 For you in dying while you are still here.²

But Mary is not yet satisfied. She asks him if Nothing was all he found where he has been. To that Lazarus has no answer, except to say that even God would hardly weep or save himself longer, for Nothing. As they go slowly back into the house, Lazarus concludes,

I cannot tell you what the Master saw
 This morning in my eyes. I do not know.
 I cannot yet say how far I have gone,
 Or why it is that I am here again,
 Or where the old road leads. I do not know.
 I know that when I did come back, I saw
 His eyes again among the trees and faces--
 Only his eyes; and they looked into mine--
 Long into mine--long, long, as if he knew.³

In this poem, there is no factual representation of the Light at all; on the contrary, there is the darkness of night and doubt and even of fear and ignorance. Yet, there is the usual Robinsonian approach to experience through the "seeing eye." Lazarus looks into the all-knowing eyes of Christ, and there sees what, if he cannot name it, is yet enough to render him for a time oblivious to the usual problems of the world as

1. Ibid., p. 536-37.

3. Ibid., p. 539.

2. Ibid.

it once was for him. He has seen too much--of whatever it was that he saw. That sight has affected him tragically; for it is his destiny to have exceeded the bounds of human experience and knowledge; to have visioned in the eyes of Christ the futility that life is for the living who are yet dead,¹ and he is not able to cope with his unique and awful privilege. He who has been the only man to have experienced two worlds, now belongs to neither.

It is a matter for personal conjecture whether Christ wept for knowing what he had brought Lazarus back to face (the living death of those without the Light), or whether He wept in the knowledge of His own ultimate and timeless betrayal by the race of men. But Lazarus did see too much; and his tragic bewilderment and necessary re-appraisal of life in this new light are an inevitable result.

The usual Robinsonian physical and psychical use of light, where twilight and night emphasize Lazarus' spiritual confusion, is especially evident here. This poem, however, is less clear and obvious in its light imagery than most. For here the Light quality is only an implication, found in the knowledge that exists in the eyes of Christ. But the effect on the beholder, Lazarus, is, as usual, significant; and the frequent concept of the terror and confusion for mortals who perceive too much for their mortality is clearly evident. Although Lazarus is not a failure in the accepted sense, he nevertheless presents an interesting variation of the familiar theme of the effect of the Light on ordinary, limited, earth-bound vision. And though the rest of his life is left to imagina-

1. This too is a favorite theme with Robinson, cf. Matthias, post p. 144

tion, it must perforce be lived now in the light of new values--values which will differ from those of his fellow-men, and which, probably, they will neither understand nor condone.¹

(c) Shakespeare.-- In contrast to the oblique vision of Lazarus, the positive working-out of the symbol of excessive vision is nowhere more apparent than in Robinson's presentation of Shakespeare, through the lips of his fellow-craftsman and admirer, Ben Jonson.² Speaking of the conflict of the elements in his genius-friend, Jonson remarks,

Brings a fire and iron down on our sacred heads.
I tell him he needs Greek; but neither God,
Nor Greek will help him. Nothing will help that man.
You see, the fates have given him so much,
He must have all or perish,--or look out
Of London, where he sees too many lords.
They're part of half what ails him; I suppose
There's nothing fouler down among the demons
Than what it is he feels when he remembers
The dust and sweat and ointment of his calling
With his lords looking on and laughing at him.
King as he is, he can't be king de facto,
And that's as well, because he wouldn't like it;
He'd frame a lower rating of men than
Than he has now; and after that would come
An abdication or an apoplexy.
He can't be king, not even king of Stratford--

Shakespeare's somewhat divine discontent, Ben intimates, is the result of what he must have had even in youth--"his eyes, and their foretelling"; his "disillusions, old aches and parturitions of what's coming."⁴ There are no roads left for him, and accordingly, some devils of

1. Implication of this exists in the fact that even Mary and Martha are necessarily alienated from their brother.

2. "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford," Collected Poems, p. 20.

3. Ibid., p. 21.

4. Ibid., p. 22.

annoyance have taken him, of late, for their own; added to which, he
 "itches, manor-bitten to the bone."¹ Often there shines out of him

An aged light that has no age or station--
 The mystery that's his--a mischievous
 Half-made serenity that laughs at fate
 For being won so easy, and at friends
 Who laugh at him for what he wants the most,
 And for his dukedom down in Warwickshire;²

It is a part, and penalty of his genius, that

...he sees in everything
 A law that, given we flout it once too often,
 Brings a fire and iron down on our naked heads.
 To me it looks as if the power that made him,
 For fear of giving all things to one creature,
 Left out the first,--faith, innocence, illusion,
 Whatever 'tis that keeps us out 'o Bedlam,--
 And thereby, for his too consuming vision,
 Empowered him out of nature;...³

He is become the creature of his too intense light; the flame of
 his knowledge, which is the essence of his genius, has left him but "hol-
 low dreams."⁴

He knows how much of what men paint themselves
 Would blister in the light of what they are.
 He sees how much of what was great now shares
 An eminence transformed and ordinary;
 He knows too much of what the world has hushed
 In others, to be loud now for himself;
 He knows now at what height low enemies
 May reach his heart, and high friends let him fall;
 But what not even such as he may know
 Bedevils him the worst: his lark may sing
 At heaven's gate how he will, but he sees no gate,
 Save one whereto the spent clay waits a little
 Before the churchyard has it, and the worm.⁵

For him, says Ben, the ultimate is Nothing; Nature and Nothing. He

1. Ibid., p. 23.

3. Ibid., p. 26.

2. Ibid., p. 24.

4. Ibid., p. 28.

recalls Shakespeare's saying to him, on the transitory and tinsel worth
of material life: all a world where bugs and emperors
Go singularly back to the same dust,
Each in his time; and the old, ordered stars his light, which
That sang together, Ben, will sing the same
Old stave tomorrow...¹ and hollowness of each of life, has

For Shakespeare, Ben distrust time and its possibilities for much more
achievement. There must come a reckoning, he feels, for us. His light,

which shines The sessions that are now too much his own, the way for him
The roiling inward of a stilled outside,
to peace of The churning-out of all those blood-fed lines,
The nights of many schemes and little sleep,
Does The full brain hammered hot with too much thinking, various
The vexed heart over-worn with too much aching--²

human ways through those vicissitudes of the light--which is at once its own
these all are the price of genius, which, from the standpoint of the
reward and its own penalty. They are the creatures both of the world of
soul's endeavor, do not yet make for peace. Because of the very weight
reality and of their author's imagination. But factual or fictitious,
and responsibility of his genius, Shakespeare must live, insists Ben,
all of them, from Hamlet to Captain Craig, from St. Paul to Rembrandt,
in "a phantom world he sounded and found wanting."³

are shining examples of two phases of failure of the ideal: the spiritual
Here again, and this time in the apparent success of the acclaimed
failure of the gifted and eminent, or the social failure of the artist,
genius, is another kind of failure; the strength which is its own weakness;
the philosopher, or the martyr, who fails gloriously, losing the world,
another example of the fact that to no man, being man, is perfection
to be sure, but maintaining the integrity of his clearest ideals of
vouchsafed. Having so much, by virtue of the insight which is his,
value. So much as the latter must belong the kingdom of the light,
Shakespeare is yet gnawed by what he has not. He has not the capacity

for that illusion which may make for content. He has not much, if any,
faith, either in Man, or in what lies beyond him. His human failing is
ironically implied by the fact that his House in Stratford symbolizes
his discontent--all that he has not; which must at the same time make

KNOWLEDGE WHO FAIL IN THE SAME TWO ASPECT OF LIFE THROUGH A LIMITATION

of insight. Ibid., p. 29. see also, as their Ibid., p. 31. into it. "and too

little" Ibid., p. 30. since this group, according to Robinson's emphasis,

him smile, knowing as he bitterly does the transitory and tinsel worth of material things.

He too then, ultimately fails of the ideal. For his Light, which is supreme awareness of the tragedy and hollowness of much of life, has burned away his capacity for the superficial comforts and complacencies that make life endurable for less gifted and perceptive men. His Light, which shines so brightly for others, yet fails to point the way for him to peace of soul.

These are some representative figures who fail in their various human ways through excess vision of the Light--which is at once its own reward and its own penalty. They are the creatures both of the world of reality and of their author's imagination. But factual or fictitious, all of them, from Merlin to Captain Craig, from St. Paul to Rembrandt, are shining examples of two phases of failure of the ideal: the spiritual failure of the gifted and eminent, or the social failure of the artist, the philosopher, or the martyr, who fails gloriously, losing the world, to be sure; but maintaining the integrity of his sincerest ideals of value. To such as the latter must belong the kingdom of the Light.

B. Those Who See Too Little

Analysis of Failures who exist for Robinson because of excess perception of the Light has exhibited failure in two phases--social and spiritual. The failure motif is now to be studied in the second main group--those who fail in the same two aspect of life through a limitation of insight or vision; those who, as their author would state it, "see too little" of the Light. Since this group, according to Robinson's emphasis,

is much the larger, a greater variety in degrees and types of failure appears here. There are those like Avon who have no light at all; others, like Matthias, Roman Bartholow, Nightingale, or King Jasper, whose failure is the result of partial or distorted vision. It is convenient again to treat these characters in a certain order or grouping, considering in sequence those who are in any way related, and as an unmanageable emotion which

(1) Tristram.--Analysis has recently been made of two poems of the Arthurian cycle. Since the Arthurian poems exist in a complementary relationship, with every beauty, or in honor King, differing from other characterizations somewhat, by virtue both of their source and of the specific major definition of the Light as the Grail light, the second group may logically begin with a study of the third of the Arthurian cycle, and of its hero, Tristram.¹ For Tristram, too, is cast in the time and the heroic tradition of the world of Merlin and Lancelot, and some of self, and imperiously, and in plot the poem closely echoes the triangular human relationship of the other two poems.² No doubt, if given the time, weren't he cursed of easy blindness, Time had saved for him

In Tristram, there is less emphasis on the Light as an overt symbol than in nearly any of the other long poems. In fact, the Light has a kind of subterranean quality, coming to the surface obviously only in the tragic crescendo of the denouement. Yet the Light is nevertheless Tristram, is early presented as another example of Robinson's "old obsession of frustration," a failure of singular importance. For the double tragedy of Tristram and Isolt of life" which Robinson incidentally portrays. He is, he tells, Queen Isolt, becomes the result of the joint failure to comprehend and admit the implications of their particular situation, and of their own impassioned

1. "Tristram," Collected Poems, p. 595. Verde, L.F. Dutton & Co., 1943, p. 297.

2. This same relationship is a recurrent basis for many of Robinson's narratives of personality. is the same fact. Personality Narratives, 1943, p. 131.

natures. Tristram laments that he "saw" too late; and Isolt allowed her pride to stand in the way of a rational, long-range view of potentialities that, uncontrolled, must make only for tragedy.

Tristram has been sent by his uncle, King Mark, to fetch back Isolt of Ireland, Mark's betrothed. It is on the night of the wedding that Tristram realizes his passion for Isolt as an unmanageable emotion which can only make him its victim. Now he knows that he has been

...blind
 With angry beauty, or in honor blind,
 Or in obscure obedience unawakened.¹

Leaning alone on the parapet, where he has fled from the wedding feast, he visions Isolt in the lecherous arms of King Mark, and writhes in anguish.

...For lack of sight
 And sense of self, and imperturbably,
 He had achieved all this and might do more,
 No doubt, if given the time. Whereat he cursed
 Himself again, and his complacent years
 Of easy blindness. Time had saved for him
 The flower that he had not the wit to seize
 And carry a few leagues across the water,
 Till when he did so it was his no more,
 And body and soul were sick to think of it.²

Tristram, is early presented as another example of Robinson's "old obsession of frustration."³ His failure is another of the "frustrations of life" which Robinson constantly portrays.⁴ He is, he tells Queen Morgan,

1. "Tristram," p. 602.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 604.

3. Van Wyck Brooks, *Indian Summer*, New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1940, p. 527.

4. Harriet Munroe, "Robinson as Man and Poet," *Poetry Magazine*, June, 1935, p. 154.

But ... a melancholy warning covered by Tristram's "lizard-
 For all who dim their wits obliviously.
 He sees again in memory

has seen and heard. In his passion, Tristram draws his sword on the

... a ghostly ship
 Cleaving a way to Cornwall silently all, on pain of death
 From Ireland, with himself on board and one
 That with her eyes told him intolerably
 How little of his blind self a crowded youth,
 With a sight error-flecked and pleasure-flawed,
 Had made him see till on that silent voyage

So there was no more to see than faith betrayed
 Or life disowned...²

back to Camelot, where Arthur will make him a knight of the Round Table.

When Isolt joins him, there is further revelation of their now-
 Isolt of Brittany has an immediate premonition that he will not return,³
 joint failure. She questions the Fate that hates and destroys them,³ and
 Of course he does not. There is a rapturous interval at Joyous Gard,
 he answers her in words that reveal her defection also.

where Isolt of Ireland has been able to join Tristram, through Guinevere's

... Your pride would not
 Have healed my blindness then, even had you prayed
 For God to let you speak...⁴

traded passion, or bewail the years that are irrevocably gone.

But always he returns to damn his own blindness. Isolt will not let him

... Tristram, Tristram,

speak so, saying, are these blind-fold years that we have lost

Because a blind king bought of a blind father

It was our curse that you were not to see

Until you saw too late...⁵

They discuss the perils of their situation. But now they are done

A little later, with the growing realization of what her life will mean,

mitted to their love, no matter what awaits them. Love, they agree, is

wedded to Mark, but adoring Tristram, Isolt cries out,

for them the only reality. So, through summer and fall, their too-brief

O God, if only one of us had spoken

When there was all that time!...⁶

isolt arrives. Returns to Joyous Gard to

If Tristram had but spoken, she muses, no kings nor crowns could have

outshone the light of their love.

Isolt is sick to death. Tristram resolves to go to her. Meanwhile, Mark has at

lost fast.

1. "Tristram," p. 609. 2. Ibid., p. 614. 3. Isolt to see

2. Ibid., p. 612.

5. Ibid., p. 616.

3. Ibid., p. 614.

6. Ibid., p. 622.

But their rendez-vous is discovered by Tristram's "lizard-cousin" Andred, who tells Mark, who has come on the parapet, what he has seen and heard. In his passion, Tristram draws his sword on the King, who thus sentences him to exile from Cornwall, on pain of death should he return. Tristram goes back to Brittany, and to the innocent trust and peace of Isolt of the White Hands, whom he later marries.

So they live for two years, till Gawaine comes to take Tristram back to Camelot, where Arthur will make him a Knight of the Round Table. Isolt of Brittany has an immediate premonition that he will not return. Of course he does not. There is a rapturous interval at Joyous Gard, where Isolt of Ireland has been able to join Tristram, through Guinevere's visit to Cornwall. Here they alternately surrender to their long-frustrated passion, or bewail the years that are irrevocably gone.

So Tristram represents, with Isolt and Mark, a failure in adjustment to the world. Where are those blind-fold years that we have lost, coupled with the impotence of a child blinder than they?...

They discuss the perils of their situation. But now they are committed to their love, no matter what awaits them. Love, they agree, is for them the only reality. So, through summer and fall, their too-brief idyll carries them to the day when Tristram returns to Joyous Gard to find that Isolt has been taken by Mark's men back to Cornwall. He is stricken with a kind of madness, and hears, later, that Isolt, too, is sick to death. Tristram resolves to go to her. Meanwhile, Mark has at last faced the inevitability of the affair, and will permit Isolt to see

Tristram, so long as he himself does not have to face him. Mark also realizes now that Andred was mad on the wedding-night--made for hatred of Tristram and for an insane love for Isolt. Like the lovers, even Mark now reiterates the wish that he had "seen" in time. But time pushes relentlessly on. Tristram and Isolt are re-united. Oblivious to all but each other, they do not see the misguided knife of Andred that marks the end for both. "Light"--the light of tragic love, which is blinding. Now Mark, sitting alone by the parapet where Tristram and Isolt lie united at last in death, voices the tragic limitation which has beset them all:

...I shall know day from night
 Until I die, but there are darknesse
 That I am never to know, by day or night;
 All which is one more weary thing to learn,
 Always too late...¹

So Tristram represents, with Isolt and Mark, a failure in adjustment to life itself. There has been a too-dim vision which, coupled with the imperious resolution of their affair in Time, must have only tragic consequences. Once Tristram had seen,

Imploring it, the light of a far wisdom
 Tinging with hope the night of time between.²

But there was never, after that, the sure gleam of a nearer wisdom. Even Isolt of the White Hands is fated for sorrow; for her dawn and ultimate wisdom may come only after Tristram's death, when she sees, as she has not seen before, there there was always attending him "an almost visible doom."³

1. Ibid., p. 721. 3. Ibid., p. 727.

2. Ibid., p. 666.

3. Ibid., p. 647.

the "glow" in so many of the Robinson poems, tragedy hinges on "dim-ness of vision". That image, or the transference of the light image to the eyes that behold it, is the only obvious light representation here. But that clouded vision holds the secret of the tragedy, in that the implied light of truth, self-knowledge, or comprehension is denied to these blinded eyes. As in Merlin, or Lancelot, there is here an implication of a "lesser light"--the light of tragic love, which is blinding for vision of the greater Light. And as in others of these poems, tragedy comes too in that, human-like, none of the principal actors possesses, until after the fact, the wisdom that might have saved them all. But this is only to suggest again that inability to "see" clearly, or in time, makes man man, with the germs of his failure inherent in his humanity.

Avon and Gavender.-- It is convenient now to consider two characters who may be analysed together; both because their failures are induced by more than ordinary absence of the Light, and because in the cases of both men, the emphasis is more than usually psychological.

(2) Avon.-- Avon¹ is the victim of hate, fear and remorse. He carries the fire of death in his eyes, for spiritually he inhabits "a black well" which has for the observer "only a dim sort of glimmer," that has no light. In his youth, Avon is the object of an unfortunate attachment on the part of another student. Even as a young man, Avon admits that he saw himself as "a light for no high shining."³ Gradually

1. Ibid., p. 543. 2. Ibid., p. 547.

2. Ibid., p. 545. 3. Ibid., p. 547.

the "slow net" of a "fantastic and increasing hate" is woven about him and his unwanted companion. Avon allows his repugnance for the other to invade and conquer his wiser instincts, until the other boy becomes for him "a worm...never yet on earth or in the ocean." He has no other friend. He attaches himself only to Avon. At first, Avon fails to recognize in himself the poison of "an unfamiliar subtle sort of pity." But so it is, and slowly Avon comes to tolerate him, despite the other's peculiar "reptilian" quality--a sort of uncleanness that, he thinks, would have persisted "even if he had washed himself to death."¹ "There was nothing right about him," he concludes, twenty years thereafter.²

From January till June, Avon endures the hated presence; all the while, he says,

There was a battle going on within me, wherever he lay,³
 Of hate that fought remorse...
 Never to win,...never to win but once,⁴
 And having won, to lose disasterously,⁵
 And as it was to prove, interminably.⁶

For in June, Avon's Nemesis voices a lie about one of Avon's friends. In an moment of supreme hate and revulsion, Avon strikes the other, who does not return the blow, but simply looks at him, weeping, and finally turns away. Says Avon, recalling the scene,

...I still see him going
 Away from where I stood; and I shall see him
 Longer, sometime, than I shall see the face
 Of whosoever watches by the bed
 On which I die...⁴

for what next came. He thinks of friendship, and sees mankind

1. Ibid., p. 553.

2. Ibid., p. 553.

3. Ibid., p. 557-58.

3. Ibid., p. 554.

4. Ibid., p. 556.

5. Ibid., p. 555.

The next day, the boy goes home. There is nothing for Avon to utter but apology, and that he cannot; for hate is still dominant in him. He is given his chance by the other, who gazes at him with vengeance and "a cold sorrow" in his eyes, and who promises that if Avon remains silent, he will know where he is until he dies.¹ So, for twenty years, Avon has "hovered among shadows and regrets," and "driven his wheels too fast";² to his hate and remorse has now been added the burden of fear--three diseases for which, he says, there is "no specific."

Sometimes Avon hears of his erstwhile companion. He is out of Avon's life, yet never quite out of it. For once a year, on Avon's birthday, comes an anonymous card bearing the other's last words to him. Once in Rome, and once in London, there is a silent and sinister chance passing of the two. But Avon's doom is to see him, wherever he is.³ A brief respite comes when the name of Avon's pursuing fate is listed among the victims of the Titanic disaster. Later, Avon is invited to visit a friend at the latter's Maine cabin; and for a time nature soothes his lacerated spirit.

But one evening he is left alone. As he watches the sunset over the lake, he becomes aware of "hidden presences,"

That soon, no matter how many of them there were,
Would all be one...⁴

He feels that he is in hell; alone, yet not alone, and can only wait for what must come. He thinks of Prometheus, and sees mankind

1. *Ibid.*, p. 564.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 567.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 565.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 562.

1. *Ibid.*, p. 557.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 562.

3. *Ibid.*

2. *Ibid.*, p. 557-58.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 565.

All huddled into clusters in the dark,
 Calling to God for light. There was a light
 Coming for them, but there was none for me.¹

While the slow intangible minutes crawl over him, time is hidden in the
 black lake which he sees only as a glimpse of black light by the shore.²
 He goes into the cabin, builds a fire, locks the door. But even the fire
 is dead, making but a shadow of him.

The rest had had its day, and there was night
 Remaining--only night, that's made for shadows,³
 Shadows and sleep and dreams, or dreams without it.

The "late wreck" of a moon moves into the cabin. Avon lies on his bed
 and falls into a "sort of conscious, frozen catalepsy" wherein

...a man sees all there is around him
 As if it were not real, and he were not
 Alive...⁴

Into his stricken consciousness then moves the figure of his consuming
 hatred, its face mirroring "the sad malignant desperation" of the tragic
 afternoon; its eyes gleaming with "all their gathered vengeance." Then
 he catches

The shadowy glimpse of an uplifted arm,
 And a moon-flash of metal...⁵

In a state of collapse, he is found by his friend. And now, he
 tells his listener, he is to have another birthday on the morrow. But
 Avon's tomorrow never comes. The cause of his death is listed as "a
 nightmare and an aneurism." But, says his physician,

1. Ibid., p. 566.

4. Ibid., p. 569.

2. Ibid., p. 568.

5. Ibid., p. 571.

3. Ibid., "The House," Collected Poems, p. 961.

before. That He died, you know, because he was afraid--
And he had been afraid for a long time.¹

Avon's spiritual and physical death is the result of his complete lack of the Light; the result of a complete break-down of the intelligence or wisdom which otherwise would have enabled him to see the old incident in its proper proportion, and thus, eventually, to conquer the emotions and attitudes it engendered in him. Avon lacked courage and love. If his pursuer had, as Avon said, "no soul," Avon himself lacked spiritual back-bone; the ability to see both of them with a fair and rational eye, and to govern his impulses accordingly. The Light here, or its opposite, is the darkness of Avon's three "diseases," creating a situation whose horror is subtly intensified by the usual adept physical use of light and shadow. Avon is an extreme representation of the result of no vision or Light at all, and his tragedy is one of a tortured spirit for which no redemption is suggested.

(3) Cavender.-- In the latter respect, at least Cavender² presents a more hopeful picture. His, too, is the experience of a tortured conscience. But for Cavender, a path out of the darkness that is his spiritual environment is at last suggested; and Cavender, it is implied, will follow the path.

Cavender, too, shows a psychological preoccupation on Robinson's part; for Cavender's "dark house" symbolizes his travail of conscience and guilty remorse for the murder of his wife, Laramie, twelve years

1. Ibid., p. 573.

2. "Cavender's House," Collected Poems, p. 961.

before. There is within him "a darker night... that others not himself were not to know."¹ Once, he remembers, there was a light; perhaps, the light of his early love for Laramie.

But now there must be no light in that house
Where no man went...²

He sits in a chair, still standing where it used to stand, and a cold ray of moonlight intensifies the barren triumph that is Laramie's at last. For she has called him back, through his constant thoughts of her, his doubts, his fear, his anguish now to learn the answer to one question: Was Laramie really unfaithful to him? Had he any excuse for the insane jealousy which had precipitated her murder? In his brooding he sees the figure of Laramie taking shape in "a sense of unseen light not moonlight."³ When he looks up fearfully, she sits before him, apparently unchanged by the twelve terrible years that lie between them. He awaits her answer, startled by "a composure more discomfiting than patience born of hate."⁴ Quite without mercy now, but also without hate, Laramie reminds him of his early pledges of faith and of his later neglect.

Hearts are dark places. And if they were not,
There might be so much less for us to learn
That we who know so little, and know least
When our complacency is at its best
Might not learn anything. I have not come
Like a wise spectre to lift any veils,
For you have eyes only to see the way
That you are taking, and not much of that.⁵

1. Ibid.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., p. 967.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., p. 968.

She knew, she tells him, that his last account would find him "a lord of ruins." He has let this come about, through neglect of her, and suspicion, which

May take the face and shape of certainty,
 And so be worse than truth and ruin together.
 My penance is that I may say no more
 Of life than that you are to learn of it.
 A best way to endure it to the end.
 ...In Cavender's house,
 As in the Lord's house, there are many mansions,
 And some that he has not so much as opened,
 Having so much to learn...¹

This, that Cavender has so much to learn, is the source of his tragic failure. Now, studying Laramie's figure, conjured up by his own conscience, he realizes dimly, and for the first time, that

...He might, perhaps,
 Have seen there was no evil in her eyes
 That was not first in his...²

He begs her not to go away; to excoriate him, if necessary, but not to go. Calmly, she addresses him. She has no wish, she says, to make him suffer more than is just.

...The worst for you
 Is not to see yourself with nature's eye,
 And therefore know how much you are of nature,
 And how much of yourself. I come forbidden
 To light the way before you, which is dark
 For you and all alive; and it is well
 For most it should be so. So much as that,
 At least, is yours in common with your kind,
 Whose faith, when they are driven to think of it,
 Is mostly doubts and fears. Not always--no.
 There is a faith that is a part of fate
 For some of us--a thing that may be taught
 No more than may the color of our eyes.

1. *Ibid.*, p. 969.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 970.

1. *Ibid.*, p. 969.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 970.

she says,
 It was a part of me when I was born,
 But not of you; and I am sorry for that.
 It would have helped you when you needed most
 A shepherd to attend you...¹

Here are two implications of Cavender's inadequacies; he has lacked
 the capacity to know the truth about his own nature; he has lacked
 faith in others, symbolized by Laramie. The Light for Cavender, would
 have been the double gleam of self-knowledge and faith, both of which
 he has been without.

Cavender now questions God, Purpose, Law. He is hopeless of
 a way out. But Laramie insists she has "some drops of mercy" for him.
 Perhaps he will not always suffer. Still, for the present, his lack
 of faith remains, and remains as the basis for his ruin. Says she,
 If you had weighed your faith more carefully,

With me, when I was with it in your balance,
 You might have saved your house...²

She insists that he has seen her in a "twisted mirror," which once he
 might have broken, and so saved them both, instead of now working with
 his doubts in darkness.³ But now, with the wisdom of the dead, Laramie
 knows that

...we must learn
 Of our defects and doubts, however they hurt.
 Love is not vengeance, though it may be death,
 Which may be life...⁴

This, through spiritual torment, Cavender must now learn.

For Cavender has been a man of change, of strong passion, of
 promises and deeds, of vitality, and a certain charm; a man designed,

1. Ibid., p. 972.

2. Ibid., p. 975.

3. Ibid., p. 979.

4. Ibid.

she says,

To change a woman to a desperation,
And to destroy her when your passion felt
A twinge of insecurity...¹

Out of this weaving together of the good and the bad has evolved Cavender's human tragedy. He has been a man of "many ways and means," a master of his world; but there was wickedness and waste in his "abused abundance."² For with all of his positive traits, he has been guilty of "self-blindness." He has lacked loyalty; so that now, says Laramie, he must fly from her on the "dark wings" of his uncertainty.³

In his anguish, he looks to her to lead him out of his turmoil. But she cannot. For him her eyes are "shining without light to guide him."⁴ There is no reason, she says, for his continually rehearsing the thing, in the hope of finding a rational excuse for his action. Such knowledge can come to him only in death, where, says she, he "may learn all, or nothing."⁵ But, she adds positively,

If you revealed yourself and told the law
Your story, you would not have so long a death
And you might gain somewhat. The laws of men,
Along with older laws, and purposes,
Might serve you well. Why not? Remorse and pain
May be the curse of our accomplishment
On earth, and may be our career, sometimes.⁶

Beyond this, however, she has nothing for him; for his ledger was always in a tangle.⁷ and he must continue to pay for his loss for some time

1. Ibid., p. 980.

4. Ibid., p. 988.

7. Ibid.

2. Ibid., p. 985.

5. Ibid., p. 989.

3. Ibid., p. 987.

6. Ibid., p. 990.

yet. Dully, he answers her.

...I took my doom
With ignorance for courage, fearing nothing
And knowing nothing...¹

Again he asks his reiterated question. But she can offer only the slight consolation of her suggested course, adding that there are various ways of accepting those "drops of hope."

...Some, having taken them,
Have turned their suffering faces to the sunrise
And waited for the light, careless of all
Unanswered questions that have haunted them.

.....
...Others have not,
Preferring a blank hazard of escape,
With no especial surety of release
Thereafter for themselves...²

He was too "hasty" in throwing her over the cliff; too hasty in leaving the town after her burial, with the mystery of her supposed suicide to engage its wagging tongues. Now, she says,

Cavender, you are locked in a dark house,
Where you must live, or wreck your house to die.³

Then rising like "fate laughing" before him, she adds,

There is in me no answer to your question;
There is in me only so much of me
As you have brought with me and made of me.

.....
You have had life and death together so long
To play for you their most unholy music,
That you have not an ear left for another;
You are a living dissonance yourself,
And you have made of grief and desperation
Something of Laramie that had her voice.

He may choose, she says, "a sudden end, only to find no end," but there

1. Ibid.

2. Ibid., p. 995.

3. Ibid., p. 1001

4. Ibid., p. 1003.

is still time for him to think, and think he must. ¹

Had such been Cavender, there is nothing for you now, ¹
But what your laws and purposes ordain. ¹

He is not afraid to die; but he is afraid to live. There are, however,

still doors in his locked house, and only he may open them.

...There may be still

Some riches hidden there, and even for you, ²

Who spurned your treasure as an angry king

Might throw his crown away, and in his madness all, ²

Now know what he had done till all was done. ²

With this final ironic gleam of hope, Laramie disappears. Cavender realizes
at least there is this way out.

...There was no more to do

Or say than to cast out the lie within him, ³

And tell men what he was. He could do that

He could do anything now but go again ³

Into that house of his where no man went,

And where he did not live. ³

Now, in a darker house than any light

Might enter while he lived. Yet there was light; ³

There where his hope had come with him so far

To find an answer, there was light enough ³

To make him see that he was there again

Where men should find him, and the laws of men, ³

Along with older laws and purposes,

Combine to smite. He was not sorry for that; ³

And he was not afraid. He was afraid

Only of peace... ³

So with a clearer vision and a new courage, Cavender finds a "door behind

him in the dark," and goes out to meet the ways of human justice. Such a

"door" would have been unnecessary had he at first possessed the Light

of self-knowledge, faith, love. Laramie, too, has not been without fault;

for her failure, bound up with his, has been that of excessive vanity.

1. Ibid., p. 1005. Unsettled Poems. 3. Ibid., p. 1007.

2. Ibid., p. 1006. Unsettled Poems.

and thoughtlessness. Both have paid their individual penalties, impossible had each been gifted with enough vision to realize himself and the other for what each truly was.

(4) Amaranth.-- Amaranth may logically follow the last two poems, in that it, too, is set against the background of the psychological. Yet it is wider in scope, being allegorical, and dealing with symbolical characters. They are those who fail for having no light at all, and who are destroyed when finally they are brought to face the Light; or those who have "seen" inadequately, or too late. Amaranth is an "epic of frustration," presented through the medium of a dream that comes to Fargo, who at thirty-five had destroyed all his pictures but one, and who now, ten years later, re-visits in his dream the half-world of pseudo-artists. It is the world of those who have failed because they have chosen the wrong life-work, following a false light that was for them only a tragic illusion. The poem concerns, then, the fate of poets, musicians, writers, and professional types who have never had the courage to face the truth, personified by Amaranth, and who are annihilated, or destroy themselves, when finally they gaze into his blinding eyes. Fargo alone has survived, because he "has stripped himself of all pretensions."²

...Art has no rest
Until, like the old guard, it surrenders,
Or, like the old guard, dies. He had surrendered,
So not to greet himself among the slain

1. "Amaranth," Collected Poems, p. 1311. n. 1312.

2. Horace Gregory, op. cit., p. 160.

Nevertheless, Before he should be dead...¹
 But now, dreaming, Fargo comes back

Once more to a lost world where all was gone
 But ghostly shapes that had no life in them,
 And to the wrong door he would once have left
 By the wrong door...

It is an indeterminate world of neither light nor darkness; a world out
 of time; a world of black evil water that once tempted him, in his despair
 at

Carrying a cross that was not his to carry,
 Believing it was art...³

As he contemplates the evil tide that surrounds him, and re-lives the
 agony of the old doubt, he hears the voice of Amaranth, which he once
 heeded, and so escaped from unreality. Now he must look, if unperturbed,
 upon the face of Truth again. For the voice asks him why he has returned
 to "the wrong world," adding

...For those who damn themselves
 By coming back, voices are not enough
 They must have ears and eyes to know for certain
 Where they have come, and to what punishment.
 Only the reconciled or the unawakened
 Have resignation or ambition here.⁴

Fargo argues the question, saying that apparently he has only dreamed the
 freedom of the last ten years; but Amaranth replies,

...Freedom is mostly dreams,
 My friend. As for your coming and your going,
 I should not care--if it were not my doom
 To save, and when discredited or feared,
 To quench or to destroy...⁵

1. "Amaranth," p. 1312

4. Ibid., p. 1316.

2. "Amaranth," p. 1312.

5. Ibid., p. 1316.

3. Ibid., p. 1313.

Nevertheless, Fargo must now follow Amaranth on a journey through this land of many graves. It is, says Amaranth, just that, for

...Some looked at me
And cursed me, and then died. Some looked and live,
And are indifferent. They are the reconciled,
Who neither live nor die...¹

They visit first the Tavern of the Vanquished. Says Amaranth,

...You were here before,
But you had then your zeal and ignorance
Between you and your vision of it now.²

As to why those who frequent the Tavern cannot see, he says,

...Some of them will;
And some of them, caring no more to live
Without the calm of their congealed misgivings
Will die; while others who care more for life
Without a spur than for no life at all,
Will somehow live...³

Now they are approached by Evensong, who warns Fargo against looking too long into the eyes of Amaranth, and who introduces himself as

...a resident
For life in the wrong world, where I made music,
And make it still. It is not necessary,
But habit that has outlived revelation
May pipe on to the end.⁴

With this, Evensong produces his flute and pipes a theme for a quintette, which, he says,

...sounds like nothing now,
But once it sounded as if God had made it.⁵
The impotent themes with which Evensong consistently lards his conversa-

1. Ibid., p. 1317.

4. Ibid., p. 1319.

2. Ibid., p. 1318.

5. Ibid., p. 1320.

3. Ibid.

tion are a recurring symbol of the futility of his whole existence. His tragedy Evensong introduces his companions, Figg, a lawyer, "whose eyes, like yours and mine, see backwards";¹ Dr. Styx, who might have been "a silversmith or a ventriloquist"; the Reverent Pascal Flax, who became a clergyman, where Figg sees disillusioned citizens, philosophers,

novelists. "Because he liked to talk, and to be seen by others of wasted lives. They But he saw nothing that he could believe, why they visit the And one day said no more..."²
 home of Elaine Acacia Waldman, "who writes, and writes, and writes."³

Also, there is Pink, the poet, who

Evensong introduces Amaranth to Waldman:

...cuts and sets his words
 With an exotic skill so scintillating
 That no two proselytes who worship them
 Are mystified in the same way exactly.³
 Believe we are mistaken and hear nothing

And there is Atlas, a giant with black beard and red shirt,

Amaranth then ... who was a king stevedore, as "a spring-clean, unimpeachable
 rump-steak." Because he must; which is, it seems, the reason
 Why there are painters, poets, or musicians...⁴

she calls "my life." They move to leave, Waldman warning the novelist
 All of them, says Evensong, except Pink and Atlas, have

not to see her far before of the far behind. But she will not heed his
 ...encountered Amaranth face to face
 And eye to eye; and as we are, you see us.
 We are the reconciled Initiates,
 Who know that we are nothing in mens' eyes.
 That we set out to be--and should have been,
 Had we seen better. We see better now.⁵

And; "Pink is "erect, impervious, and secure," because he has not yet

looked Truth in the eyes. Indignant at Amaranth's implication that to do so requires a supreme courage, he challenges Amaranth, who wearily

1. "Amaranth," p. 1330.

4. Ibid.

2. Ibid., p. 1321.

5. Ibid., p. 1322.

3. Ibid.

complies, and looks at his. Pink departs, to go and hang himself. His tragedy is representative of that of all who have lived blindly, or in the world of artistic illusion, and who see, to their despair.

Fargo and Amaranth then visit a succession of scenes. There is an old house, where Fargo sees disillusioned divines, philosophers, moralists, economists, lawyers, deceived inventors, and others of wasted lives. They go to where Pink is hanging from his rafter; they visit the home of Elaine Amelia Watchman, "who writes, and writes, and writes."¹ Evensong introduces Amaranth to Watchman:

...He is a mighty one
 For murmuring; and he murmurs all the time
 To all of us. But most of us who hear him
 Believe we are mistaken and hear nothing.²
 But the false voice of doubt, common to man.

Amaranth then presents Fargo to Watchman, as "a spring-clean, unimpeachable pump-maker." Watchman glances proudly at her shelves of books, which she calls "her life." They move to leave, Evensong warning the novelist not to see too far before or too far behind. But she will not heed his advice. She will look into Amaranth's eyes. When she staggers away from what she finds there, Amaranth picks up one of her volumes. "'Listen' he said, 'and smile'."³ But where were leaves are now but gray flakes of dust; and Watchman herself vanishes in a thin scream, and "a little mound of lighter dust" which Evensong gently puts into an envelope and seals, adding her epitaph:

1. "Amaranth," p. 1339.

3. Ibid., p. 1347.

2. Ibid., p. 1378.

lawyer, There was no resignation born within her. Says Says Drowning.
 Truth, coming first as an uncertainty,
 of Atlas, Would have said death to her, and would have killed her
 Slowly...¹

Enjoy with him, when he discovered it
 Ampersand, Watchman's cat, who has his own explanation of things in terms
 of the mechanistic philosophy, adds that his mistress had "liked writing
 more than she liked truth or life."²

by possession, he found
 his first wish to annihilate her was
 Amaranth and Fargo go on; they visit successively a graveyard,
 then an evilly-lighted wharf, where Ipswitch, a foiled inventor, offers
 Fargo a siren drink and a place with him and his companions on a ship
 soon to sail. Fargo nearly accepts the drink, but realizes its danger
 just in time, and the old ship, with its crew of "superannuated men,"
 and "women obscenely decked and frescoed against time," departs, to sink
 beneath the black water. Says Amaranth, "There is no way out of here
 alive, like that."³

The studio of Atlas is next. Atlas is rough of tongue and strong
 of stature, but as a painter of blue horses he does not know Amaranth;
 and he cannot bear for him to think that he fears him. So he too looks
 into Amaranth's eyes. Having seen, he takes his sailor's knife and
 slashes all his paintings into ribbons. Then he leaves the room, and
 commits suicide.
Identical is revealed quality
 what we buried when we buried Atlas.

Next Next, Fargo finds himself in his old studio--where, however, there
 is now no place for him. The diminished company decides to attend Atlas'
 funeral. In the graveyard, they discourse, each of them--musician, doctor,

1. Ibid., p. 1348.

2. Ibid., p. 1378.

3. Ibid., p. 1359.

4. Ibid., p. 1387.

lawyer, clergyman,--on their respective failures in life. Says Evensong,
of Atlas, a each of them that, there is a great facility, though come by

individually Color with him, when he discovered it way, and through the
.....
fact that, Was a long drunkenness--which he conceived
As new, and revolution,
It is... like some others, himself to look into Amaranth's eyes
Assured of more than they possessed, he flung
but having His first bomb to annihilate for ever. He looks, and
Those ancient superfluities of line
fleds that And form that were an obstacle between him. For Jerry
And his desire. There was a blast of color,
to sure,--and Atlas never knew that he was blind with his farewell.
Until he knew the eyes of Amaranth.¹

To himself, says Evensong, Amaranth had given the choice between "resigna-
tion or destruction," having found him "without incentive and without
invention."² Figg, the lawyer, had stifled his "proper flame" with
"indolence and indecision," having followed others because he saw them
shining,
And without asking whether or not the fuel fail,
In me was one to make their sort of fire
And light...³

Dr. Styx diagnoses his failure as "indifference," being "inured to use-
lessness"; which Evensong sums up as a belief that all who live are

...in essence, and in everything,
Identical in revealed futility. Friend,
With what we buried when we buried Atlas.⁴

Flax, the clergyman has failed through a devastating doubt of what "for
certain" is evil. When his theological house fell about him, he fled out
of it. There is, he feels, a God within him; but he has "no name" for

1. "Amaranth," p. 1374.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 1384.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 1383. 1387-88.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 1387-93.

him, and now words, for Flax, have little meaning, and no truth.¹

In each of them then, there is a great futility, though come by individually through a different spiritual deficiency, and through the fact that, for all, Truth came too late.

It is time now for Fargo himself to look into Amaranth's eyes; but having once heeded his voice, he has nothing to fear. He looks, and finds that all except Evensong and Amaranth have disappeared. Now Fargo is sure,--and free to return to his own world. Amaranth bids him farewell.

...Remember me
 As one who may not measure what he does
 More than fate may. If it were possible,
 I should hold only pleasure in my eyes
 For those who see too late. You heard my voice, after all;
 And heeded it, not knowing whose voice it was,
 Many have heard it, and have only covered
 Their fears and indecisions and misgivings
 More resolutely with their vanities;
 And under such an unsubstantial armour
 Against the slow rust of discovery
 Must choose rather to strive and starve and fail,
 And be forgotten...
 ...To a few
 I murmur not in vain; they fly from here
 As you did, and I see no more of them
 Where, far from this miasma of delusion
 They know the best there is for man to know;
 They know the peace of reason. To a few
 I show myself; but only the resigned
 And reconciled will own me as a friend.
 And all this you have seen. You are not here
 To stay with us; and you are wiser now
 For your return. You will not come again.
 Remember me... The name was Amaranth...
 The flower... that never... fades...²

There is a great light, and Fargo awakes with joy into the world of his own effective reality.

1. "Amaranth," pp. 1387-88. 2. Ibid., pp. 1391-93.

actually. The allegory here is so obvious that only a brief summary is necessary. Here Amaranth, or Truth, symbolizes the Light, and Robinson is dealing again with the old theme of failure which is because of inability to know the Truth, or to know it until it is too late for positive endeavor to follow, this group being illustrated by Styx, Figg, Flax, Evensong. Pink, Atlas, Watchman, represent those who, having never perceived Truth at all, are rendered incapable of life itself, under the blinding glare of revelation. All are examples of the blind or disillusioned futility which is failure.

Here Robinson has concerned himself with the specialized worlds of art and professional life. But this is a universal world, after all; for the greatest art is the art of wise and effective living. The allegory is then entirely comprehensive in its scope. Properly envisioned, the Light would have brought to Evensong, Pink, Atlas, Watchman, the power of truthful art; to Styx, a sense of the value and nobility of service; to Flax, the certitude and peace of a sure faith. Lacking these, all fail.

(5) Fernando Nash.-- A less symbolical and less general treatment of art and artists is presented in the history of Fernando Nash, The Man Who Died Twice.¹ Here Robinson is concerned with another peril which may beset the artist. This time, it is not so much the tragedy of inability to perceive Truth, as in Amaranth, but the "unpardonable sin" of the conscious waste of genius. The poem illustrates then not failure through absence of the light, but failure through betrayal of the light once

1. "The Man Who Died Twice," Collected Poems, p. 921.

actually possessed, *...and doubted him. And, he says,*

Fernando Nash is a musician. He has known since boyhood that he
One other thing, I should have gone down then
 has but to wait, patiently, and fortified by the knowledge of his genius,
Myself to be secure...¹
 to hear the music of his symphony "blown down by choral horns out of a
But his stubborn spirit has combined with a child impatience, a lack of
 star." But he has dissipated his talent and become the victim of impatience,
spiritual discipline, which has ruined even his great gift. For beauty
 sensuality, and doubt. At forty-six, he is discovered by the narrator,
years he has been lost,—
 beating a Salvation Army drum on Broadway, resigned to defeat and waiting
For all these years while he had crushed spirits
 to die. Now he is but "the ruin of a potential world-shaker," whose
Then earth gives over to giants who are to live
...former dominance and authority all for me
Had now disintegrated, lapsed, and shrunken,
To an inferior mystery that had yet golden ropes—
The presence of defeat...¹
Or so Fernando surely would have said
 He had always been *before...²*

I see The marked of devils—who must have patiently, Nash was
And slowly crucified, for subtle sport,
 sitting in his *This foiled initiate who had seen and felt*
Meanwhile the living fire that mortal doors
 in a dusty *For most of us hold hidden...²* *...competent plain sense of*

Yet, even now, Nash can rationalize his fall and the desolation of the
 present. For those who once feared and "yelped" at him have made, he
That was the only way to live
 says, no music either any less futile than his; he at least, as a drum-
 ming evangelist, makes a music "heard all up and down Broadway."
his was
 rain, he confers *...Mine are the drums of life—* *mirror.* ³ *He reviews the*
After those other drums. I had it—once.
 weary darkened *sage of his life, from his first boyhood intimations of*
 But that was long ago. Now for years, Fernando Nash has inhabited his
 a talent, up to the present moment. Why, he ratiocates, could he not
 own dark world—a world whose wreckage came crashing down upon him, because
 have waited? Five words—"Symphony Number Three, Fernando Nash"—would,
 he had lacked basic qualities for the flowering of his talent. He had

1. "The Man Who Died Twice," p. 921. *Ibid.*

2. *Ibid.*, p. 922.

3. *Ibid.* p. 923.

scorned those who hated and doubted him. And, he says, he would have
 been "master ...if I had known. But he built the machine, he tells him-
 self, "only One other thing, I should have gone down then
 Upon my knees for strength--I who believed
 Myself to be secure..."¹

But his stubborn egotism has combined with a wild impatience, a lack of
 spiritual discipline, which has ruined even his great gift. For twenty
 years he has been lost,--

For all those years while he had crushed unripe "devil-woman"
 The grapes of heaven to make a wilder wine
 Than earth gives even to giants who are to live bitterly
 And still be giants. It may be well for men
 That only few shall have the grapes of heaven
 To crush. The grapes of heaven are golden grapes--
 And golden dregs are the worst dregs of all--
 Or so Fernando surely would have said
 A year before...²

A year before, on the eve of his forty-fifth birthday, Nash was
 sitting in his barren room, on his iron bed. His music was beside him--
 in a dusty box waiting for the janitor. The "competent plain face of
 Bach" looked down on him

Like an incurious Titan at a worm,
 That once in adolescent insolence
 Would have believed himself another Titan.³

Sick with futility, and recognizing now in himself the cause of his own
 ruin, he confronts his bleared face in a filmy mirror. He reviews the
 weary darkened saga of his life, from his first boyhood intimations of
 a talent, up to the present moment. Why, he reiterates, could he not
 have waited? Five words--"Symphony Number Three, Fernando Nash"--would,

1. Ibid., p. 924-25.

3. Ibid., p. 925.

2. Ibid., p. 926.

he knows, have placed him among the mighty. In due time, he would have been "master of a new machine." But he built the machine, he tells himself, "only to let it rust," he tells them, "and you have come too many

times before
 A fog of doubt that a small constant fire
 Would have defeated had invisibly
 His And imperceptibly crept into it, ^{from he wakes in bed,}
 And made the miracle in it that was yours
 wandering to A nameless toy for the first imbecile ^{to be his, in the}
 To flout who found it--wherefore he'll not find it.¹
 guise of seventy sails which perform for him the first act symbolically. The
 So he has followed the drumming devils of his doubt, and the "devil-women";
 music forges along

he has become the creature of lust and drunkenness. Now he bitterly asks himself,

To a dark and surging climax, which at length
 Breaks horribly into coarse and useless laughter
 That runs above the groaning of the damned;
 What do you think you are--one of God's jokes?²
 You slunk away from him, still adequate childhood,
 For his immortal service, and you failed him;
 The rate danced And you knew all the time what you were doing.²
 You damned yourself while you were still alive.
 and at length vanish, leaving him in a cold sweat. For the next week he
 His birthright, "signed away in fettered sloth," has vanished. He knows
 tries to starve himself. Miserable and alone, he fights through days and
 it. Yet he is not "crazy" enough, or "solid" enough to kill himself out-
 rights of fearization. Then one day he is aware of
 right. But there is, he reasons, another way. It is

A longer and a more monotonous one,
 Yet one that has no slight ascendancy
 Over the rest; for if you starve yourself to death
 Maybe the God you've so industriously
 Offended in most ways accessible ^{to find}
 Will tell you something; and if you live again
 You may attain to fewer discrepancies
 In less within you that you may destroy.
 That's a good way for you to meet your doubt
 And show at the same time a reverence
 That's in you somewhere still...³

Notice So he tears up his first two symphonies without regret now, and

1. Ibid., p. 929.

3. Ibid., p. 935.

2. Ibid., p. 931.

goes down the stairs for a last ironic debauch. Half-way down, he hears
 in a kind of warning the drums of death again; but he sets his jaws hard
 together. "You are too late," he tells them, "and you have come too many
 times before."

His spree lasts three weeks. One afternoon he awakes in bed,
 wondering how he got there. A horrible fantasy appears to him, in the
 guise of seventy rats which perform for him the first rat symphony. The
 music forges along

To a dark and surging climax, which at length
 Broke horribly into coarse and unclean laughter
 That rose above the groaning of the damned;
 And through it all there were those drums of death
 Which always had been haunting him from childhood.

The rats dance madly to the infernal noise, leer at him, bow mockingly,
 and at length vanish, leaving him in a cold sweat. For the next week he
 tries to starve himself. Miserable and alone, he fights through days and
 nights of recrimination. Then one day he is aware of

For a new clearness which had late begun
 To pierce forbidden chambers long obscured
 Within him, and abandoned, being so dark
 And empty that he would not enter them--
 Fearful of what was not there to be found
 Should he go there to see...²

...After a grateful darkness,
 There was to be the pain of seeing too clearly
 More than a man so willing to see nothing
 Should have to see...³

Motionless and weak, he lies upon his bed, trying to persuade himself

1. *Ibid.*, p. 940.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 941.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 942.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 942.

2. *Ibid.*

But the drums That this new clarity was the light that comes, until
 Before the night comes, and would not last long--
 His "choral" Yet knowing it was not...¹

For now his wits are clear again. He confesses
 ...a rueful willingness
 To reason that with time and care this power
 Would come, and coming might be used...²

Brighter and brighter sound the "choral drums," and Nash realizes
 For the first time in his life, he knows a calm "to the confusions that
 that at last the "ecological messengers" whom he has so frequently "insulted"
 were born with him." A "grateful shame" for his past sins, and a "vast
 joy" suffuse his spirit, to tell him
 That after passion, arrogance, and ambition
 of the ignorant Doubt, fear, defeat, sorrow and desperation,
 He had wrought out of martyrdom the peace
 of freedom That passeth understanding...³

There is in him now

...a gratefulness and had not waited for
 Of infinite freedom and humility, not wait now.²
 After a bondage of indignant years
 In the glory And evil sloth...⁴

Vaguely contemplating going out for good, he hears his drums of death
 again; and for the first time, without flinching. Now he can let others
 follow them, if they must. The drums roll closer; but now with a "sing-
 ing flame" that leaves him trembling in fear. For they roll to the rhythm
 of musical premonition.

Like his there would be no more golden fire
 For one that would no longer recognize them
 ...He could only wait, come...³
 Therefore, and in his helplessness be seared
 With his own lightning. When the music leapt
 Out of that fiery cloud and blinded him,
 There would be recognition for a moment,
 And then release...⁵

of death are to become for him the drums of life, with which he will

1. Ibid.

4. Ibid., p. 944

2. Ibid., p. 943.

5. Ibid., p. 943.

3. Ibid., p. 942.

But the drums are destined to sound intermittently, after all, until his "choral gold" comes down to overcome them gloriously.

...Trembling there alone,
He knew that there would now be falling on him
The flaming rain he feared, or the one shaft
Of singing fire that he no longer feared.¹

Brighter and brighter sound the "choral horns," and Nash realizes that at last the "celestial messengers" whom he has so frequently "insulted" have found him again. Mingled in the long-awaited harmonies are the evil cynic beatings of his own drums, the cries of the living who are yet dead, of the ignorant, of those "banished from the house of life"--and a new note of freedom and "deliverance and return."

He knows that
All he had known and had not waited for
Was his; and having it, he could not wait now.²
In the glory of inspiration, he thinks only that he must get manuscript paper. He gropes out into his dark hall,--and falls from weakness to the bottom of the stairs.

It is a supreme bit of irony for
Like his there would be no more golden fire
Brought vainly by perennial messengers
For one that would no longer recognize them
Or know that they had come.³

It would be too bitter, were it not that out of the ruin emerges one positive fact. Fernando Nash at last finds his own soul; and his drums of death are to become for him the drums of life, with which he will

1. *Ibid.*, p. 947.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 953.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 952.

"make a joyful noise unto the Lord." He knows the full extent of what he lost on that golden afternoon. He will, he says, "go lame" henceforth; "but the Lord's ways are strange."¹ Once, says Nash, with a new humility, he was given a "golden sheaf," which God, in his wisdom, took away again.

...Once, for an hour
I lived; and for an hour my cup was full
With wine that not a hundred, if a score,
Have tasted that are told in history.
.....
But I have found far more than I have lost
And so shall not go mourning. God was good
To give my soul to me before I died
Entirely, and He was no more than just
In taking all the rest away from me.
I had it, and I knew it; and I failed Him.
I did not wait.³

It is of little importance that Nash lives but a short time after his spiritual and artistic resurrection. The significant death was the early obvious way through with men of the very type that had once helped devastation and defeat of his genius; the tragedy of drive him to despair.

...an inviolable distinction
That was to break and vanish only in fire
When other fires that had so long consumed him
Could find no more to burn...³

Here is the specialized and tragic failure of genius betrayed. The Light image here is not particularly obvious, existing largely by implication. Yet it exists, none the less; for the Light, for Nash, was both the golden fire of his thwarted talent, and the Truth about himself (hence, self-knowledge) which he perceives, at last, through suffering. His blindness to the light is implied in his defects--lack of faith, un-disciplined sensuality, impatience; thus, his failure as an artist

1. Ibid., p. 954. 2. Ibid., p. 955. 3. Ibid., p. 956.

directly results. There is an added ironic touch in that when revelation does come he is unable to endure it. There is, too, an ironic emphasis when Robinson presents the composer in the somewhat questionable role of a street-walking evangelist beating a bass drum. Of course the drum is the concrete manifestation of Nash's own "devil drums," with a now positive rather than the previous negative connotation. But there is an extra touch of humiliation in the circumstance.

Perhaps nowhere has Robinson dealt more stringently with a defeated character. First, Nash, the artist, loses his creative soul through a lack of consecration and devotion to the ideal--though in so doing he gains his immortal soul. Second, bearing within him "a giant's privacy of lone communion," he must find his path to salvation along a particularly obvious way thronged with men of the very type that had once helped drive him to despair.

There is no greater personal tragedy than that of one who has once possessed the spark of divinity and extinguished it wilfully and consciously. Yet, with his usual tolerance and sympathy, and with his customary negation of any man's right to pass final judgment on a fellow man, Robinson does not condemn Nash utterly. His artistic penance is severe enough. Spiritually, he does find a way out. Robinson allows him to find it when he subordinates the Light of Nash's genius to the Light of ultimate Truth which Nash finally is allowed to recognize.

This poem then is another illustration of what Robinson so consistently says: that each man fails according to his unique pattern for ideal achievement. Yet, if he fails thus, Robinson does not allow him, usually, to fail forever, or to fail in so far as he represents mankind, in being

the possessor of an immortal soul. There must still be a final hope, or life would be unendurable. If that hope, as appears here, comes as a straitened, difficult, and less glorious way than could be wished, it is also a more realistic way, and thus according to life itself. Perhaps, too, it represents the only possible method for the ironic and subdued temperament of the poet whose solution it is.

(6) Roman Bartholow.-- Roman Bartholow¹ is one who fails temporarily because of a dimmed vision. Here, though domestic tragedy is involved, the tragedy becomes the narrative; it has not already occurred, as in *Cavender's House*. Like Cavender, however, Roman Bartholow finds at length the Light of wisdom, and re-shapes what remains of his life for an implication of worth. In the "morning light of a new spring" Bartholow joys in his spiritual rebirth out of a "dead negation that would not let him die."² Out of a "buried emptiness" he has been resurrected, through the spiritual offices of Penn-Raven, who has appeared mysteriously, and who for nearly a year has lived as guest and neighbor to Bartholow and Gabrielle, his wife. Penn-Raven, according to Umfraville, an eccentric and comic-faced fisherman, has raised the veil and given Bartholow eyes.³ He has lifted him out of a "devouring fear and hopelessness," when
 which kindled with an intermittent flame
 ...hope was a lost word and happiness
 Not even a ghost that haunted him...⁴
 who could...

1. "Roman Bartholow," Collected Poems, p. 733.

2. Ibid., p. 734.

3. Ibid., p. 739.

4. Ibid., p. 743.

Incidentally, he has won the affection of Gabrielle.

There is the usual Robinsonian irony here, for Penn-Raven is presented not only as the ambassador for Bartholow's new light, but also as the instrument for the tragedy of his friend's marriage, and for Gabrielle's suicide. Perhaps with regard to Penn-Raven, it is again the old taunt--"he saved others, himself he cannot save." Or again, Gabrielle was ripe for the plucking, having long before become indifferent to Roman. She can still purr at her husband, but her voice has a "muffled hardness" in it. She is, in fact, indifferent to all the patterns of her life. For she has none of Roman's new "joy of being." Nor has she any longer an interest in trying to re-build, as he begs her, the "old house" of their former love. She has no faith in any such renovation; although she admits that as yet the world, viewing their apparent felicity, envies them. Roman, in his new wisdom, attempts to understand and forgive her coldness. Now he realizes that he was to blame, in having brought her away to a remote and lonely spot, and in concerning himself, during the "black years" of his blindness, only with his own misery.

Penn-Raven is Roman's spiritual savior--though seeming later to exemplify the opposite qualities. He has a strange violet eye

That smoldered with a darker fire behind
Which kindled with an intermittent flame
A nameless light whereon but few could look
Long without flinching--Bartholow being one
Who could...¹

And yet

It was in his eyes

1. "Roman Bartholow," p. 749.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 764.

1. "Roman Bartholow," p. 748.

That most of him was latent or revealed
 Unto the eyes of others who could find him,
 And there were few who could--Bartholow being,
 For price of larger sight, one who could not.¹

Penn-Raven then is a sort of apostate angel. He possesses enough light to win Roman back from his black way; but for himself his light is "intermittent." And because of the brighter light that he has given Roman, the latter cannot see into the dimmed crevices of Penn-Raven's being--out of which combination of factors grows the tragedy which precedes the final chapter of Roman's adjustment to life.

Then there is Umfraville, Greek and Latin scholar and fisherman, of face

Socratic, unforgettable, grotesque,
 Inscrutable and alone...²

Out of his wisdom of and tolerance for the ways of human nature, and out of the absorbed wisdom of his beloved classics, Umfraville remains a constant factor to comfort Roman in his coming distress.

Umfraville is sure of the eternal verities; but not so Penn-Raven nor Gabrielle. Says Penn-Raven, "Once I believed I knew more than I know."³ Gabrielle too admits her inability to reflect philosophically about her limitations--or to do anything about them. But for her, and tragically, there is Penn-Raven. For coming to her, disillusioned, lonely, "prowling alone" in her dark desperation, he has brought her a new if not feasible interest. Says Gabrielle,

...It was all dark
 Until you came from nowhere with a lamp;

1. "Roman Bartholow," p. 749. 3. Ibid., p. 764.

2. Ibid., p. 736.

4. Ibid., p. 761.

And if I read more by the light of it
 Than once I fancied I should ever read,
 You do not hear me saying I was blind,
 I am no blinder now than I was then.¹

In a climactic moment, Penn-Raven kisses Gabrielle. He is to leave on the morrow, he tells her, adding that he, too, has been waylaid by the bright gleam of her light; that when he came there were two dark-nesses, "and one the darker for the light you made."² He has, he says, found in her "all that he sought past hope of any finding."³ But her love is not for him, any more than the wisdom which he vaguely surmises can truly be his. He has performed no miracles in thus resurrecting Roman, he says.

There is a field for them, or their appearance,
 Though I have never gleaned or wandered in it;
 There's also an unfailing fountain-head
 Of power and peace; and if but once we prove
 The benefits of its immortal taste,
 Our living thirst will have a living drink--
 Dilute it or offend it as we may
 With trashy draughts of easy consequence
 Mingled with reason...⁴

But Gabrielle is beautiful, hard, unappreciative, with a necessity for admiration and a "tinsel insincerity." He leaves her with the warning that the house of the Bartholows cannot long exist upon a lie.

After his departure, Gabrielle muses on the reason for their spiritual chaos. She thinks of Bartholow, who

...had seen much in his illumination

.....

That she, having a soul that had no eyes,

1. "Roman Bartholow," p. 778.

3. Ibid., p. 779.

2. Ibid., p. 778.

4. Ibid., p. 781.

which has fallen. If she had any, had not been born to see; once he had,
 And he had suffered hard. She knew all that,
 He will go, if she knew nothing else. And if a man, in a real service
 Had suffered much to see, had not a woman
 To humiliate, suffered as much not seeing?...¹ To allow one woman's

So Gabrielle is paying now for "comfort without love," in the realization
 of her wasted life.

Her desolation is at once apparent to Bartholow when he returns
 from his walk. Inarticulately, she conveys that all is over between them;
 and suddenly and furiously, Bartholow knows Penn-Raven in a new guise.
 Now each admits to the other a basic mistake. Gabrielle says she was
 not made for such an existence, and Roman says he has been blind. He,
 she adds, may go on to a new life; but she no longer cares to live, for
 she feels that she lacks the necessary wisdom. Thereby
 I am the bridge, then, over which you pass,
 Here in the dark, to find a lighted way,
 To a new region where I cannot follow,
 And where there is not either sand or moonshine,
 And a new sun shines always...²

So Gabrielle leaves Roman, to go to her room, and later, to seek oblivion
 in the nearby river.

A little after, Penn-Raven enters the room. In a moment of
 revulsion and wounded pride, Roman strikes him, and would have killed
 him. Penn-Raven sadly controls his maddened friend, telling him that his
 house was destined to fall when he arrived, things being what they were.
 But Bartholow, he says, may yet be redeemed out of his futility. He
 himself, says Penn-Raven, has erred in the darkness of a deeper night

1. "Roman Bartholow," p. 787 2. Ibid., p. 802.

3. Ibid., p. 802.

which has followed "an excess of blinding light" which once he had, He will go, at once. And Bartholow will find his way to a real service to humanity, being a man of too great capacity to allow one woman's tragedy to blight all life for him.

...You are not one to flout
The power of all your services unseen
That soon you are to see, and are to give,
When really you conceive yourself alive.¹

The ruin of Bartholow's house is tragic, but it is a necessary tragedy through which must come, says Penn-Raven, a more vital Bartholow, with now a vision for the truth.

Your doom is to be free. The seed of truth
Is rooted in you, and the fruit is yours
For you to eat alone. You cannot share it,
Though you may give it, and a few thereby
May taste of it, and so not wholly starve.
Thank me or not, there is no other way;
And there is no road back for you to find
And she...she is not either yours or mine.²

Penn-Raven adds that through his suffering, Roman is to come into a new wisdom, by which he is to be alive, among so many that are not alive.³

So Penn-Raven goes back into the mystery from whence he came; and Roman, after seeking out his fisherman for a final talk, leaves his house, and the remembrance of Gabrielle who has died that he may live with vision, and takes with him his new tolerance and wisdom, and the inextinguishable memory of Penn-Raven who "had betrayed and saved him." Though Roman's destination and particular type of service are unknown, the implication is that it will be in the world of active life, where he will apply what he

1. "Roman Bartholow," p. 787 to 789. 3. Ibid., p. 829.
2. Ibid., p. 825.

has learned.

Here, as in "Cavender's House," "The Glory of the Nightingales," "Matthias at the Door," "Talifer," and the Camelot poems, is a variation of the failure motif presented in a domestic complication. Here, too, appears again a dominant Robinsonian theme, "not physical decay, but the growth of the human mind through time and change."¹

Obviously, what all three characters fail to perceive until too late is the truth about their own characters and their situation. Each represents a human type. Some, like Gabrielle, are destined never to see truth, and for these the incomplete answer is death. Some, like Penn-Raven, have periodic flashes of intuition or wisdom, but these are not constant enough gleams to be dependable guides for action. Roman Bartholow is one of the few who may emerge from the searing fire of truth perceived into wisdom; bearing his inevitable scars, but not incapacitated; in fact, only then born into significant existence.² Of the four characters, only Umfraville lives placidly among his books and fish. But though he can advise Roman with a strange competence, he is, ironically, so grotesque, that life for him is only that of "a dry mummy among books"; his wisdom is pared down, to become an attenuated suggestion of all it might have been had Umfraville lived less remotely in his world.

Roman Bartholow represents another excursion into the world of

1. Floyd Stovall, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-6.

2. Roman is a blood brother to Matthias, who also, out of complacency, through despair and tragedy, emerges to a purposive existence. Cf. post, p. 144

3. Floyd Stovall, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

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tragedy induced by too little vision. The presentation of the theme is complex and less clear than usual. But the end, the interpretation of a phase of human experience, and the means to that end, remain consistent with the usual emphasis on the Light as an agent for the determination of character and action. Talifer to recover from his situation and to discover (7) Talifer.-- In the poem "Talifer,"¹ which presents, as did Roman Bartholow, a domestic situation freighted with dramatic and tragic possibilities, Robinson has taken "his sabbatical year in the land of comedy."² This poem and the characters involved appear to present an exception to the sombre picture usually portrayed. But beneath the humorous treatment lies the usual irony, the more to be realized when one looks searchingly at the happy solution to Talifer's difficulties.

Certainly the usual materials for tragedy are here. Robinson has turned again to the domestic triangle which is the basis for so many of his interpretations of life. The saving element in this situation, however, is in the character of Dr. Quick, a kind of positive and reincarnated Umfraville, who is "benevolent and wise enough in the ways of human nature to cause mistakes to be corrected before they lead to tragic consequences."³ In this respect, "Talifer," differs in its outcome from Roman Bartholow, or Cavender's House, or Lancelot or Tristram. For a fool who has thrown away a Talifer has broken his engagement with Althea, a kind of "White bird" and "patient Griselda," having fallen under the spell of Karen's

1. "Talifer," Collected Poems, p. 1231.

2. Garty Ranck, The Boston Transcript, Sep. 30, 1933, p. 1. Quoted from The Book Review Digest, 1933, p. 801.

3. Floyd Stovall, op. cit., p. 18.

"waxed language," her propensity for reading Greek, her exotic, too-perfect physical charm. Dr. Quick, who loves them all, and to whom Althea confides her grief, knows that Talifer's marriage to Karen does not promise happiness to either. Yet no one can do anything now. They can all only wait for Talifer to recover from his delusion and to discover Karen's true nature. Says Dr. Quick of Karen,

...She is more like an ivory fish--
 If you have seen one. They are fascinating,
 For reason of their slimness and their skins,
 But they are not proliferous, or domestic,
 And are not good to eat.¹

Change will be coming like a friend, he insists to Althea, and she will learn to wait its coming. That is all any of them can do, who are but the servants of time.

A year passes. Talifer is beginning to realize his mistake. He admits to Quick that once in a bitter moment he is tempted at the sight of

Karen's white throat, and the thought of how pleasant "it would be to seize it, and hold it."² Yet he can do nothing to escape to a now longed-for freedom; for there has never been a stain on the Talifer name. Quick

predicts Talifer's eventual return to Althea. A year and a month after his marriage, Talifer finds himself on the old path to Althea's house, and suddenly meets her. Now he knows himself for a fool who has thrown away a treasure for

...a soul-frozen disillusionment
 That was not woman and was not for man.³

1. "Talifer," p. 1240.

2. Ibid., p. 1267.

3. Ibid., p. 1278.

He admits as much to Althea, and his path home is clothed in a new glory and warmth that it had not held an hour before.

Returning home, he finds Karen asleep. He contemplates

...that seeming heaven-wrought sheath
Of ice and intellect and indifference,

and the face of Althea rises before him. He raises his arms in angry questioning, groaning, "Why was this woman born?" As he looks at her,

Karen awakes, shrieking and terrified, and sure that the look in his eyes means only horror for her. He tries to calm her, but she will

neither listen to him nor let him touch her. He tries to tell her that both have made a mistake, and that now they must try to re-shape their

"mishandled lives." Karen, however, escapes from Talifer and flies to Dr. Quick, to whom she relates her fear of Talifer and her version of

the incident. Quick explains the real basis for their present confusion:

...You never wanted him;
You only wanted what Althea wanted.

.....
You stole him, as you might steal priests and bishops
If you set out. You are the devil, Karen,
And you must not go back to Talifer.²

.....
Nothing of yours
That you're not wearing on your body and bones
Is left...

Karen will not go back. Neither will she stay in the town, to be made ridiculous. Quick reminds her that she is not far from New York and

other destinations. Further, he offers to see Talifer for her, and promises that all she asks for will be sent after her. Karen accepts

1. Ibid., p. 1279.

3. Ibid., p. 1288.

2. Ibid., p. 1287.

the plan, and vanishes from the problems she has helped create; vanishes with no penalty much to herself, if one may judge from a final reference to her as being in Oxford, happy with "a fur-lined assignation with the past." Talifer, two years later, appears as the proud pater familias, surrounded by Althea, his wife, Dr. Quick, his mentor and practical guide, and his squirming young name-sake, Samuel Talifer, Junior.

There is much sheer cleverness and humour in this poem; so much, that the customary profundity emerges only by implication. Of the Light, as such, there is practically no mention at all.¹ Yet, though the poem is exceptional in treatment, and in its downright happiness of ending, it is still basically Robinsonian in that it deals with the old theme of unfortunate love; and but for the unusual presence of a Dr. Quick, who possesses the wisdom of foresight rather than wisdom-after-the-fact, the familiar tragic consequences might easily have ensued. Talifer might have killed Karen, as Cavender did Laramie, though for a different reason. Althea--given a little less wisdom and patience--might have killed herself, like her sister-character, Gabrielle, who saw only futility ahead for her. Dr. Quick himself, created as a less positive or active character, might have foreseen events, as did Umfraville, yet been able to extract from them only a faint philosophic consolation after they had happened.

Furthermore, one looks beneath Robinson's ironic humor here to suspect, at least, that neither he nor anyone else is too convinced of Talifer's intellectual or spiritual regeneration. Talifer, though he has

1. There is, however, a decided and usual use of physical light.

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escaped the burning this time, holds no guarantee that he will always escape. Talifer has learned from this particular error, and been fortunate to be allowed to solve it correctly. But Talifer is still Talifer, who, says Dr. Quick,

...will be notable, and will be observed
 And envied, and will not escape, not wholly,
 The qualifying eye and the true tongue.
 For truth will say that no man has a right
 To look so great and still be not so great.

If his apparent happiness at the end of the poem is to serve as argument for his "success," it must also be admitted that Talifer is left with most of his life yet ahead of him; unlike many of Robinson's characters who die, or have lived through what one believes must be their most eventful and tragic years. Life cannot surely be said then to hold only peace for Talifer. There is no way of knowing that the same blindness which entangled him in his unfortunate marriage with near-tragic results, will not re-appear. Though for the time his life falls in pleasant places, there is no pledge of security for the future. Robinson is saying not that Talifer is the one man of all his characters that achieves "success," but only that for once, because someone on the spot was wiser than men usually are, a tragic possibility is worked out without complete or too harrowing consequences; and there the poet is content to leave his never-too-enlightened Talifer.

Talifer is simply another representative human being whose destiny has been more kindly shaped than is usual. But he is never portrayed as a regenerated spirit like Lancelot, for instance, who saw a Light which

None of these fallibilities persist, and perhaps are rendered even more effective by their very subtlety and the humour with which they are veiled.
 1. Ibid., p. 1250.

altered his whole life-pattern. Talifer's capacity for perceiving wisdom or truth is not much enlarged. It was really not his wisdom at all, but Quick's, which was the factor in clearing up the difficulty. All Talifer did was to fall into the snare. The patience and forgiveness of Althea, the wisdom of Quick, Karen's recoil from Talifer--these brought about his ultimate "achievement," which amounts to the sum exactly of an apparently successful re-marriage.

So Talifer, like his fellows, is a kind of failure, too. That he is not more harshly punished is no merit of his. Furthermore, though he does not even admit to having a Light, it was the lack of Light in him that made him what he was. Blinded by the superficial charm of Karen, as many a man before him has been blinded by a superficial feminine charm, he abandoned his wiser instincts, his loyalty to his word and to Althea, and buried his intelligence in Karen's insinuated logic and selfishness. There is the hope that he has learned a bitter lesson well enough to apply its principle to analogous problems. But it is at best only a hope.

Talifer failed through ignorance and pride. It is part of Robinson's irony that Althea though innocent, must suffer for a time for Talifer's mistake, and that even Dr. Quick, who has vainly sought the love of both women, and who can "manage" affairs for others, cannot achieve for himself the happiness he desired.

Talifer is more fortunate than most of his literary kin. But he, too, is cast in the usual mould. The lines are less severe; the situation is not pushed to tragic extremes. But the irony and implications of human fallibility persist, and perhaps are rendered even more effective by their very subtlety and the humour with which they are veiled.

And the Light, though conspicuous by its absence here, is by implication as persistent as the near-tragic results of its non-perception are obvious.

(8) Matthias.-- Another domestic situation, this time the relationship of three men and a woman, is the basis for the action of "Matthias at the Door."¹ Matthias is one of Robinson's most clearly conceived characters. It is as though in dealing with this one-time arch egoist Robinson has taken particular pleasure in saying again that the most apparent success may cloak the most profound spiritual failure.

For Matthias is surely one of Robinson's brightest "failures in success." Matthias, at fifty, is serene and honored. He is possessed of vast estates, not the least important of them being "a wood-shadowed and forsaken gorge" in which stands a square black rock which is, says Garth, interested in that rock, where two pillars stand "carved out of solid night...with dappled light between them." He proposes that they go down to the rock. To be the tomb of God...²

Then there is Matthias' house, and inside it is Natalie, his wife, in whom he manifests, when it pleases him, a placid, possessive interest. Matthias, in his complacency, feels that he has done well.

As he sits harmoniously contemplating his possessions, Garth arrives. Garth is not old, but he is bent beneath "the weight of more than time." He is but indifferently alive, for he has seen too much. He has seen, for example, enough to be able to read Matthias accurately-- and not always to the latter's comfort. Matthias, says Garth, may tell

1. "Matthias at the Door," Collected Poems, p. 1077.

2. Ibid., p. 1082.

3. Ibid.

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the truth as nearly 'as a man may come to telling it without knowing it."¹
 Here is a key to Matthias' character significant for tragedy. Further-
 more, says Garth, men would say Matthias "was a man to emulate." He would
 not thwart their little pursuits--

And they did him no harm--knowing too well
 Ever to try. And why should anyone try?
 He had some enemies, and no fear of them;
 He had few friends, and had the need of fewer.
 There was nowhere a more agreeable bondage
 Than his was to himself; . . .
 He was not one
 To move unenvied, or to fade unseen,
 Or to be elbowed and anonymous
 In a known multitude...²

But, adds Garth, perhaps Matthias should worship at his black rock, for
 he is "as much in the dark" as is Garth himself. Garth is peculiarly
 interested in that rock, where two pillars stand "carved out of solid
 night...with darker night between them." He proposes that they go down
 to the rock. One day, says Garth, he will go there and knock.

And that will be the last of doors for me.³
 I have knocked on too many, and for nothing.

As they proceed, Garth continues to analyze his friend.

You are strong in body and in soul, yet I'm not sure
 That you are sound in your serenity.
 Your God, if you may still believe in him,
 Created you so wrapped in rectitude
 That even your eyes are filmed a little with it.
 Like a benignant sort of cataract,
 It spares your vision many distances.
 That you have not explored...⁴

A little later, as they gaze at the rock, Garth says,
 "I shall not go until
 my name is called." Yet he is less self-righteous than Matthias, who

1. Ibid., p. 1080.

3. Ibid., p. 1084.

2. Ibid., p. 1081.

4. Ibid.

1. Ibid., p. 1080.

2. Ibid., p. 1084.

...Do you see it?
 It's only a dark hole in a dark rock,
 If you see only that. You will see more,¹
 Matthias. You have not yet seen anything.

Still later, Matthias climbs back up his hill alone, leaving Garth still in the dark where, Garth says, he now lives.

The next day Matthias speaks tolerantly to Natalie of Garth, who has died in the rock by his own hand. "He was a poor defeated soul," alive, yet already dead, says Matthias. It is an ironic comment, for later, in his misery, Matthias is not allowed to emulate Garth's action, being told that he may not die, for he has not yet been born.

Meanwhile, Timberlake, the other of Matthias' two friends, visits them, drawn by the news of Garth's death. Timberlake, however, is not surprised at the suicide, having, he says, "outlived surprise." Matthias regrets Garth's action, not so much for Garth's sake, but because he feels that Garth has thus made a show of his envy of himself. For Matthias, sure of his eminence and success, can hold only a complacent pity for Garth, the failure. Says Matthias, "if he had seen it so."

...I was friendly,
 But I was not his guardian or torch-bearer,
 My own torch was as many as I could carry,
 And trim and keep alive...

 When I see folly that has pawed its wings
 Hating itself because it cannot fly,²
 I'd rather turn my eyes the other way.

Timberlake, too, rejects Garth's way out, saying, "I shall not go until my name is called." Yet he is less self-righteous than Matthias, who measures rectitude by obvious achievement. Says Timberlake to that,

1. *Ibid.*, p. 1085.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 1093.

Accomplishment and honor are not the same, ¹ *ibid.*
 that they should be. Matthias, and one may live without the other.

But Matthias is practical and efficient and sure of his own honesty; though perhaps others, he says, would call him hard, "only because they can't make holes in me." He has, too, the conviction of the successful man. If Garth, he says, had kicked away the first dog, he would have scared the others off. ²

With a new sharpness, however, Natalie takes exception. To Matthias she says,

...I'm not
 So sure that you know all there is to know
 Of dogs, and dogs...

.....
 Garth could have told you. He had felt their teeth,
 And he had bled where they had bitten him.
 None of us know for certain when the dogs
 Are on the watch, or what they are waiting for. ³

As to Garth, "dying was his career." Natalie is secretly sympathetic to Garth, having a futility something like his "to nourish and conceal." For she had married Matthias for comfort without love, in place of starving with Garth, or marrying Timberlake, "if he had seen it so." Natalie really loved Timberlake; but he had resigned her to Matthias out of a mistaken sense of gratitude for the latter's having once saved his life.

Thinking of Garth, now, Natalie is strangely drawn to the dark cave. There she finds Timberlake. They discuss the four of them, now three--and suddenly Timberlake finds Natalie in his arms. They realize

1. *Ibid.*, p. 1095.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 1107.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 1096.

that they should have married, in spite of Matthias' heroic deed.
Natalie feels that she should tell Matthias how things are.

...There isn't so much to tell,
More than to say we are three fools together,
Each in a crumbling foolish human house,
With no harm done--save two of them in ruins,
And one of them built happily on a lie.
He thinks I love him, and so throws away
No time or pride in asking why in the name
Of heaven and earth I shouldn't. That's his way.
He married me and put me in a cage
To look at and to play with, and was happy--
Being sure of finding, when he came home,
With my face washed and purring. Poor Matthias!

.....
But what if many a man like him should learn
Somethings that many a man must never know?

But Garth, Timberlake thinks, may have somewhat shattered the "rich web
of his complacency." Will Matthias see the holes, or the truth?

Nothing, however, can be done to rectify the mistake. Timber-
lake is bound in honor to Matthias, though the fault in the situation
has always lain in their partial vision of the truth of the affair, and
in the inexorable consequences of having flouted that truth. Says

Timberlake, sitting alone on a winter Sun-
day afternoon...Half the grief
Of living is our not seeing what's not to be
Before we see too well...³

That night Matthias reveals that he has seen and heard them
both in the cave. Though he and Natalie will not separate, his faith in
her is broken. Now Natalie faces lonely and dark days. Her world is
fatally disjointed. Timberlake has gone, and Matthias has withdrawn

1. Ibid., p. 1105-06

3. Ibid., p. 1109.

2. Ibid., p. 1122.

2. Ibid., p. 1127.

into his own remote world. He has his "Olympian pride," and she--has her dense of desolation, a constant vision of Garth and the black rock, a sharp pity for Matthias, and a tacit acknowledgement of her own deceit.

So things stand for three years. Meanwhile the strain is writing its story on Matthias' face:

Timberlake ... An intangible, that even yet remained vision is "a
Untarnishable seal of something fine
Was wearing off; and in his looks and words his not be
A primitive pagan rawness of possession
Soiled her and made her soul and body sick.¹

Matthias is drinking and becoming brutalized. Now he begins to taunt Natalie with "not playing as well" as at first. Furious at him for his sarcasm and spoiling of himself, she strikes him, and goes away. Hours later, he awakes from his stupor, to find a brief apology, and to know with surety that they have reached the end. For Natalie too has sought the dark rock--for the last time.

Now Matthias has lost nearly everything but his pride. The rock has become in very fact "the tomb of God," he reflects. Yet he still cannot break, at least outwardly. Sitting alone on a winter Sunday afternoon, he hears the desolate message of the dead leaves; he doubts his faith, but clings still to his pride. With pride, patience, and "high scorn" he meets

Are more like sketches of ourselves, half done,
A life without a scheme and to no purpose--
An accident of nameless energies, illimitable
Of which he was a part, and no small part.
His blindness to his insignificance
Was like another faith, and would not die.²

1. *Ibid.*, p. 1129.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 1136.

1. *Ibid.*, p. 1131.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 1137.

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He, says Months later, Timberlake reappears at Matthias' door, worn and ragged. He is welcomed, and for the first time in months, Matthias is not alone. To Timberlake, Matthias declares

...I believe nothing;
And I am done with mysteries and with gods
That are all gone...¹

Timberlake silently reflects that even yet Matthias' vision is "a fraudulent and ephemeral disguise of life." But he tells him not be be afraid, for

All things that are worth having are perilous,
And have their resident devil, respectively.
There's this that I have here, there's love, pride, art,
Humility, ambition, power and glory,
The kingdom itself, which may come out all right,
And truth. They are all very perilous,
And admirable, so long as there is in them
Passion that knows itself--which, if not hushed,
Is a wise music...²

Four days Timberlake stays with Matthias, then he is found in his weakened condition out in a cold flooding rain. He has taken refuge, quite exhausted, in the black cave, whither, he says, Natalie had called him. This time Matthias can not save him.

There should have been more for Matthias to save, says Timberlake, then there was; but why there was not remained an unanswerable question.

So do not ask me why so many of us
Are more like sketches of ourselves, half done,
By nature, and forgotten in her workshop,
Than like a fair or tolerable fulfillment
Of her implied intentions...³
If there was nothing else, To live alone,

1. Ibid., p. 1129.

3. Ibid., p. 1135.

2. Ibid., p. 1131.

He, says Timberlake, has found gold where Matthias has found only gravel.
 But he cannot give it to Matthias, who must find it for himself. Matthias' eyes are still too blind, and, continues Timberlake,

...There is no cure for self;
 There's only an occasional revelation
 Arriving not infrequently too late.
 For me it was too early--which is granted,
 Sometimes, to the elected and the damned.¹

Matthias, says Timberlake further, is not old.

...you are so young
 That you see nothing in fate that takes away
 Your playthings but a curse, and a world blasted,
 And stars you cannot reach that have no longer
 A proper right to shine...²

Now Matthias confesses that he has had neither knowledge nor belief since the evening when Natalie last spoke to him. His devastation is complete when, three days later, Timberlake dies. Alone now, wounded more by life than he would have believed possible, Matthias turns half-heartedly to searching "the darkness in him." He reviews his life, its plan, purpose, structure. He had built as best he could; yet now he is surrounded only with ruins.

...The only eyes
 He had were those that his inheritance
 Had given to him, and he had seen with them
 Only what he might see...³
 Yet now, he is
 A man with nothing left but money and pride,
 Neither of which was worth his living for,
 If there was nothing else. To live alone,

1. Ibid., p. 1137.

3. Ibid., p. 1142.

2. Ibid., p. 1138.

4. Ibid., p. 1143.

A captive in a world where there were none
 Who cared for him, and none for whom he cared,
 Was a dark sentence, and might be a long one.¹

Now at last Matthias is ready to say that Garth was not the
 fool he once judged him. He himself is lost, tired, alone--and "alive,
 with pride for company."

Matthias was a man who must have light,
 Or darkness that was rest and certainty,
 With no fool-fire of an unfuelled faith
 Invading it and losing its own spark,
 Such as it was. Matthias was alone,
 And there was only loneliness before him,
 Because he was Matthias, and had failed.²

So he looks at a hand which may well end his futility, and
 questions, "Why not?" He makes his way to the dark Egyptian door of the
 cave. He is not afraid, and he has no longer any doubts. He is about
 to push open the door when a voice which he recognizes as Garth's says,
 "Not yet, Matthias."

....No matter what you do,
 You are not coming. A way was found for me
 To meet you here and say you are not coming.
 You cannot die, Matthias, till you are born.
 You are down here too soon, and must go back.³

Matthias would argue with Garth, but to no avail. Says Garth,

Your generous language and its implications
 Although a little delayed, will not be wasted.
 Nothing is wasted, though there's much misused--
 Like you and me, Matthias, who failed together,
 Each in a personal way. You, having more
 To fail with, failed more thoroughly and abjectly,
 But that was not the end...⁴

Matthias may not even push the door open; for he has found it too soon.

1. Ibid., p. 1143.

3. Ibid., pp. 1146-47.

2. Ibid., p. 1144-45.

4. Ibid., p. 1148.

He has not yet been born, Garth reiterates, for

You have not yet begun to seek what's hidden
In you for you to recognize and use.¹

Which, says Garth, is more than science may reveal, though he may find
it if another door opens, in himself. Matthias must go back, then,

To build another tower--a safer one
This time, and one for many to acclaim
And to enjoy...²

Garth previews for Matthias a re-shaping of his life under a new emphasis
of service to his fellows, instead of the old consciousness of self, which
was the first rotten pillar under Matthias' old tower.

So, inexorably, the dark door swings shut, taking with it the
spirits of the three who had preceded Matthias.

...He had come down
To follow them, and found he was not wanted.
He must go back again; he must be born
And then must live; and he who had been always
So promptly served, and was to be a servant,
Must now be of some use in a new world
That Timberlake and Garth and Natalie
Had strangely lived and died to find for him.³

With this new positive vision, Matthias gropes his way back from
the rock, feeling a grateful "warmth of life" through the cold night and
the long dark hours until he meets his new dawn.

It is not necessary to dwell long on the implications of this
poem. Matthias, Garth, Timberlake and Natalie all fail, Matthias less
obviously at first, but more agonizingly as his life proceeds. For he
must fight through the barrier of his own egotism and selfish complacency

1. Ibid., p. 1150.

3. Ibid., p. 1154.

2. Ibid., p. 1152.

to a new sympathy, and a new realization that no life can be even remotely successful which finds its sole emphasis within itself. Garth's failure is equally obvious, for his suicide was the final admission that what he saw exceeded his spiritual strength to sustain. Garth had not the Light, for he lived in a "dark world." Natalie and Timberlake must both pay for their initial blind error in not having been honest either with themselves or with Matthias before it was too late. They, too, saw insufficiently, in that when wisdom came, the error was already tragic. All then, have lacked their peculiar types of Light. All, as is inevitable with Robinson, must then fail.

Actually, of course, the Light is not so specific here. But as usual, it exists by implication, symbolized by all that the characters, and Matthias in particular, cannot "see," until suffering opens his eyes. The Light becomes here Truth or self-knowledge, surrounded in this case by the attendant graces of sensitivity, generosity, humility. For it is upon these foundations that Matthias is to erect the structure of a richer and purposive life.¹

There is perhaps no more deft and forthright probing of failure in Robinson's works than this presentation. It is even more poignant than most, for in many ways Matthias is an estimable man. He has few pettinesses, and his not obscure positive qualities enlist sympathy, as he descends into his darkened valley. For we realize that his qualities for failure, his lack of insight and over-emphasis of self, are after all, and again, basic

1. There is the usual delicate use of light and darkness to suggest ignorance and defeat, and to heighten emotional overtones, particularly those centering about the dark door.

to both his humanity, and our own. *Malory is going to* Nightingale and King Jasper.-- Analysis of the long character poems of Robinson is concluded with "The Glory of the Nightingales," and "King Jasper," his last work. Five years lie between the two, and the last poem is of "triple significance," being of narrative, economic, and allegorical value. Yet the two poems may legitimately appear in one section; for the same motive, revenge for the betrayal of a friend, which betrayal has ruined one and spelled "success" for the other, is basic to both.

(9) The Glory of the Nightingales.--In the earlier poem,¹ Malory, doctor and bacteriologist, who has been betrayed by his former friend, Nightingale, is at last on his way to a violent balancing of his account with Nightingale. For years he has existed on the venomous nourishment of the thought of revenge; ever since Agatha, whom both loved, but who had married Malory, has died, taking their child with her. Agatha was not able to endure the shock of the tragedy induced when Nightingale, who had invested all of Malory's money, allowed him, through jealousy, to become financially ruined.

Malory is now no longer in his net using it,

A man of dreams more than of deeds--

Dreams that had not abundantly come true.²

Disaster is "manifest all over him." Nightingale is "alone with his advantages," trying to believe that he had acted once as necessity demanded.

Malory "does not know." You he is a man without any regrets.

1. "The Glory of the Nightingales," Collected Poems, p. 1011.

2. Ibid., p. 1014.

1. Ibid., p. 1022.

2. Ibid.

But the necessity was that of his own "thwarted vision." Now Malory is going home to Sharon, with a plan to end both their lives, for neither of which he can see any reason for continuing. Having withdrawn himself from his intended service because of his personal tragedy, Malory sees nothing left in life but the hard insistent drive of revenge. His scientific passion has crumbled, till nothing remains but his unholy passion. Stopping on his way to Nightingale's at the cemetery where Agatha is buried, he can resolve only one plan for peace-- death for both himself and his betrayer. In a crimson twilight that argues bloodily for his intention, he summarizes his tragedy. To lose faith in God is disaster.

...But to lose faith in man
 And in himself, and all that's left to die for,
 Is to feel a knife in his back before he knows
 What's there, and then to know it was slimed first
 With fiery poison to consume the friend
 Who had no friend...¹

Nightingale might have killed him, he adds; but that was too soft a technique.

...If someone else's neck
 Was a good base whereon to set his feet
 For a new spring to new vindictiveness,
 There was no logic in his not using it.
 Why else was a neck there?...²

As the light fades on Agatha's cold tombstone, so does the black veil of whose flattery may make Nightingale "forget." As he contemplates the revenge cloud what might once have shone forth to Malory's now-distorted barren elegance, his name is called in a voice which

Malory "does not know." Now he is a man without any surety;

though he can still surmise that life can hold no peace until one learns

1. Ibid., p. 1022.

2. Ibid., p. 1022.

that "living is not dying." But though he can state the principle, he can not illustrate it; for he has lived too long in the world of living death. In such a state of mind, he passes by the house where he and Agatha had once lived. There will be one more stop for him--a "mansion somewhere by the sea."

After he has spent his last money for a night "with other derelicts in Sharon," he sets out in an anguished sunrise to revenge and death. Nightingale will be found in "a new house with towers and trees." Nightingale himself, he hears, inhabits his house "like a large and powerful worm in a stone shell." He is a "stationary monster, doing no harm, and doing no good."¹ He simply exists in what he has always wanted--his house by the sea.

Through morning and afternoon, Malory makes his way toward his destination. After arrival, there will be for him a long road to the sea, and to death. As for death, he reasons--

Death was another country where new light
Or darkness would inevitably prevail.²

Arriving at last, Malory saw

More wealth, attesting an intelligence
That was another lonely waste...³

He surmises the satellites--not friends--who may be admitted there; those whose flattery may make Nightingale "forget." As he contemplates the barren elegance, his name is called in a voice which

...had the sound
It might have had if in the mills of years
Another life than Malory's had been broken.⁴

1. Ibid., p. 1026.

3. Ibid., p. 1031.

2. Ibid., p. 1028.

4. Ibid., p. 1032.

Realizing that if he is to act, he must act quickly, Malory yet stands motionless, clutching his hidden pistol. He stands, and waits, silent; gazing at "one who had grown older than time had made him."¹ For Time has judged Nightingale and delivered its own sentence. In velvet robe, half lying, surrounded by tiers of books, and facing a huge window that looks upon the sea, Nightingale reclines in his wheel-chair, paralyzed.

Gazing upon a face which he had once idolized and now hates, Malory knows bitterly that time and fate have removed his power of destiny and vengeance. Now there is no need of killing the other. He was dead "before his name was called."

Nightingale is not surprised to see Malory. He knows why he has come, and he will not argue with him. But now with his sudden bitter understanding, Malory is surprised to recognize in himself a new faint wish to live—and looks into the blunt muzzle of Nightingale's gun. He surrenders his own to Nightingale, admitting that he had indeed come to kill him, but that he has come too late.

Nightingale: "Nature has beaten me. Nature, or God; I don't know which..."²

After a brief review of old history, Malory sees the futility of his plan, and turns to leave. But a great weariness overcomes him. Nightingale, "a devil waiting to steal me from myself." Yet, says Night-

ingale, "He had not know how tired
A weight that has at last been lifted leaves him. He says:
Who carries it too far..."³

With the next morning Malory feels a new sense of desolation.

1. Ibid., p. 1032.

2. Ibid., p. 1037.

3. Ibid., p. 1040.

3. Ibid., p. 1040.

3. Ibid., p. 1040.

For now he is without even the stiffening strength of the old fierce purpose.

...He was alive,
And was to have been dead with Nightingale,
Who sat with death already; he was awake,
And he could see too clearly and too far,
Or so he thought, over an empty ocean
Into an empty day, and into days
That were to come, and must be filled somehow
With other stuff than time...¹

Nightingale tells him that he wants him there till the morrow. Malory objects to watching even his "worst friend" suffer. But Nightingale replies with a forth-right declaration of his own type of, and reason for, failure.

Some follow lights that they have never seen,
And I was given a light that I could see
But could not follow...²

Nightingale has allowed passion and jealousy to dim intelligence. Says Malory to that:

...You may have been the devil,
But you were never a fool...³

Sitting before the window, and watching the sea, Malory reveals to Nightingale the tragedy that has destroyed his family and his faith. Agatha and her child went together, he says, she not being "mad of iron." They went, moreover, at the wrong time; for there was in Malory, as in Nightingale, "a devil waiting to steal me from myself." Yet, says Nightingale, answering, he himself was not always bad. As a youth, he says,

...I had enough of other vision
To see the other side of selfishness,
But I had not the will to sacrifice

1. Ibid., p. 1042.

3. Ibid., p. 1045.

2. Ibid., p. 1044.

My vanity for my wits. I was the law--
And here I am...¹

Continues Nightingale,

I was a youth of parts and promises,
Endowed with a convenient fluid of conscience
That covered the best of me with a bright varnish
And made me shine. If none had thwarted me,
I might be shining still, instead of dying
In this expensive nest. If had learned
In time, to know I was not the law
That made me live, I should have done more shining

.....
...I made a better town
Of Sharon, and I never sang outside
Myself the song in me that I knew best.

.....
...I was not so bad
So long as I was having my own way.

.....
...I was the dominant bird,
Outsinging and outshining and outflying
Everything else...

.....
...Before I learned,
I was a lord of a small firmament.

.....
...I was untried
I my submissions and humilities.

.....
I was a light that would be shining always,
A light for generations to remember

.....
...Fathers have made a show
Of my initiative for their dull sons
To copy, and have clucked at my foresight
In seizing what another could not see.
It is not always criminal to be first,
But there's a poison and a danger waiting
For him who will not hear, and will not listen
While choruses of inner voices tell him
When to be second. That was the curse prepared
For me: I would not listen to my voices.

So Nightingale reveals his fatal defects: a basic egotism, un-

1. Ibid., p. 1048.

2. Ibid.

willingness to discipline himself, a ruthless shrewdness, a "self-destroying adoration of...divinity." When he met Agatha, the one thing he had not, thwarted pride and rebuffed desire turned to slow hate for Malory whom she loved. Malory, says Nightingale, had his science; he himself had nothing. He saw Malory as one who had "betrayed him in the dark"; for Nightingale had introduced Malory to Agatha.

So Nightingale had gone to America, first advising Malory to invest all his legacy in a gold-mine. Warned himself of its imminent failure, he had sold his own stock, but "evaded and temporized," and told Malory nothing "but a few shadowy promises," until disaster came. Says Nightingale

...Tell yourself
And let there be no doubt, that I destroyed her
While I believed I was destroying you.
It was too dark for me to see just then
What I was doing—for my only light
Was fire that was in me; and fire like that
Is fire that has no light...

.....
...She was the only thing
I ever wanted that I could not have.¹

Now, while yet realizing Nightingale's falseness, Malory finds himself watching the waves that flash with the power of life, a power ...that was like a wish
To live, and an awakening wish to serve.²

When Nightingale sends him to walk on the beach, he goes, with a strange new resignation which precludes the beginning of a more positive philosophy. He will not die, he knows now—even though Death, which had seemed his last friend, has for the time abandoned him.

1. Ibid., p. 1060.

2. Ibid.

If glimmerings that attended him today
 Were intimations of a coming light,
 He was to be alone for a long time,
 And with no friends in sight. If he deserved them,
 Or if his light required them in his picture,
 No doubt they would be there eventually.

 If he should find a way back to himself,
 His enemies, long pursued and long forsaken,
 Would be his friends; for death, living in them,
 Would be his life. There was no answer yet.¹

When Malory returns to Nightingale, he is beginning to perceive what his
 problem of spiritual regeneration is:

...There was time
 For living in himself and on himself,
 Like a thought-eating worm, and dying of it,
 Unthought of, or for life larger than that,
 Larger than self, and one that was not death.²

Meanwhile, Nightingale has a plan. Though twice he has been blind--

Once when I sank my judgment and your money
 Into that most unhappy hole in the ground;
 Once when I kicked my decency and honor
 In after them...³

now he sees that Malory owes himself and his services to suffering humanity.

To that end he is bequeathing all his wealth, to make of his house by the
 sea a haven for pain and misery. Then, he tells Malory, he will know why
 it was built.

So Malory accepts his way back to the "long sentence of his use-
 fulness." His is to be
 ...the lonely joy of being alive
 In a good servitude, and of not being
 Obscurely and unintelligibly wasted.⁴

"acknowledgment and recognition, humility and surrender."⁵ Malory, were

1. *Ibid.*, p. 1062.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 1065.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 1067.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 1069.

Having made the matter legally air-tight, Nightingale sends Malory out for a time. When Malory returns, it is to find only the worn body of his erstwhile friend, with Malory's pistol beside it. That night, contemplating Nightingale's now-peaceful face, Malory summarizes Nightingale's life, and states his own new acceptance of life, in his release from both grief and hate.

The light you could not follow is not mine,
 Which is my light--a safer one for me,
 No doubt, than if it threw a gleam too far
 To show my steps...
 ...I cannot know,
 For certain, that your way, dark as it was,
 Was not the necessary way of life.
 There was in yours at least a buried light
 For time and man; and science, living in time,
 May find at last a gleam nearer than yours,
 For those who are not born to follow it
 Before it has been found. There is, meanwhile,
 A native light for others, but none born
 Of penitence, or of man's fear to die.
 Fear is not light, and you were never afraid;
 You were blind, Nightingale, but never afraid;
 And even when you were blind, you may have seen,
 Darkly, where you were going, and where you are.¹

So Malory faces his lonely way back to human effectiveness in

periods of sea darkness where his eyes were to be guided
 By light that would be his and Nightingale's.²

Here, then, is a double presentation of failure, which resolves
 itself in each case in a kind of redemption. Nightingale redeems himself

(10) *King Jasper*.—*King Jasper*¹ is Robinson's last work. One is tempted to say it is also his "biggest." He himself called it "his treatise on economics,"² and he made of it a dramatic representation of the "acknowledgement and recognition, humility and surrender."³ Malory, more

1. *King Jasper*, *Collected Poems*, p. 1057.

1. *Ibid.*, p. 1072.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 1055.

2. *King Jasper*, *Collected Poems*, p. 1060.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 1073.

sinned against than sinning perhaps, is a preliminary failure whose light has been dimmed by a consuming grief which finds no outlet except in hate and vengeance. Realizing that vengeance does not ultimately belong in man's province, and called back to his better self through the brightening gleams of his old idealism and scientific zeal, he re-dedicates himself, under a new inner compulsion, to whatever service is still his to render.

Here again is the old Robinsonian theme of the ravage wrought by jealousy, hate, egotism, revenge. Yet here, too, is the usual implication of some redemption achieved through understanding and the forgiveness it creates--qualities which come with the ability to see the truth, represented by situations and men as they are. Here the Light is for Nightingale the intelligence and integrity which he flouted and eventually discovers, with also the humility that accompanies his belated self-knowledge, and admission of his limitations. For Malory, it is the renewed pursuit of scientific truth and human service, realized when he is freed from all that had once destroyed it. Like Matthias and Roman Bartholow, and others of the darkly elect, both lives come to fruition and significance only after preliminary periods of sorrow and futility. They come, as always, with the new, or renewed presence of, and obedience to, the Light--which then is never without price, and, again, is the requisite for spiritual effectiveness.

(10) King Jasper.--"King Jasper"¹ is Robinson's last work. One is tempted to say it is also his "Biggest." He himself called it "his treatise on economics,"² and he made of it a dramatic representation of the

1. "King Jasper," Collected Poems, p. 1397.

2. Hagedorn, op. cit., p. 369.

"disintegration of the capitalist system."¹ But he also made of it another allegory, like *Amaranth*, which preceded it by only a year; an allegory of "ignorance and knowledge and aspiration."² In addition, it is a narrative of six characters, of whom five perish in "a cataclysm of all that is life to them."³ Thus it has a three-fold interest. Furthermore, it links up two main preoccupations which previously have been noted in Robinson's poems. It blends his early and now-familiar emphasis on the frequent spiritual hollowness of the eminent, with the disintegration of a world, which is a main theme in the Arthurian poems. With the latter echo, "*King Jasper*" portrays characters of more than individual proportions. For as Robinson found in the heroes of the Arthurian poems an enlarged conception of human personality,⁴ so here he again stretches his character conceptions to universal dimensions, and the conflicting personalities of the poem emerge as types rather than as individuals. It is, however, with emphasis on the failure and destruction of the five characters who perish, and their relation to the sixth, Zoe, who, as Knowledge, represents one aspect of the Light, that the poem will be analyzed here. The allegorical value will also be of interest.

Zoe is both the daughter-in-law and the natural child, since the knowledge is born of ignorance, of *King Jasper*. *Jasper* symbolizes both ignorance, and the eminent capitalist whose success is told in the smoking

1. *Ibid.*

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ex. ante.* p. 69, (Merlin)

5. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

chimneys of his factories.¹ Zoe is also the unaccepted daughter-in-law of Honoria, who is Jasper's wife, and the symbol of social propriety, prestige and tradition. Zoe is the wife, "under the stars and under God," of young Jasper, the prince.

When the latter brings her in to meet his father and mother, Honoria is already uneasy under the "touch of hidden fingers everywhere,"² which follow her wherever she goes, but which she knows only intuitively. She fears them; for instinctively she realizes that they challenge all her established patterns of life. She awaits and dreads the time when they will blast "with unseen decay", Jasper continues, that unless Honoria

can accept her...all there was her son. But Jasper knows she that even
 For her to feel and see and never to know,
 this is not Honoria's real distress, which, though she cannot voice it, is

 If she could see what they were doing,
 Or say more certainly what hands they were,
 a ghostly hand
 Doom, when it came, would be endurable,
 And understandable, as death would be.³

Not the least of her distress lies in the fact that Jasper, who really loves her, and whose material success has given her what the world envies, cannot see what she at least dimly envisions. Jasper can wish that she could find more things to see which he could share; but Jasper has his own horizons. They are the backgrounds for those chimneys which are the "landmark" of his power. Gently, he derides Honoria's doubts, suggesting that they may originate in the problem of young Jasper.

young Jasper introduces her. Says he,

1. The old irony is still here when Robinson suggests in Jasper the deficiency that is to the poet so often a basic quality for spiritual defeat and material success.

2. "King Jasper," p. 1397.

1. *Ibid.*, p. 1397.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 1398.

Old Jasper, a "small, tight man," with his face "of amiable deceits and pleasant dangers," does not understand their son. But Honoria's doubts are not primarily of young Jasper. Says she,

...He is still young,
 And so must have his visions. If you fear significantly,
 He sees today too far beyond your chimneys,
 Why be alarmed? Be quiet, and let him grow.
 The chimneys are still there...¹

Old Jasper is grateful for that fact. Perhaps in time, the boy will re-evaluate the despised chimneys, he says, and the "supremacy" which now he calls "a dragon." Meanwhile, he is pre-occupied with a woman--Zoe. He is so much pre-occupied with her, Jasper continues, that unless Honoria can accept Zoe, she will lose her son. But Jasper knows now that even this is not Honoria's real distress, which, though she cannot voice it, is a ghostly but increasingly sure premonition of catastrophe.

Jasper, however, is not without his ghost either--a ghost with "living and invincible hands." But for the time, says Jasper, the ghost remains invisible; and while he does, they will imagine that he never was, and not mention him. Yet he is with them, nevertheless, in the picture of old Hebron, who was Jasper's friend, whom Jasper had betrayed, and who has died, that Jasper may live and "succeed."

It is into this psychically disturbed atmosphere, this situation rife with tragic implications and the ghosts of a demoralized past, that young Jasper introduces Zoe. Says he,

When she was young, the wisest man alive,
 Before he died, gave her a little knife

1. Ibid., p. 1401.

4. Ibid.

That's like a needle...

 ...All there is of her
 That's not a wonderment to be observed
 Is mind and spirit--which are invisible
 Unless you are awake...¹

When Honoria frowns upon Zoe, young Jasper adds significantly,

It's well for mother to be agitated,
 Occasionally, for she draws and follows
 A line too fixed and rigid, and too thin
 For her development...²

King Jasper invites them to be seated; he, at least, will listen further. But Honoria refuses to countenance Zoe, whom she regards as an upstart, and "with a pallor-covered rage," she leaves them. Jasper admits that he likes Zoe, but also that he is afraid of her. Says he to Zoe:

...With you for teacher,
 I might go back to school again,
 And might be punished...³

To this young Jasper accedes, adding,
 Zoe can be ferocious, if incited;
 She can be merciless, and all for love;
 And not for love of one, or two, or three.⁴

Even while Jasper senior regards this strange and fascinating young woman, he knows a rising of old fears "of truth he long had fancied was asleep." Wordlessly, through the eyes of Zoe, he receives a message that confirms his newly-aroused doubts. It is the secret of her power of penetration; the secret, again, of the "failure of success":

The mightiest are the blindest; and I wonder
 Why they forget themselves in histories

1. Ibid., p. 1408.

3. Ibid., p. 1412.

2. Ibid., p. 1414.

4. Ibid.

and know what They cannot read because they have no sight, they will be
 What useless chronicles of bloody dust
 Their deeds will be sometime! And all because
 They cannot see behind them or before them,
 And cannot see themselves. For then there must
 Be multitudes of cold and unseen hands
 That reach for them and touch them horribly
 When they're alone...¹

Young Jasper pleads with Zoe not to annoy his father, not only
 for his own sake, but

...for the sake of all who are too old
 To see the coming of what they have called for,²

through their ignorance and practical ruthlessness; which amounts to a
 violation of the principles of love, wisdom, and morality. Further, says
 young Jasper to his father, he has seen young Hebron, who has been long
 away, down among his father's chimneys, "measuring them with a sardonic
 eye," as though they did not belong to Jasper. To the implication that
 Jasper owes much to old Hebron, Jasper acquiesces, with the practical
 statement that the living are always indebted to the dead.

Old Jasper asks Zoe, "Who was your father--and your mother?" She
 cannot tell him. "I was found once on a time," she answers. Perhaps it
 does not matter, returns old Jasper, for, says he,

...Your two eyes
 And what you see with them, and what's behind them,
 Are more for you, and for your preservation
 Than are the names of unremembered parents.³

Zoe and young Jasper leave him then, alone in the dark with his new pre-
 monitions of disaster, and also with Jasper's realization that he does

1. Ibid., p. 1413.

3. Ibid., p. 1416.

2. Ibid., p. 1414.

not know what she is, or what she means, but that she must stay until he knows more.

Old Jasper sleeps, at last. He dreams that he is toiling up endless rocks and hills, alone and lost in a dead world with no hope anywhere in it. He is hailed at length by "a gaunt frail shape" that is old Hebron, who has seen him coming and waited him. But Hebron has changed. Was the change due to death,

Or was it a king's fear that wrought the change,
In one the king had crushed and left infirm,
To starve on lies, and perish?¹

Hebron says that he will follow Jasper in his bitter climbing, and they will talk; as once they talked, when Jasper used to assure him of peace, health, independence, and much gold, which were to "reward his genius," and compensate for present "diseased and foodless years."² If Hebron's strength fails, he knows that Jasper will not leave him twice behind, and let him die. Jasper groans an admission of his betrayal of Hebron. It was for power, he says, that he neglected him; not for gold. He had "a demon of ambition." Hebron accuses Jasper of being a liar.

You never made me see or let me guess
What you were doing with what I had done,
Did you know what it was that you were doing
While you enlarged your dream, and swelled and changed,
Till you were more a monster than a man?
When I was gone, men said you were a king;
But you were more. You were almost a kingdom;
And you forgot that kingdoms are not men.³

Jasper has lost his humanity. He has failed of the ideal through a con-

1. Ibid., p. 1423.

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3. Ibid., p. 1425.

1. Ibid., p. 1423.

2. Ibid., p. 1433.

2. Ibid., p. 1430.

2. Ibid., p. 1423.

suming self-interest, which blinded him to loyalty, to moral conduct, to any humane considerations. On these perilous foundations have his chimneys been reared. Necessarily, they must ultimately fall.

Says Hebron further,

Your lies assured me there was nothing then
Forthcoming or in view for either of us;
And so I died for lack of means to live,
And you became a king. For there was brain
Under my skull, richer than yours. You knew it,
Jasper; and you sustained it on your promise,
And on your lies, till all of it was yours
That you might use...¹

.....
...You reckoned well your time,
And mine. You knew then that your need of me
Was done; and that another sick year or two
For me would not be long for you to wait.²

By this time, Hebron has leapt upon Jasper's shoulder, where he grows heavier and heavier; for Hebron is changing into gold.

I am the gold that you said would be mine--
Before you stole it, and became a king.

Fear not, old friend; you cannot fall or die,
Unless I strangle you with my gold fingers.

...They are as cold and hard as death,
For they are made of death...³

On they go, Jasper pleading for mercy; admitting that he had lied because Hebron's cautions, hesitations, uncertainties, would have been maddening "logs and obstacles" standing between him and his material destiny.

They reach a chasm, across which the figures of Zoe and young Jasper beckon to the frantic father. Zoe calls to him to throw off the vicious weight and leap the chasm to them, and to knowledge. For, says she, if he could see Hebron truly, he would see his kingdom and his power

1. Ibid., p. 1429.

3. Ibid., p. 1430.

2. Ibid., p. 1428.

and glory as it truly was. Now Zoe reveals herself as his rightful child:

Zoe, who has
 that not she
 regrets
 "its unwilling"
 that parent

Without you I should never have been born. She tells him
 Without you, and your folly, and your shrewd eyes
 That saw so much at once that they saw nothing, wife. She
 Time would have had no need or place for me,
 Or for the coming trouble I must behold
 Because you gave to me unwittingly
 My being. You should have thought of that before
 You buried your brain and eyes in golden sand,
 And in your personal desert saw the world.¹

Now, goaded by Hebron, nearly frantic, Jasper shuts his eyes, and, ^{He was afraid for us, and} incredibly, leaps the chasm between ignorance and knowledge. But he is not so easily to be saved. For seeking to approach Zoe, who looks at him with "calm hatred" in her eyes, he is denounced, and renounced by her. Still pressing on, despite her warnings, he tries to seize her, and is struck, if regretfully, with Zoe's sharp knife. Jasper falls, clutching the edge of the chasm. The dream ends, and he awakes, with a wound in his heart where Zoe's knife had found its mark.

^{To make a new king of a stricken one}
 During the king's convalescence, Honoria takes her stand. Either she or Zoe will leave the house. But if, as she admits, Honoria hates Zoe, the latter pities her for what she knows Honoria is afraid to learn. Jasper insists that neither must leave. Yet neither Jasper nor Honoria can move each other, and after a time Honoria leaves him. To him then comes young Hebron, who speaks sardonically of the past relations of his father and Jasper, and of himself, "a dark child...marked for disaster." His house, says young Hebron, "will be the world," which having never ^{the man who sees too much. (Cf. section A, The} owned he cannot lose. He meets Zoe, and is enraptured. But Zoe will ^{characteristic belongs also to} have nothing to do with him. He is a "wrong prophet," she says, who can-

1. *Ibid.*, p. 1434.

not know. She adds that only a few may know, and they must go alone.¹ Zoe, who has grown truly fond of Jasper, speaks further. She tells him that not she, but he, himself, had struck himself with her knife. She regrets Honoria's refusal to love her because of the latter's pride and "its unwillingness to see."² She reveals the fear in all their hearts that permeated the place when she came.

...I was afraid for you and Jasper;
He was afraid for me, and for his mother;
You were afraid of time, and you still fear it.³

Furthermore, Zoe feels the trembling of the chimneys; and she knows that Jasper has felt their creaking long before she came. Further, there are now two Hebrons to be considered.

Now Jasper, seeing too much for peace, is also aware of unseen hands destroying his house and his world.

...Zoe had come too late
To make a new king of a stricken one
Whose retribution was a world's infection.⁴

For he has been dominated by the urge for power; and a world so immorally created must fall. But Zoe has come in time to wound him to a revelation of the truth about himself and that world.

Again, Zoe continues, if Jasper's downfall is to be accomplished by young Hebron, he must accept him, knowing that Hebron's own "red

1. Ibid., p. 1454. This theme is aptly developed in other poems in the group of those who see too much. (Cf. section A, The Tragic Light.)

2. This characteristic belongs also to Isolt, q.v. ante p. 100

3. "King Jasper," p. 1455.

4. Ibid., p. 1457.

rhetoric" will defeat itself through its own ignorance and violence. Before she leaves, Jasper admits to her that she and young Jasper may be the "king and queen" of a larger and better kingdom--if they live. When Honoria rejoins him, he would send her away, telling her that now death is there. But Honoria will not go; for Zoe has made her change, too. She knows that here she must stay; for though her house is falling, there is no other place for her.

Meanwhile, Zoe warns young Jasper that she is destined to go her way alone. Young Jasper understands her, having waked to wisdom in time. Yet she questions his capacity to leave his inherited world and to go with her. While they are discussing the matter, old Jasper comes with a letter from Honoria, addressed to Zoe and young Jasper. Having lived by the maxim that "sorrow had no other friend than silence," Honoria has killed herself.

So Jasper awaits his own death, and the freedom of a^a dark night of oblivion. Zoe rebukes his negation of the Purpose of life. If man, with his tragic war of existence is all there is, it had all far better not have been, says she.¹ Most of all, Jasper now regrets the price of kingship--the suffering of others. But that, says Zoe, is the limitation of most of humanity, in not being able to "see ourselves in others."

Now young Jasper would take both Zoe and his father away from the imminent collapse of their world. But Zoe knows that old Jasper cannot go; and she knows that young Jasper, though a natural necessity that is "more than love, more than all knowledge," cannot go either. She alone

1. Ibid., p. 1471.

must go, for she must live. This is her destiny.

Destiny is upon them. For now the king looks upon the actual fiery disintegration of his world, and the fall of his chimneys. Zoe and young Jasper are reconciled to such retribution; but Jasper cannot survive the ruin of the beloved and costly symbols of his power. As he dies, a shot crashes into the room, and only Zoe is left alive to see young Jasper, where he lies with a bullet in his brain. She looks up, to meet the "lust-drunken" face of young Hebron.

He is as much a failure as the others; for his, says Zoe, is

...a blistered hatred of all things there are
That are not your, or yours, and cannot be.¹

Young Hebron tries to persuade her that he and she together

Are God's elected who shall fire the world
With consecrated hate and sacrifice,
Leaving it warm for knowledge and for love.²

He seizes her madly, and when she does not resist, thinks he has won her. Accordingly, he tells her that she must leave the house, which is already "mined and woven with doom and flame." She must come with him, to help him "light for blinded man the fire of truth."³ Here is another flaw in young Hebron's character. To him, truth is fire, out of which comes only chaos and dissolution. But to Robinson, truth is the white light of accurate vision, which does not destroy, but saves.

Before she goes, Zoe asks for a moment alone with her two dead--

...One of them was too old and worn

1. Ibid., p. 1482.

3. Ibid., p. 1485.

2. Ibid., p. 1484.

To change, or live; and one of them was too young
And wise to die...¹

Hebron rushes at her, cursing. She must get out, he insists, and go with him. He is met by the flash of steel, and he too dies, gasping out what he learns too late--that Zoe cannot die with him.

Now Zoe goes, fleeing through a darkness lit by flames of the burning house, where

...More than a house
Was burning; and far below her more than chimneys
Were falling...Now she could rest, and she could see
Two fires at once that were a kingdom burning.
In one of them there was the king himself,
The prince, and their destroyer. In the other,
With chimneys falling on him while he burned,
There was a dragon dying...Nothing alive
Was left of Jasper's kingdom. There was only
Zoe. There was only Zoe--alone.²

Here is Robinson's last declaration of the Light. As an image it is not obvious in the poem. But Zoe undoubtedly symbolizes one facet of the Light; for Zoe, the sole survivor, is knowledge, whose coming often spells tragedy for the unprepared or the blinded or the violent. Zoe represents an eternal value, however, which must persist, though a world crumble for the price of it. As to the individual failures, they have already been suggested. Honoria's flaw is excessive pride, the bulwark of tradition that, outmoded, cannot modify itself, hence must perish. Honoria, more sensitive than Jasper, recognized a coming destiny. She was already dead in her dying world before Zoe came. Jasper failed through his lust for power which

1. Ibid., p. 1461.

2. Ibid., p. 1488.

ruthlessly trampled whatever stood in its path. That he was allowed at last through pain and recrimination to recognize the irony and tinsel of his kingly crown makes his tragedy more poignant. Old Hebron was the impediment to Jasper's success, so was crushed and his genius betrayed. Young Hebron knew only hatred, revenge, violence, and tried to right a wrong by adding another to it. His defect was ignorance--an ignorance which knew itself only through the violence that was begotten of his madness. Young Jasper had vision, idealism, a sense of justice and real value, as is proved by his espousal of Zoe. But he, too, was a victim of his father's world, and rendered impotent for good by a larger necessity that bound him to that world. Zoe alone was left; and Zoe, as is the case always with the few who "know," must go her way alone.

As is usual, there is considerable physical use of light here; but here it is not the golden positive light of Talifer, or the sensuous glow of Merlin. It is the angry flame and destruction that overtakes Jasper's doomed chimneys and his house and his world. It is the flame of revenge and revolution and death. That Zoe, or knowledge, rises phoenix-like from the ashes of dissolution only suggests again that for a limited mortality true illumination carries a dear price, and bears a tragic quality. It is to reveal again the full implication of the tragic Light. An inherent positive quality. For only through his perception of the existence to the Light does man progress toward an ideal spiritual state. In this respect, a positive force is accumulated, in that all men, working individually for good, prevent a universal and complete illumination of what ultimately will be good for all men.

This then is the most significant aspect of the Light symbol.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In each of the nineteen poems here analyzed, the Light has appeared either as a dominant, a secondarily important, or an implied motif or principle. In all but the Arthurian material, where the Light is the Grail light, it exists as an illuminating symbol of Robinson's most profound beliefs, observations, and deductions concerning a fallible, mortal world. If, on the one hand, men lack the Light entirely, or in part, they fail. If, on the other hand, they have too much Light, like Merlin or Lancelot they must pursue a lonely path through the wilderness of human ignorance and passion. Even in such cases, failure is implied in preliminary experience. Being but human, even these must ultimately achieve the Light at the expense of most, if not all, of the things that the flesh holds dear.

Such is the hard but inescapable price of the Light. Yet if all this is true for the individual, and would appear to lend a certain negative quality to possession of the Light, it is also true that there remains an inherent positive quality. For only through his perception of and obedience to the Light does man progress toward an ideal spiritual state. In this respect, a positive force is accumulated, in that all men, working individually for good, present a universal and composite implication of what ultimately will be good for all men.

This then is the most significant aspect of the Light symbol.

Robinson "looks beyond the tragedies of persons and societies, and beholds life as an eternal and creative will evolving through a succession of changing patterns toward an ideal of perfection."¹ The Light, through a series of widely varying specific applications, becomes a universal principle, and applies, finally, to no individual man, or time, but to universal, timeless existence and experience.

Thus, like all universal concepts, the Light must be infinite, eternal, unchanging. There are few such concepts. None of them are new. They have been suggested in every significant religion and philosophy. Robinson has indicated them by their positive presentation in his portrayal of the group who see too much. He has implied them negatively, by revealing the overt tragedies consequent on their absence, in the group who see too little.

By the constant use of the phenomenon of physical light, with its overtones of spiritual vision, he has suggested the basic quality for moral effectiveness, the capacity to recognize life for what it is, in its human and material aspects, with all the potentialities of those aspects. He insists that such clarity of vision must always be the basis for the only real success, spiritual competence.

So the Light finally resolves itself into a composite, poetic essence which is Truth, Knowledge, Wisdom, Faith, Love. The last four qualities are attendant upon, indistinguishable from, and component parts of, Truth. Truth, then, becomes the beautiful, the good, and, by extension, the God, implicit in His faulty image. That image must still be

1. Floyd Stoval, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

2. "Ode," VIII, *Collected Poems*, p. 102.

drawn, through repeated failure, toward the Glean which, no matter how dimly, shines still for him.

Accordingly, for Robinson, human failure occurs because of the imperfect vision which sees

Collected Poems Too far for guidance of today,
Too near for the eternities.¹

Yet there still abides "the self which is the universe."² For lonely mortality, there is still an inescapable companionship. There is the compensating if tragic shaft of the Light, itself:

There is no loneliness; no matter where
We go, nor whence we come, nor what good friends
Forsake us in the seeming, we are all
At one with a complete companionship;
And though forlornly joyless be the ways
We travel, the compensate spirit-gleams
Of Wisdom shaft the darkness here and there
Like scattered lamps in unfrequented streets.³

There remains one thing more to say here. The Light is the first and last refutation of the old charge of pessimism directed against Robinson. It is the way home through the dark for the lost children of men. It is the positive and bright avowal of the most significant kind of optimism--the belief in the ultimate capacity of man to perfect his destiny through the implications of his divinity, expressed in Wisdom, Love, Faith, and thus to rise above the limitations of his earth-bound mortality. Birth, for Robinson, is not "a sleep and a forgetting," but the embarking on an eternal and perilous road. But always, through the mists of doubt and pain and futility, gleams the Light. If it is tragic, it is also finally triumphant.

1. "Clavering," *Collected Poems*, p. 333.

2. "The Children of Night," quoted from Amy Lowell, *op. cit.*, p. 28

3. "Octaves," VIII, *Collected Poems*, p. 102.

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