The Tragic Light In Edwin Arlington Robinson

Margaret L. Dauner

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The Use of Symbolism in Robinson's Treatment of Failure has been termed the creator of a new romantic sensation, which indicates a new use of vocabulary, rhythm, and imagery, and the interpreter of twentieth-century America; the voice of modern New England's "modern classic" and, by all critics, the poet of failure. It is, however, a poet who made his most significant subject—Margaret Louise Downer—in turn a "failure" that he is to be studied here; particularly, with emphasis upon his standard for determining such failure. This American hero tried to express in the term "the tragic light." 

This study, then, hopes to point out with some degree of adequacy, first, the criteria by which Robinson judges Downer personality for his effectiveness or lack of it; second, with the limitations of his failures. A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in which the character exists. It is an effort to recognize the principle of the light to nineteen representative scenes, it will be possible to establish some interpretations of the light itself, and the writing of a character synopsis. The available Division of Graduate Instruction of Robinson's Butler University philosophy will also be a Butler-Indianapolis studio provided under, New 1940. 

However, this study in no wise parallels the light as a mathematical principle, but seeks it in the character, in its own divinity. 

I shall try to define directly, what the term "the tragic light" means to Robinson, as I examine him in these individual elements of his
presence or absence, I shall analyze those of his characters who best illustrate its growth and tragic working-out in their individual
situation. It should be stated forthwith that this was entirely completed

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON is admittedly one of America's leading
"philosophers in the poetry of modern Arlington Robinson," by Hildreth S. V通讯, contemporary poet. As such, he has been variously hailed. He has been
a long Columbia University Press publication, through philosophically
named the creator of a new poetical technique, which implies a new use of
viewpoint, rather than poetic, as in this study, Miss H. S. V通讯's work has
vocabulary, rhythm, and imagery; the interpreter of twentieth century
America; the voice of modern New England; a "modern classic" and, by all
agreement, a poet additionally, to this study, where under criticism, the poet of failures. It is, however, as a poet who finds his genius, differences of viewpoint, or substance, 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

I wish to express my deep appreciation for the assistance rendered
standard for determining such failure. This standard I have tried to ex-

press in the term "the tragic light".

standard, for an existential, critical, and serious, I am

This study, then, hopes to point out with some degree of adequacy
also inscribed to Dr. John S. Garrison, head of the Department of English,
first, the criterion by which Robinson judges human personality for its
by Dr. Alice B. Seasey, to Dr. John Seasey, and to Dr. John Seasey, effectiveness or lack of it; second, what the limitations of his failures
are, and how those 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, how-
ever, 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
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.

PART II

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. Allan Stewart, for her constant kindness, critical guidance, and advice. I am also indebted to Dr. John A. Harrison, head of the Department of English, to Mrs. Alice B. Weisberg, 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 time, and the locality into which Robinson was born. What were some events pertinent to the formulation of his poetic and moral conceptions? To answer these questions, it is necessary to examine the circumstances themselves: for it is against these "darkening shades of a decline" that the poet's parade of failures is to march.

A. Robinson's New England

Edwin Arlington Robinson is generally acknowledged to be part of the world of Gerard Manley Hopkins, in the concluding decades of the nineteenth century. In particular, the "poet of failures". His poems deal most intimately with the problems of men and women who err through their various limitations, and tragic "after the fair hand has been in the work just under the polite bird, who usually err tragically. Since this is true, it is necessary to survey Robinson's vision of the poet of hard and briefly, and attempt to classify, the materials from which the analyses emerge; and since he so often details the confusion of chance, in this study will be drawn. Such a survey will follow immediately in important, for a fuller understanding, to see the milieu out of which a subsequent chapter.

It is, however, profitable in dealing with an author's work, to ask whether generalization might also throw his characters right well to his own reactions to life for some explanation of his particular be of any race, or any time, still, in a world obviously marred by the views of life, and of his unique emphasis. For often such views and such strong views of a declining era instead exaggerate, and his people carry emphasis are a more or less direct result of the experience which has conditioned them.

The New England of 1840, then, nineteen 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, for the Outer World framework, the outer setting is to art in Robinson's life, it nevertheless appears probable that certain near-situated factors were more to blame. In the tragic circumstances, coupled with a decided New England heritage, environment was also important for its whole general atmosphere, temperament, and temper, were factors that intensified his interest in the "founder" some eighteen years before Edgar Lee Master's "Eliot Wadkins", problem 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 times and the locality into which Robinson was born? What were the 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. And New England was still New England. Any Lowell sores of both Robinson's times and locality may be deduced from a passing glimpse at the world of Gardiner, Maine, in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Further, Gardiner must also be regarded, as representing a typical "old" New England town, in the years just prior to the poet's birth.

A backward glance is necessary; for Robinson was 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 "this peculiarly generalized locality," 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, of the patterns of his relics: the New England of 1860 then, nineteen years before Robinson's "New England" was full of the confident rage of a people in conflict.

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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".
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 scouted, during the '70's and '80's, along its then-
empty and rotting wharves. In 1860, the Western Atlantic was dotted with
the white sails of ships; the horizon was streaked 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 as the
atmosphere of Gardiner."
1 Mr. Coffin says that "the most fundamental
concepts of older New England men...traditionally English and de‐
finitely old-fashioned". That year, was a thriving milltown, a center for shipping;
with mansions were mansions, formal, pillars, spacious; furnished with
treasures from London, Paris, Venilo, and the "best room" was "dedicated
to high moments"—the funeral or the courtship. Furniture was of plush,
silk, or hair-cloth, and stood "pride, severe and uncommon." Farms were
prosperous and orderly, their attic-storerooms stocked with apples, pon-
corn, jellies, jams—the setting of "Snow-Bound"—and farms were ev ery-
where. 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. 2 The neat, pristine 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
2. Coffin, op. cit., p. 4.
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'." These people were sure of their ancestors, of themselves, of their children. And, says Mrs. Coffin, "their economic and social foundations made it easy for them to keep the faith."

Gardiner itself, whether 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, Salbot, 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 bled 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.

Gardiner—a pertinently typical town of "old" New England—had its aesthetic interests, too. It read the standard English poets; it fostered its literary ideals, it had its line of "the imitated." There were the smart citizens who had had correspondence with learned societies in

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2. Ibid., p. 16.
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, daughter of Julia Ward Howe and Samuel Gridley Howe. 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." 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." Poetry then was calm, "to be a poet was to be on a rostrum." 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." Poetry was also romantic. Steeped in the fog from the Atlantic, carrying with it a hallowed and homogeneous blended emotion more real than any vision of out-bound sails bulging in the wind, it was natural that the more frequently the muse's creative sense ached and bore mechanically turning wheels, to resound in the sick and industrial tragedy line: "The Mill."

1. We are indebted to Mrs. Richards for one of the most intimate sketches of Robinson, her R.A. N., printed by the Harvard University Press, in 1936.
4. Ibid.
5. Lowell, 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”, was
“a wistful and unfleshy passion”.

Such then, restrained, Puritan, elegant, picturesque, confident,
and genteelly bustling on streets and wharves, were the spirit, the scene,
the New England that great genus of writers was still in...to muse, the
afternoon of its decline and even its death. Here once more again the

declivity of some passionate to the cautious stoicism of a conventional
ecstatic, frustrated, and bewildered remnants of a now outdated tradition
and class. For major events had occurred, or were to continue to occur
until American history reached the golden commercial apex of the 1830’s.
The Civil War had left its bloody marks on North and South. The accelerating
rhythms of westward-marching feet is recalled in Robinson’s poem,
“The Iliadike” — the song of

... five men together,
Five left of 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 limned in “The Mill”.4

There was, too, the fact of the increasing barrenness and fatigue of the


2. Ibid.


4. Ibid., p. 360.
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. He and money, to minds that were sure they had an important part to play, it was a transition period for American poetry, too; for while in New England their great group of writers was still in its prime, the afternoon of its decline was upon it. 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."  

It was during this twenty years that Robinson became so imbued with the mean-spirit, tone 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 legend."  

There was, for example, Sedgwick Plummer, the town's outstanding failure, who came down from driving two dashing horses and living in an expensive manner, to shuffling along Water Street, sleeping at night in...

2. Lowell, op. cit., pp. 5-6.
area-maps;" 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.\footnote{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", who as early as 1892 were "a power in the land". Life was no longer ruled, but at ease in an increasingly mechanized world they did not understand, and often fewer in number, they were retreating into "empty houses and long silences". They were the "aristocracy both in their ideals and in the measure in which they are reached by the life of others". Their qualities were visible in the reticence, tenderness, courage. But the world which created them had passed; and they were left "without any life to shape to the code".\footnote{5}

Three forces had reshaped the New England spirit and scene to its diminished mould. They were the "disintegration of an economic fabric" which occurred with the passing to West and South of New England's leadership in sea trade and manufactures; the coming of a new kind of science, and the development of the new science; the "insufficiency of our present form of education", and the discovery of the New England code itself—a code "not founded on standards that are
wide enough for a whole world to grow by. 

So this three-fold instrument, for change, the very getting responded negatively... Mr. Coffin remarks that the houses along Robinson's Kennebec River are not so well painted now, nor in repair. 1. "Shipyards... are gone as I have seen... 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... good in the house across the valley... Stonewalls are lost among the maples... A deer comes upon some apple trees in the very heart of his forests... The deer eats the apples some men 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 the house too big for one old man. 2

and types of people which the new New England affords the growing part. The people are keeping pace with the land, developing queer. They meet a shadow over him; they3 apprehend his spirit with a sense of negative tendencies, They are the people of Robert Frost, as well as of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. The types of people which the land dictates. The Hill ladies—men inhabit the back hills; who do not "live" in the land; who have lost their name as quaintly as in his first volume, but simply "stay". They develop odd patterns of behavior; strange fears—One has only to glimpse through his window, and then, again, a of the twig at the window. They come to like their loneliness. Or they serpents, restless, restless, restless, restless, restless... which become restless autarters, like John Everaldson; or they are fascinated by rotting hawthorns; or called, like Luke Everval, 4 by dead voices.

"Children sacrifice themselves for elders; aunts for nephews". 5 Their lives are the most serious spiritual expression of the new New England

2. Ibid., pp. 17-18.
4. Ibid., p. 74.
"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 knew, who live years together without speaking, and fly off aaster shrill.

On the river, there is nothing moving at all. "Shipyards...are as found it in the morning with no iron bar behind, gone as completely as towns of the Indians...ice-houses have sunk into glad either in the ashes that were left, or anywhere, the earth. There are wharves and warehouses rotting away in Gardiner, and Hallowell, Bowdoinham and Bath."\(^2\) The sea beyond the Kennebec is empty, too. "The coast that once was the cradle of captains is empty No life, no love, no children, no unrest today...Maine has always bred her best children for other states farther "The Tavern"\(^3\) rooks us with its sinister mystery: West. Empty cradles are everywhere in Maine; in towns, in houses, in whatever I go by, more nowadays minds.\(^4\)

This, then, is the world of Robinson; these are some of the scenes and situations which the New England of New Jersey, the world's best. They cast a shadow over him; they impressed 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 works 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. As the New England town...in equality to continue in the old way. Among the most obvious poetical representations of the New England scene and its twisted, thwarted characters are such poems as "Stafford's

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1. Coffin, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 40
Cabin, where an unsolved death occurred: a mechanical and commercialised world. An apple tree that's yet alive saw something, I suppose. Of what it was that happened there, and no mortal knows. And some one on the mountain heard afar off a master shriek. And then there was a light that showed the way for men to seek "troms flutek. They are here, too. They are revealed in the darkness. We found it in the morning with an iron bar behind, of the hereafter, and there were chains around it; but no search could ever find 'Y'. Either in the ashes that were left, or anywhere, living in the A sign to tell of who or what had been with Stafford there.

One is the "Dead Village", where there is "peace of the past" opposed for something but the ghosts of things—"the lives" and No life, no love, no children, and no men; "death forgets". But she is the play background of how England or of any "the Taverns" mocks us with its sinister mystery: other land—"untroubled, unthought-of and unviewed". Whenever I go by there nowadays There is a rack wind and the strange grass, essentials The torn blue curtains and the broken glass, an end of all things, the end of time, and something stiffens up and down my face, For all the world as if I saw the ghost Of old Ham Acre, the murdered host, With his dead eyes turned on me all aghast. That definitive note for sanity of any soul. "The Wilderness" is burdened with the grinnings of bleak November in New England: a sense of aridity, ofCEARD, of agony, of moral might, of the shoal where it shakes the dead black water", its "moan across the lowland". *Pam Thalass, Thalass* recalls those doughty men who went down to the sea—but the men are lost, and the sea is empty. Perhaps the last soul of the old New England itself, its inability to continue in the old way a gracious existence, is lamented by Robinson in "The Ballad of modern America is nothing but the rust on the bicycle, the broken flutek", where "the broken flutek of Aoady" lie on forgotten activity, from serenity gone, men already and futilely remembered then

2. Ibid., p. 88. 5. Ibid., p. 336.
3. Ibid., p. 93. 6. Ibid., p. 77.
ground, husbanded forever by the iron blows of a mechanized and commercialized
world.

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

And what of those who even yet continue to strive to play the
role of Luke Havergal, waiting for the voice of his dead
wife to awaken in the wistfulness of the dawn? They are seen, too. They are revealed in the wistfulness
of the dawn and in the sunken eyes of the poor relation.

There is no scented "sensuous" atmosphere of the world of
New England, old and new, beneath present 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, in the world of Robert Frost, "in a country in the midst of
bitter moths," see a man alone in a graying house—alone with a strangely
feared time, during whose most irreversible stage of his life—erected remains of a past
"sensuous" love—of the traditional spinster aunt,--ever with a smile
and gentle grace and smile, in the country, in the country, toward such
people, such people, such people, such people.

That hungering incompleteness and regret--

There is the "Dark House" itself, which confines so many of these twisted
souls about whom Robinson writes:

And I know that in one room,--in one room,--in one room,--in one room,
the country; Bury a lamp as in a tomb;--in one room,--in one room,
April 4. 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. 48.
2. ibid., p. 48.
3. ibid., p. 184.
4. ibid., p. 48.
in "The Mill"

R. Edwin Arlington Robinson

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 musky 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". 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 splendor; he was approaching fifty when the bursting process 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.

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.
Another factor is significant for an explanation of Robinson's interest in failure. That factor appears in certain crucial events in his own life—events which made his feel for years that he must include himself in the ranks of those failed creatures who were becoming so particularly 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, Medomak," 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, and other branches, 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 gloss 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 slimmer mould interwoven with the ciphers, he was more likely to find his Certain.

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1. The biographical material is largely taken from Hagedorn (op. cit.) and Laura Richards, "A.E.E.," cf. Footnote 1, p. 5.
of verse, they none the less were to bear the Robinsonian touch of skilled
of enthusiasm, and expressed illicit passions as their som-
and polished craftsmanship; and they were none the less fashioned by a
beauty, that all was the work of the devil. They were simple,
loving hands, and measured against the uncompromising standards of their
keep the word of them that suffered and inspired, imprinted
own New England Puritan conceptions, their eyes. They were often
necessarily torn between the spirit and the flesh; they were
plagued by Robinson's immediate roots—struck deep into the earth, where both
they must justify their existence in terms which the common
sturdy, citizenly, and pastoral sensitivity flourished. His father, Edward
foundations.
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 moralistic ambition, were on
Palmer had been a founder of Bowley, Massachusetts. Parsons, with whom
December 82, the shortest day of the year, 1800, a true son of the New
Palmeres had intermarried, had founded the first textile mill in New England.
England their efforts had helped establish. He was an alien, externally,
and maintained the tradition for one hundred and seventy years. Thomas
Dudley, an ancestor of Mary Palmer, had been a governor of the Massachusetts
most of all, the personal circumstances of most of his life, form an
Bay Colony, and one of his daughters, Anne Bradstreet, was New England's
sagacious exemplification, if any be named, for his tact: sold into which
first post.
his poetic fury was to pour itself—"a tradition of practical
For two hundred years behind Edward and Mary Robinson, Palmers,
embraced and carried forward the failures, which at midnight's near end
Robinsons, Parsons, and others of their ilk had
of success. But this was environment; that, briefly, were the car
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 ever-serious, being mindful of devils,
large and small in ambush for the unwary...They were haunted by a
sense of incomprehensible and inscrutable destiny, and the wisest
at times suffered from spiritual indications. They were not without
their humor, though it was like their own shipwrecks, elusive and

1. Mr. Robinson's exquisites carelessness 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, "Parishologist of New England," Saturday
"Tell you see, now and then I like to listen to someone that's got
abrupt. They were neighborly...but they mistrusted any form of enthusiasm, and repressed illicit passions as their seafaring 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, as a rule, to keep the part of them that suffered and aspirèd, imprisoned behind straight lips and unceasing 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.

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, 1859, 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 void into which his poetic fury was to pour itself, in a tradition of practical ones. The early illustrated the natural born which his mother, Susan, loved him, and was the saucer that he was fulcrum of all the 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 the particularly those of his childhood and early manhood.

When Robinson was born in the "story-book village" of Read Tide, his father, 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 whistle 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.

A little later, the family went to a new home, in Gardiner. The home environment, though unsensational, was significant for the poet-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 on their lap, and they were soon to be known as the reading family. The boy early discovered the medical books which his brother Dean so loved and perused, he must have lain often under a reader's arm, was studying, and was soon convinced that he was suffering from all the maladies of the age—of which he was always inordinately fond—listening to diseases detailed therein. He discovered rocking-chairs at an early age; his mother, in carrying on his "childish occupations in the ways of men", 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 eleven he was beginning to write verse. He was unusually "drowsy—denial I should ever have been"

characteristic which was to account for much suffering in the rest of his life. For at the public school, at five years old, he was the most prosperous.

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 propounder 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 unpainted stairs". (p. 3)

2. Sagedom, 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 preoccupation with the reminders of the ultimate end of man was not enough, the death at eleven of Harry Morell, his close friend, may have weakened 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, when 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, and his mother had turned over the guard of her sons to my husband, and so had lost none of her instinctive fear. Yet there was always the feeling, as he walked in and out of the house, that he was but a cloak of protection thrown over the real person whose name he wore.

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." 3

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

ear-ache. It was to develop into a necrosis of the bone, and become a very mortal personal devil for forty years thereafter, as by chemistry he did. By now the personalities of the family were clearly defined. "The father was the strength, the mother the light." Dean was at 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 him."

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

3. There is no doubt but that Tennyson's profession of verse loved books—especially Dickens, with his sympathy for the social mis-fit. At the high-school, he day-dreamed. He loved Vergil; and in his
third year, he amazed his classmates by turning Cicero's first oration against Catullus into English blank verse. 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. To write a sonnet in twenty minutes and to call 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?' 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 technique which was to bring him such quantities of rejection slips while he was struggling a decade later for an audience.

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1. There is not 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. Oh! I can't think you will start, not altogether.


3. Hagedorn, p. 31.

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 Watts, of Atlantic, or 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 planned and chiselled and hammered, with loving exactitude, the hulls of their ships. He learned to "write a nonet in twenty minutes, and to work over it for twenty days." But at home, the clouds were gathering. Dean, who had been absent, 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." Edw. 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."
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—"Pharaoh" or "Marshe". 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. John Hagedorn, "her father, a practical man, ended what had barely begun". The practical reality was that he was not suited to the intellectual life. It was now that Gardiner, of Tilbury Town, became his best teacher. Distraught, 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 woman alone, turning in doorways, disevelled and furtive-eyed, on the lookout for a woman who would have him. What did it seem to be such refuse? Here...was object, ultimate failure. Gardiner closed its eyes in horror at such sights. But young Robinson looked and pondered, gripped by a sharp, incomprehending pity. 

And there were others—New England "individualists"—who fascinated him. "There was Peg-Jug Talbot, the disreputable "tin-knocker", who repaired for the eurhythmic group of delinquents, whom he fed by his own stoves; Nash Benjamin, who had a mistress down the road and cursed the Episcopal Church every chance he got; Squire Whitmore, who was so close he was even thrown into jail for a time when his son, who kept only one hen, which he said, could lay all the eggs he and his sister and his brothers ate. Of course, no one could understand his".

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1. Hagedorn, p. 42.
2. Ibid., pp. 52-53.
3. Ibid.
And all the time, at home, circumstances were growing darker. Donn 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 etymology, 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, not gone to college. Already he had learned to alternate 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, for anywhere else, but who was proud to believe that he was not altogether a misfit. He had a great many friends, this fellow, but those he did have he has never forgotten, and I never will." It was a time when,

1. Nagedorn, op. cit., p. 56.
2. Ibid., p. 57.
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!'" 1aram, though spiritually uncompromising, was kind-hearted, and came to his brother's support. He would have to have treatments in Boston. Why not Harvard, after all?

In 1881, 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 Hix restaurant; the Latin Quarter; the Museum 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 Men from Stratford. 2 But

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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, and the Atlantic, Century, Harper's, and the like, as well as the Harvard Advocate. Before the year closed, however, Robinson was back in Gardner 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". She in literary critics who wrote reviews to readers who might be amused. In 1892 he experienced one of his most tragic years when his mother died under peculiarly distressing circumstances. She contracted 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. 82.
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".

Ironically, too, her death had preceded by less than a week the appearance of his first evidence of achievement. For, disturbed by the rejections of his work by the Atlantic, Century, Harper's, Scribner's, as well as by newspapers generally, he had gotten together forty poems which he called "The Torrent and the Night Before" and published them himself. Fifty-two dollars got his 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". 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".

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

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2. Published at Gardiner, Maine, 1896.

3. It is interesting to know that recently $1600 was offered for one copy.

4. Laura Richards, pp. 46-47.
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." The disappearance of the measure. These then, were the years when, particularly, his acute personal sense of failure, according to the standards of Tilton, Town but of his whole New England inheritance, made him sympathetic to failure in others, and of indications of spiritual victory behind the worldly defeat. A very good and obvious reason, however, lay behind the consistent rejection of his poetry. Its very strength, its new techniques—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 only 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 technique; getting rid of the pomposity, the ornamentation, the artificiality of "poetic language". He was, in fact, breaking completely with tradition, breaking chivalry, finding a less "correct" style. His phrases were short, often staccato; for plain speaking demanded a plain style. Furthermore, these phrases and lines were not always measured carefully, foot by foot. Often they ran over; or the rhythm would

2. Hagedorn, p. 89.
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 measures, 1 that 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." 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, at the moment until... 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. Lewellyn and Priscilla find domesticity together unsupportable, and Priscilla fades alone for twenty years.

Mr. Flood portrays a new and ironic New England chivalry, winning a less silent and less shining horn on his lonely road. Mr. Coffin thinks that L. Horns Gregory, amusingly adds, "Robinson's portrait of the Robinson was himself his greatest irony, suggesting that he found his best sellers must be a source of quiet amusement to him." The heavier order in the old chivalric world, which thus became an escape for

4. Ibid., "Mr. Flood's Party", p. 373.
him.

now we could write, "I shall never be a prominent citizen, and I thank
There is, too, the element of his humour, of which it has been

and for that he would be anything but a good orathy and possibly
written, "He uses humour as a means to saying some of the saddest things
the only thing he had ever believed in. For himself, the story of the early
but it is also inescapable, and often, even impudent.3 Added to it was

a capacity for indirect oblique approach, as in "The Mill,"4 and a

1 It is true of Robin that he has incessantly discouraged new

mills any more."

In addition, Robinson was using the monosyllabic line; sloughing
United States Treasury, in the United States Customs House. This, through
off archaism and circumlocution, Editors looked askance at the sonnet
the Committee of President Grant's history, to who his son herself
entitled "The Writer," in which the octet has but five words but seventy-

Of course, this is the nature of the "manufactured" poet as a special agent of the

be poetry; and they sent it back to its author. These then, were some
of the factors behind the long and dark years of his un-acceptance.

in his own words, "imaginary images, drawing water;" then was dead sensation;

For a year, he tried to give up writing poetry, and wrote short;

trifling, trifling, trifling nonsense, and not taken in drama with any serious

But neither would the magazines have them. Finally, he destroyed
from his family, and Robinson felt more as his responsibility. His
the manuscripts--and surrendered. It was his last effort at retreat; and

of South.3 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


had remained the character of Robinson's writing; as he said, he could
months of vice versa. As he said, he was consistently to buy a pair of trousers,

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 Sigurd Torrance. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1945,
p. 116.

4. Cof. ante p. 15

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." 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 desparately 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." But that that cleared the path to success, by any means, was 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. Kermit, who had taken to drinking, was separated from his family, and Robinson felt then at his responsibility, his inability to aid them materially, as he wished, added again to his own sense of failure. So a week to assemble material for arrangements for a Boston dry-good. 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
him two dollars. Sean was a letter for him—a letter that
was to go to his next of kin.

One day he had received word of a possible position. It was that of a checker of trains and of a position in the New
York Subway. It was ten hours a day, of checking the workmen in, in the morning, and out, at night. "In the dreary hours between, he passed
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." The pay was ten dollars a day.

As part of the "century," he had to keep the skinny 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

I. Buckendin, "The Location was large and impressive, as unac-
cepted. It had not been fully understood. In the center of the room, a large
lined letter was the name, "The Hours." Certainly it was, but with
It was in such circumstances that he had walked wearily one evening
and over, dreamlike. In fact, it seemed to me, "To dear Mr. Robinson,
I know, I have enjoyed your work, especially the "Hollow of the Night.

2. Lucius Beebe, "Dignified Fowl," The Outlook and Independent,
Aug. 27, 1930, p. 647.
3. Ibid., p. 647.

E. Radosorn, p. 303. 43.
into his dark rooming house. There was a letter for him—a letter that
was to mark for the first time, the top of the long hill. It was the
winter of 1905, those poetic laurels, and the technique and subject-caller
that if a
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 Zippinott's had taken his sonnet for $5 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." It was at
least an indication; but even the most tenacious bit of encouragement meant
much after so many years of being ignored.

The Veil of Success did come, beginning in 1916, with the publication of "The
Man Against the Sky," 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 Francis was his critical essay on Spenser when
he was twenty. [Citation: "The First American Poet," Boston: Little,
Brown, 1908, p. xiv.]


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

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. The dominant interest in and sympathy for failure was to be only more intensified and enlarged in Mathilda and Cavender than it was in the prophetic projections of Richard Cory and Flammonde. 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 Rotinsonian 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.

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 Nurse in Council, The Riverside Press, Cambridge, 1922, p. 846.


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 pat-
terns, as those patterns shift back and forth in the movements of countless
color-atoms which are presented as individual men and women. To repeat,

the characters themselves are more significant than the stories of the single revolutionary message is simply a man has failed." — Louis H. Leitermanp

lives they lead; or, to turn it about, their narrative patterns are the inevitable results of their complicated personalities.

These characters are subject to a certain amount of formal external failure. But to those readers, and for present purposes, another more classification. There are those like Cassandra, drawn from Greek or Roman mythology and legend; those like Nicodemus, Lazarus, St. Paul, taken the term "sacrifice" and "salvage" are actively applicable to spiritual directly from the Bible, Merlin, Lancelot, Arthur, and his courtly men the peculiarities of the Arthurian cycle; and women re-appear from the time-honored pages of the Arthurian world which and women are steeped in the Celtic wistfulness and sense of often interpret these in the opposite way.

futility. Ben Jonson, John Brown, Shakespeare, Rembrandt, step fresh from If then, Robinson so often seemed fascinated by that epoch of 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; the group who live in the city; the group who live in the country; the group who live in the desert; the group who live in the snow. Mr. Flood, who tips his lonely jug under two moons; Miniver Cheevey, the fact that he is very not to join in the social failure a ritual of eccentric romanticism born out of time: Reuben Bright, the butcher, with his unex- pected sensitivity; Captain Craig, Tilbury's indigent philosopher-humorist; they are, in some way, the personality-heroes in the sense of shaping the characters' lives into a pattern of their own—of the characters' own—the heroes of his long poems—those "faceless" ones in people who struggled and failed them who succeeded. He characters who live in no particular town, and at no particular time, and factories, and the architecture is of no specific period or design. This deviates the most and most interesting to the reader, to the story of the is the group of Roman Barthes, Avon, Cavendish, 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
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which they lend ore turn it about, their narrative patterns are the
inevitable results of their complicated personalities.

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classification, there are those like Cassandra, drawn from Greek or Roman
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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 laments 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 only hastily standard 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 in 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 doomed to spiritual failure, though the

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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 Mr. Captain Craig—tne type whom the world easily classifies on the basis of his 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 Ahab or Oedipus; 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 both facets of existence, and become for Robinson simply the two modes for failure, actively 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 fall, 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.

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 clash of clearly analyzed personalities that react upon one another and yet are bound fatally by what they are," still, it is also true that "he concentrated the bias of his insight on the fundamentals of human nature which vary comparatively little with time and place." If, then, each character is highly individual, he yet possesses qualities which in 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 noisome of Merlin. Here are the Mr. Floods, shabby in moral fibre as well as in garments; the John Everaldmores, mechanically following the voice of sexual desire; the Miniver Cheevy's, blaming fate for their the only path out of the wilderness.

2. Louis Ledoux, op. cit., p. 16.
3. Ibid.
in a commercialized world where "none heeded and few heard"; the Carmichaels, many of his "classical" failures, like Dorrance, or Shillingford, with their subtle kind of horror. Here too is the man Flamond, distinguished, generous, intuitive, one "who held his head as one by kings was held by mercy of reason, for such a different way, by one ever usually accredited"; yet there is in him a "small satanic kink" which makes him achieve, and for none ever obvious or conventional. But it is there, by "a Prince of Castaways". Here is Mathias, who "grew with honors earned"; implausible, its beginning is surely among names, in life, and yet true, he was, like his house, "somewhat on an eminence"; and who is fated to try and men more, and lead to a lot and all-enveloping horror.

To batter down with his two hands the doorway to oblivion. Here is Richard Cory, who effusively contradicts popular opinion, which wished itself in intimately linked with its preliminary, the failure, of the failure here his place, by the swift sure gesture of a bullet through his head. Here can be no question. "Has any seen Tom Tug in the woods, but I'm King Jasper, the rich and ruthless capitalist; and Merlin, the mighty king of men." Failure is, with the others: their homestead and their 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 less human in their ability to shape life is 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, the Magnificent Light, "Merlin," 562.

Here then is the basic classification for this study. The Robinsonian characters fall into two main groups. In their authors' parlance, they are the Father and the Son. Here.

are those who have "seen" too much, or too little, of that Light which is the Light of the Path out of the Wilderness; the son, who "sees" too much, really the Light 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.
Many of his most "distinguished" failures, like Cavender, or Nightingale,
or Matthias, or Sardana Nash, do find that path at last. It is a sug-
gested 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 re-
 mains misty, and leading to a far and still-receding horizon.

But the problem of redemption is a separate one in itself, if in-
timately 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." 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.

Now 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

3. Implications of Robinson's optimism, which his suggested re-
demptions directly infer, will appear in the individual analyses of the
chapter on "The Tragic Light," post p. , and also in the general Conclusion.
also the crucial problem for those bewildered and complex men 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 SIGNIFICANCE

"It is the faith within the fear"

Allusion has been made to the Robinsonian symbol, the Light, in
whose perception hinges the fellows of the 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
riterion for Robinson's peculiar technique of character-education. I
have tried to express this best for character-education in the phrase "The
Traveller light." It is a phrase with double suggestiveness.

First, the light symbol is perhaps not only the most consistent
idea in Robinson's story (though he introduces it symptomatically with
the "child"), but it arises at and implies the heart of the sensation
of life, and of character development.

For those that never know the light
Its absence is a matter
but for, the children of the light
been lost it fortune's blessing.

Wherever mentioned these words as the outset of his career as an artist,
his adherence to the importance of the Light concept resistant Waramel
and the moral life. Furthermore, the Light is an external sign of interior
life, and the "children of the light" symbolize how the Light concept
was absorbed into the artist's life.
philosophy guides and shapes the ultimate expressions of his narrative pattern and his characterization.

Chapter III

The Light Symbol and its Implications

"It is the faith within the fear."

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 "word"), but it strikes at and implies the heart of his conception of life, and of character effectiveness.

Lewell wrote: "I have never known the light."

Though Robinson's words, at the outset of his career as an artist, his adherence to the importance of the Light remain consistent throughout his poetic life. Furthermore, the Light is an integral part of whatever...
philosophy" guides and shapes the ultimate expressions of his narrative thought and his ideas, it marbled through filmm patterns and his characterization.

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 a neat package and permanently installed. By the contrary, he says his "answers" to the questions with which he was preoccupied both in his journalism and in his literary work: "We cannot discuss life in its entirety, nor the human condition, nor the "philosophy" of his treatment of things; we have to deal primarily with "philosophy," which, however, would appear to be convenient, if not the essence of the thing itself. Such terms, however, are

Actually, he considered himself in the ranks of the joyous of the earth—though his was highly specialized kind of joy, very different from Kipling's, for instance. Robinson's answers on the occasions to what he called "the nauseating evasions of the uncomprosing "optimist." In these he was not a philosopher but a poet, one who saw that the indefinite, ever to permit of attaching to his attitudes the word "philosophy." These terms, however, would appear to be convenient, if not the essence of the thing itself. Such terms, however, are

which is surely a statement of the difficulty to accept a metaphysical interpretation of the universe and of life, as I see it, or poetically.

1. The most complete critical work on Robinson's philosophy. Miss Emelen's recent study, (of Foreword, ante p. 1) includes a chapter titled "Lights, and Shadows," p. 46, in which the Light is studied as a philosophical concept applied to four major poems.

other side of the balance, she adds, is "Success through failure," or disproven in Plato's term—meaning words—and this is a proven truth.

But this is not to say that Robinson ever obliques by presenting things as they are. In fact, she states that her philosophy is not a neat package and conveniently labelled. On the contrary, he alludes to the idea that much more is involved. She still writes that she rejects a philosophical implication for his poetry. Perhaps the critical focus is on what makes her philosophy the most important.

In a letter to Dr. Will Durant, Robinson again speaks of the poet's role and that he was not a philosopher; that as a poet, he dealt not with logical and moral kind of optimism and pessimism; if a man is a materialist, or a mechanist, concepts, but rather with emotion; and obviously he dealt primarily with the effect of the spirit upon the artist. These elements, however, are not the primary stuff of philosophy and to attempt to force them into belief in a world of an ideal future is a mistake.

With the essence of logic.

Witness, for example, Robinson's answers on two occasions to unpleasant comments on her poetry. She's not thinking about the realists or optimistic pre-students who were preparing theses on her poetic philosophy. In 1920 she replied that she was actually upsizing her literary craftsmanship. She wrote, "There is no philosophy in my poetry beyond an implication of poetry," she said. She further stated that she was preparing a realist or an ordered universe, and a sort of deterministic negation of the general world of natural science, something that would be useful. She added that poetry matters that appear to be the basis of rational thought.

Again, in 1920, she replied that she was not the one to be blamed. She wrote,

I am sorry to learn that you are writing about my "philosophy," which is exactly a statement of my inability to accept a mechanical interpretation of the universe and of life. As I see it, my poetry does not, in the sense of absolute statement, grow out of the real world.

1. Ibid., p. 54.
2. Ibid., p. 56.
5. Miss Helen has applied the poetic symbol of the light as a philosophical concept in her essays.

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, then I can live it only as a bad...

...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 such that anyone can do about it except to follow his own light—whichever may or may not be the light of an ignis fatuus in a swamp.

For through it all, there, beyond it all—

Again, Robinson's own definition of poetry, recorded by Joyce Kilmer in an interview for the New York Times, in 1916, definitely prescribes a powerful, poetic, belonging to the publication of 1920. He includes any possibility of his actually revealing his literary scaffolding. In "Poetry," he said then, "is a language that tells us, through a mere or sixty-fourth, we could still write of the light with conviction and joy; less emotional reaction, something that cannot be said." He added that it is what is seen that has been seen, for without ever it had two characteristics, one of which is "that it is, after all, have always had one to keep the game...though I fear that you... undefinable." For times that is ever burning, burnish low, worse it will, but it never went out...and I think there is all enough in it. Perhaps, too, Robinson's unwillingness or inability to commit himself to the dangers of absolute statement grows out of the fact that again, not to record once more, in the course of universality.
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.

This double viewpoint is already that of his early "Gaza." He has said:

"I cannot find my way; there is no star
In all the shrouded heavens anywhere;
philosophically, there is not a whisper in the air.
Or any living voice but one so far
That I can hear it only as a dream,
Of lost, imperial music, played when fair
And angel fingers weaved; and unanswerable
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,
always to know that something in the light;
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 1895. 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 uncomfortably blind, or wretchedly astray. I
have always had one to keep me going, though I fear that you... of
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."

2. Collected Poems. p. 94.
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."  

One feels justified in saying that Robinson added the Light.

That, however, hardly amounts to postulating the Light as a philosophical principle. 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 "Whymness and the Whimsiness," to choose, 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

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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 Kapić, (op. cit.) particularly the chapter titled "Royce and Schopenhauer," p. 29. 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. 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 as far as his characters are each unique, again explains the apparent business of the Light symbol, and the necessity for deriving from each set of circumstances the exact meaning of the Light which best fits it. For each man, the Light is a different value and definition of the Light for each individual.

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." 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

2. Cf. post p.7/
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 per-
ception of the Light has made him.¹ For each, then, the Light is a dif-
f erent 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- or- vision of an
ideal state of men's being, never on this earth to be fully realized.

Such Dagonet, Arthur's Fool, recalls, in speaking of the "Siege Perilous"
and "prelude of circumstances," the literal interpretation of
of the Grail. Says her

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

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


...a mystic and intrinsic peace
Of one who sees where man of nearer sight
See nothing...

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?
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,
responding degrees of Light intensity.

Again it is the philosophic Captain speaking—this time, on his death-bed.
  Such a paradoxical and psychical use of the light is particularly
Forget not that he who in his work
would mount from these low roads of measured shade
To tread the languid and 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-shot mind; for 'tis the mind
That makes you drawn or invincible,
Dreaded or pleasant...

The foregoing examples will serve to illustrate the inherent
variation in the Light image; the fact that it must be interpreted directly
in the context; in the light, or in the light—without which
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-

3. Ibid., p. 166.
In "The Diary of the Light-Brancher," Waldo's journey of survival, connection with Nature, several other light values and attendant symbols with their varying intensities of meaning, in order against a corresponding are so closely linked as they should be noted here. One of the masts background of light and time, as afternoon wanes into the diminished characteristic Robinsonian uses of light is as a purely natural phenomenon. light-world of twilights and nights and even dawn comes dimly and blindly, to intensify emotion in a given situation. Consistently, with this purpise behind a joy for the intended double mood of black. Waldo's sentiments pose and effect, Robinson uses day and night, light and shadow, as an in the hour events before anyone's book comes with her name. In emotional "back-drop." One is reminded of Shakespeare's similar use of A drama in a light that fades its beauty: Nature, so effectively does Robinson touch with light or shadow the with which his characters' moods 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 psychological use of light is particularly in "Avon's Harvest," where no light appears at all, Avon's world and with all its evil existence of can, being a completely shadowed existence dominated by hate, fear and removed. There in the lurid gleam of the fire of hate and terror that burns in of course, the light here, as in "Avon's Harvest," being its opposite. 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,

"Light and light's darkness are the same."

Later, the moonlight line between him and a chair in which Loraly, whom for time was hidden out there in the black lake which now I could see only as a glimpse of black light by the shores. There were no stars dark phases of emotion, and the moon was hours away behind me. There was nothing. "And what was coming..."

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

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 one lived by any man will be, as is his.

Perhaps nowhere in Malory's works is his sensitivity to the spiritual dark house of remorse, the light here, as in "Aven's Harvest," being its opposite, darkness, signifying both spiritual torment, and the blackness of the night against which it is enacted.

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

Later, the moonlight lies between him and a chair in which Laramie, whom he has murdered, used to sit. Here, cold, remote, now it penetrates the darkness, in the house of their former owner, now to take its place in the dark places of his mind, intensifying the cold triumph of his now tortured soul.

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 his love and the world’s cruel sky.

He strode alone...

Until there was no moon but the white blur.

Low in a blurred gray sky, and all those lights

That once had shone above him, and itself,

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.

Vivian, as leaves, Crusoes in the last in a fierce wind and a glow that

Perhaps nowhere in Robinson's poetry is his sensitivity to the
decadence into irrecoverable night. And there are darknesses over Camelot.

emotional possibilities of light and color more evident than in the Vivian-

There are a few glimpses out of some of Robinson's earlier use of Merlin scenes, where their mutual passion rises to a fiery pinnacle, then

gradually chill, as rictious autumn colors arrival into the withered brown

of winter. On Merlin's arrival at Broccoli, he is showered with

representations—what might he called the symbol of a symbol—is the

...the cherry blossoms falling

down on him and around him in the sunlight.

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

...where blood and olive made a wild harmony

With eyes and eyebrow 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, new in royal purple,

and Vivian in a crimson "sheath," relax in a "flame-shaken gloom." Flaming
silver candlesticks etch her "dusky loveliness" against a deepening gray shadow, while Merlin and Vivian "twine" golden goblets. But a vision of
Camelot comes to Merlin—
(really it is also the searching heat that seared its
object into negligibles. This is the reality revealed in Frostmagi's
remark:"
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..."

When Time and Fate and Chance have inevitably overtaken the love-idyll,
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
departs into unrelieved night..." "And there was darkness over Camelot," says
these, then, are a few examples of many of Robinson's constant use of
light for emotional intensification.
light, with all the emotional and spiritual.

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, omniscient, and blinding comprehen-
sion of life. Such understanding is vouchsafed to but a few, and for
these exceeds human capacity to long sustain, as witness Merlin. 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
one seen."

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The sun image then is a particularly apt one for the Light is the way to peace and grace and spiritual life,
but in
perhaps, than eyes of men are not to see inherent in its saving intensity is also the scourging horn that may arrive its object into nothingness. This is the quality revealed in Tristan's remark born of knowledge too late: the dark cave 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 look too long into its face, 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.

Insight into the nature of things, yet 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

Matthiæ's mentor, lacked failures, or ancient successes; the failures are
paradoxically always accidental successes. A failure that was right. They had seen more ritual successes.
Perhaps, then eyes of men are meant to see
or the masses of earth and earthly works. Individual roses are built, as they
It is no surprise when Earth 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 "Califer" 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 failures,
for example, it goes without saying that the majority of Robinson's characters
see through a glass darkly. Only a few, as in life, bear the terrible
responsibility of excessive vision or insight into the nature of things.
But, and here is the full implication of the "tragic light," in either
of these cases, 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 strains the degeneration
of ideas, the dimming of the light, when these become implicated in the
crude action of the world. It matters not then whether these

1. Ibid., p. 1072
characters are obvious failures; or apparent successes; the failures are paradoxically explained, not infrequently as imminent spiritual successes, 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 a arising, to a new leitmotiv, 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":

1. Of such are Captain Craig or Fernando Nash.
2. Coffin, op. cit., p. 46.
the "courage to face disaster"; — the "flower that never fades."

To look once again at Captain Craig, who, it is asserted, presents as plainly as his author ever spoke such 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...

As previously stated, Robinson is particularly interested in portraying the aspect of failure that resulting from excess vision of the Light, and that caused by disease, or complete blindness of spiritual vision. Such failure is, again, directly related to the degree of individual perception; and it is a basic theme in the treatment of a widely varying group of characters. Finally, the failure essential to Robinson's "philosophy" even more than to his personal experience. The failure will not be applied to nineteen points, in which it will be interpreted as a fundamental cause of failure, whose existence or diminished perception accounts for specific failure. As the Light itself wavers in new ways, so also will the type of failure vary.

It should be stated that analysis will be made of these representative characters, belonging most distinctly and only to the Victorian world. The list will include: Captain Craig (1806), Captain Marley (1817); Tance (1820); Ann's Harvest (1821); Peter Mott (1821); The Man Who Died Twice (1825); The World (1825); Captain's House (1827); The Story of the Righteous (1828); Matthias at the Door (1829); Talifer (1833); Expectant (1834); Zinn Jasper (1836). Further analysis will be made...
also of the earliest group of short poems inspired by the short portrait of Richard Cory (1913). 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 authors but his own observation and knowledge. Consequently, the poems will not be treated in chronological order, for Robinson's poetry actually indicates

**PART II**

**CHAPTER IV**

**THE TRAGIC LIGHT**

As previously stated, Robinson is particularly interested in little growth, except in the length of his later poems, where the implied portrayal of two aspects of failure: that resulting from excess vision of the Light, and that caused by dimness, or complete blindness of spiritual vision. Such failure is, again, directly related to the degree of 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 work, an abiding faculty of his, were it not for his Robinsonian "philosophy" given 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.

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);
- Aven's Harvest (1921);
- Roman Bartholom (1923); The Man
- Who Died Twice (1924); Tristram (1927); Carver's House (1927);
- The Glory of the Nightingales (1930);
- Mathias At the Door (1931);
- Talifer's Character: a Second Study of the Character Division of the Nightingales (1933); An Aramid (1934); King Jasper (1938).

Brief mention 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
"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
borne 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, of
"acid drawings of human failure, a filial technique, a sense of crashing
tragedy, an astounding felicity of phrase, were his from his beginning."

The grouping here then will be first according to the major division,
and then, within the division, according to a basic similarity or con-
trast 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.

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.)

here because they, too, bear the Robinsonian imprint. For the poet has discovered in these 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 fall in their various ways because they have seen too much of the Light. The argument for this group is interesting and forcefully simple. Then 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 poem)—Before beginning the first

1. I shall analyze first the "Richard Cory" poems, followed by "Captain Craig," "Marlin" 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 these whose 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 narrative; no psychological analyses—except by implication. Four stanzas suffice for Cory's brief and glittering walk across the pages of American literature; yet in these 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 capacity whenever Richard Cory went down townspeople saw the light. He was always a gentleman from sole to crown, pure for whom the bell. Clean favored and imperially slim.

Is too intense, and we breathe. And we, from the veriest bones, this. And he was always quietly arrayed, Creased and ageless. And his hair was always clean, when he talked, a lack of ability to But still he fluttered pulses when he said, Cordate it. Good morning, and he glittered when he walked, such the

And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—
And admirable schooled in every grace.

In fine, we thought that he was everything.

To make us wish that we were in his place.

World can be the complete answer we sought, but his Dickinson's still. So on we worked, and waited for the light.

five unlensed, and went without the meat, and cursed the bread. 
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
is another. Went home, and put a bullet through his head.

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

It is not surprising that Richard Cory baffled early readers of Robinson. Why did he do it? 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 left 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 the loss of his woman, the realities of life-values, with the light of self-knowledge, lighted upon us in the moral drama, that he had discovered and knew, or of Truth, as he had, which was more, apparently, than he had listened to or lived, or even wakened 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 was the end of his life.

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 sight that made his eyes see at any instant objects in the most intimate vision, he could detect, and foster, a talent hidden from even casual observers. To Captain Craig, he was a rare, unique, and mysterious phenomenon. As for Tilbury himself, he possessed the rare quality of understanding, and tolerance.
for, those unfortunate 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 of his inherent capacity for greatness suggested of him. Robinson says conclusively: "We trust in God, and let the Deacon starve. Barely at once will nature give us the power to be Flammonde and live."

This is, however, not an implication of desolation, 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 to be an actual order of the soul a little differently. Captain Craig "had the sun," but Captain Craig, unlike Richard Cory, is of the social drag. Yet he is discovered and in the Captain with "a dim work of writing hand," in the chair, listened to by five or six young idealists for and presents the picture of a philosopher whose better grace is the same.

The spark in him... of humor, or Choked under, like a jest in Holy Writ, went being defeated, By Tilbury prudence. He had lived his life... of the social drag. Yet he is discovered and in the chair, listened to by five or six young idealists for and presents the picture of a philosopher whose better grace is the same.

Whatever he was not, and after time, When it had been sufficiently to pass
That he was going patch-clad through the streets,
Weak, dizzy, chilled, and half starved, he had laid some nerveless fingers on a prudent sleeve, And told the sleeve in fugitive confidence, Just how it was: "My name is Captain Craig," He said, "and I must eat." The sleeve moved on... and disappeared as a thief out of the burglar's shop. Of men's


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

Captain Craig is a constitutional and consistent "failure," exuberantly overlooked by the town, which, in its "sunk-faced failures." Socially, this is his trait.

...found it more melodious to shout Right on, with unsullied admiration, To keep the tune as it had always been, and this quality, To trust in God, and let the Captain starve.

this ability to "eat first things first," which has never allowed him to be If, by the grace of his young pensioners, he does not completely starve, become depressed over his lack of interest in, hence lack of ability for his ultimate history is disclosed in several philosophic letters, in a nesculation of the world's goods. Even so, during his last devoted number of conversations, and, finally, in an eccentric and triumphant den: the hero of nothing death-bed scene.

...that he would rather be dead he himself,

But he is triumphant. For he had

He is a "...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..."

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, yet the amusing way the Captain, like the arch, has a knack for it in a tragic joke that life is but 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

perverse of this quest, achieved, sees at last the realization, and even the uncanny, the Paliology, the Dharma, courage,

with love, and the world, 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."

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1. Ibid., p. 114.  2. Ibid., p. 116.
2. Ibid., p. 115.  4. Ibid., p. 119.
The Captain has "laughed" all of his life; and in spite of, or at, a success-stained world and its "sour-faced failures," (Socially, this is his tragic flaw; that which has prevented his becoming an "Eminent Citizen." He has "an irredeemable 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 days, he thinks of nothing but of the young, "windy alive,..." of his last Will and Testament. Conscience is a "dearly-purchased," whole-worshiping, live-questioning, sanctified and "cherished" light; even to the "God's universal Fool." Forgetful of dead shadows...

Yet the sunshine, says the Captain, like the dark, has a demon who is a stranger to most of us, and 3.

1. The quest of him is hard enough—
2. As hard as truth, 4.
3. As hard as stone
4. For sunshine, too fierce for stone.
5. Yet, out of this quest, achieved, comes at last the realization, and even 6.

And awe of God, who have sought.

the possession of "the world's achievever—wisdom, knowledge, courage,

that I, in having asked, have found.

faith, Love. Of such is the Captain's Light.

The answer is the "impossible of love.

Then inward eye for the aim fast

Of what this dark world is...

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1. Ibid., p. 126. 3. Ibid. 5. Ibid., p. 137.
2. Ibid., p. 181. 4. Ibid., p. 131. 5. Ibid., p. 139.
But if there 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,
success is not if we shall or if we fail;
slowly and almost majestically, he emerges as an example of Robinson's
peculiar irony. For his, and his author's is

Fainless as he is, he can still bequeath an ultimate Universe
to his young friends—the staff of his last will and testament. Confess-
sed in his last hours of his "world-worshipping, time-questioning, sun-
fearing and heart-suffering," the Captain assigns to them "God's universe!"
And well shall have no sheep to cross your flight.
The secret of his failure and success—and that of most of Robinson's
strangely victorious characters—is revealed in his latest words:

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 can lose
Man gains; and what man gains reports itself.
In losses we but vaguely depresses, nay,
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.

And yet—
No, no... It is the flesh... and his wisdom... and his perdition of the spirit.
That ails us, for the spirit knows no qualms.
The light, the failure, no down-falling; so climb high, as his hope.
And having set your steps regard not such that all of them,
The downward laughter clinging at your feet, has enabled not.
Nor overmuch the warning; only know him to endure.
As well as you knew down from lantern-light, and to seek.
That far above you, for you, and within you,
And always yours, the truth,
As he is, the truth.
It is the wisdom of a screw and ringing clave.
His wisdom... fly for truth.
And hell shall have no storm to crush your flight; and
No laughter to vex down your loyalty.

This, then, is the forlorn and triumphant legacy of one who stands in
(35) Declin.— Another distinctive addition to the contrast
the best Robinsonian sense for success. It is also another statement of
the eternal conflict between the aspiring spirit and the constraining
in the figure of Declin, the hero of the poem of the same name. In this
and dubious flesh.

...if there come
But o'er on all his journey, singing down in death and experience To find him, the gold-throated forward call, in some of which is excitement and Shall after that call guide him? When his ears
Have earned an inward skill to methodize.

1. Ibid., p. 180.
2. Ibid., p. 181.
universal in The clash of all crossed voices and all noise individual
How shall he grope to be confused again,
representation As he has been, by discord? When his eyes have experienced
have read the book of wisdom in the sun,
are again no And after dark deciphered it on earth.
how shall he turn them back to scan some huge
Blood-lettered protest of bewildered men—through "a
That hunger while he feeds where they would starve,
finité and round all absurdly perish elsewhere, both Merlin and Lancelot.

were — So, out of his indigence, and his wisdom, and his perception of the light, the Captain's most precious gift to his friend 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 surer and singing gleam. His wisdom is the wisdom of joy and of truth, and his final going is radiant and assured, and "Lancelot" in which experience has its roots in wisdom and its

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 poet 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, and now reached the heroic proportions of legend. Here, in three poems based on Arthurian legend, 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.
universal significance. These men and women are not pure individual text representations, 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 finite and fragmentary wisdom. Furthermore, both Merlin and Lancelot were written against the disillusioning background of the first World War, a time when physical catastrophe and emotional chaos reached upwards through the work of pessimists 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," He further points out that nowhere in Robinson son's poetry is there a more explicit illumination of that subtle concentration of experience into its ideal values than in these two poems and "Merlin" and "Lancelot," in which experience has its roots in passion, and its meaning in a consecration of the spirit. 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."
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." 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. If the king he has created, for his, there can be no grue Merlin, after a ten years' love-idyll with Vivien in Brittany, has reappeared 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 Medraut who covets both Guinevere and the throne, Arthur, as my king of Camelot, as head of the Round Table, and as a man, numbers his days. More of both king and the world. Yet when Merlin first reappears at Camelot, but the poem is primarily the wistful and shadowed story of Merlin, the once-mighty wizard, whose light, super-bright, is yet inadequate to light a man of mean stature on. Arthur's court, he once again sees the ever-present tragic events to come, and recognized them as inescapable and inevitable. At last, he knows that his magic is too uncertain, too frail, and he refuses to divert or forestall the personal negative resolution of his life, his failure, comes for Merlin in the course, and Arthur's estimate of Merlin's light. Merlin.
consequences of his love affair with Vivian. This is the situation which reveals Merlin’s particular failure:

Perhaps "failure" is too emphatic a term to characterize Merlin’s state at the end. 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. What is failure and penalty both; for he must witness the downfall of Arthur’s kingdom, if he has his wisdom any longer. But has he not fallen of the world and of the king he has created. For him, there can be no greater personal failure. How does it come about?

She said, "Is it Merlin.”

Merlin had existed, serene and competent, until he allowed himself to lose his sense of proportion, until he betrayed his intelligence, by his love affair with Vivian. Their affair is at first so satisfying that he is, to the king’s growing rage, a "tranquiliser."

On his face, falling in love with Vivian. Their affair is at first so satisfying that he is quite willing to divorce himself from all further concern with the 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. Yet when Merlin first reappears at Camelot, he is still, according to hearsay,

wears the valiance of an ageless youth, crowned with a glory of eternal peace.\(^2\)

But, significantly, he has come back without his famous beard; an external change suggestive of an inner one. Once, Gawain asserts, "he knew everything."\(^3\) At least, he "knew as much as God would let him know"—until he

3. Ibid., p. 339.
met Vivian. It is an important "until," Begomot. Arthur's Fool, implies
that part of Merlin's penalty for excessive knowledge is actually
...being buried in Brocéliande.
For too much wisdom and clairvoyance!

But now there is a general feeling that Merlin is diminished in power and
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 fomend, lost Merlin,
Whose Norn's had made of him a slave.
A man of dalliance, and a sybarite. 2

He is, to the King's grieving eyes, a "transmitted seer." On his face,
voiced by Vivian for both of them, Merlin's "Her magick hand" upon
his shoulder, her "written for the king's remembering eyes,
A pathos of a lost authority
once 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, 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,—
and both to a new Youth of a very, very conventional tradition, and
Galahad, who is to be Lancelet's son, and who is to find the Grail. But

1. Ibid., p. 260.
2. Ibid., p. 269.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 261.
neither Merlin nor Arthur shall see the Grail. Says Merlin, "This mirror"

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."

"Merlin,  The man who sees Not even on seeing till the inverted flame Merlin's penalty for excess Light is then the madness—though an ecstatic
And leaves all of what there was of him to the madness—of his love for Vivian. His failure as a magician, the result of their love and hate alike must take away
the love-idyll, comes when he is unable to save Camlact. 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."

Of moths and flowers, and shimmering far away

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,"

Of Camlact. The Sibyl. For they were light.
she adds that both of them are "out of tune with time." They are,

neither of them, she says, "strung for today."

So she rationalizes

their belonging to each other!

...Vivian is your punishment
For asking 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...

But Time will have its revenge, The change inevitable is shadowed
when Merlin leaves her to go to Camlact. When returns to Brittany, he

you much must have an eye to see at all.
comes back to a new loneliness; a "vague, soul-consuming premonition"; and

but I shall fall before I must do so.

For I am old. I was young yesterday.

1. Ibid., p. 284.
2. Ibid., p. 289.
3. Ibid., p. 289.
4. Ibid., p. 287.
5. Ibid.
now he wonders if his “avenging intellect” is to shine as a “twin mirror” with Arthur’s dissolving kingdom. 1

He says... The man who sees
May go on seeing till the immortal flame, 
May be the path he takes unseen; he told himself.
Then he found thought again. The man who sees
Leaves of what there was of him to die,

The path he takes unseen, he told himself.
Then he found thought again. The man who sees

Leaves of what there was of him to die,

When he found thought again. The man who sees

Leaves of what there was of him to die,

An item of inhosiptable dust

An item of inhosiptable dust

Again to Vivian. 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.

Here is because, he says,
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 in

Of Lancelot, the Grail. Nor this pure light

Merlin’s star has many rays to throw, for many men to place of Grail,

To follow; and the wise are not all pure,

and the Ligh

Nor are the pure all wise who follow it.

There are more rays than men. But let the men

Who saw too much, and was too drive himself

From paradise, play too lightly or too long

To prove or air,

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.

His power,

And there, with no complaint, nor much regret, he

Shall 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;

So vanished...

The man who sees

...The man who sees

Too much must have an eye to see at last

Elusive by
Where Fate has marked the clay... I see the light

But I shall fall before I come to it;

And perhaps...

For I am old, I was young yesterday.

...Time has won. 2

1. Ibid., p. 285.
3. An interesting variant of this verse appears in "Lancelot" post, p. 77.
It is Merlin's own epitaph for greatness: that he voices. So Broceliande
decides for his a prison-yard, as Tint takes a delayed revenge, as to

"Merlin. He feels that he must leave Vivian and return to Arthur; and he
does. But on his second trip back to Camalon, 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 the
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 im-
ponential wizard, and a disillusioned and saddened man, it is because, he says,
to be convinced, but I saw neither Fate nor God, refused to see and ab-
I saw too much; and this would be the end.

Lancelot were there to be an end, I saw myself—
A sight no other man has ever seen;
the flames that burn beyond himself,
I saw two fires that are to light the world.

ever killed a number of his knights, including two of Gawain's brothers.
Merlin's "two fires" are, of course, the destructive blaze of Camalon,
and two hands to joyous Gond, his country. Gaining roads Arthur into
and the Light of the Grail.

abandoning joyous Gond, and weary and fruitless fighting continues, until

Like all of humanity, Merlin may not exceed the limits of mortal
Lancelot he ordered my case to two brothers without knowing 
not in power or experience without penalty. He may begin a great work, and

Arthur, freed from his duties to Gawain, Lancelot shows Arthur that it is
create in Arthur an example for coming ages; but the finishing is beyond
mockery awaiting him, and he realizes that the war is to exhaust
his powers. Merlin has seen too much of the Light—in his case, the
in France. Later, forever, in a letter from Gawain, Lancelot is accused
of the light of wisdom or intelligence. Vivian is his explicit punishment; and

that Lancelot has had for thirty to ten years, and yet Arthur is right-
so punished, through the dimming of his powers, he has been rendered ins-
with power for the last ten centuries. Merlin, as the received, upon
incompetent to save that which he has created and loved. It is his failure,
Lancelot to forestay his master and remember only that A was once B,
and perhaps his human distinction.

Lance's nearest friend, seeing that only Lancelot can ever, certainly, save

Arthur, Lancelot agrees to what he desires to deem the later.

Arthur and Gawain have their seat.


2. An interesting variation of this theme 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 incompletences 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 Ginevere, and to follow the lonely Glean which the
knights of the Round Table hailed as ultimate truth. His resolution to go
yields to Ginevere's persuasion, however; and Arthur and his knights re-
turn 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 ad-
mit. Lancelot flees, and Ginevere is to be burnt at the stake. Then
the flames are actually licking the faggots, Lancelot returns, rescues
her, killing a number of the knights, including two of Gawain's brothers,
and takes her to Joyous Gard, his castle. Gawain goads Arthur into
attacking Joyous Gard, and weary and fruitless fighting continues, until
Lancelot is ordered by Rome to surrender Ginevere to Arthur. But on re-
turning 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 Gawain, Lancelot is advised
that Ginevere has fled for safety to the Tower, and that Arthur is fight-
ing Mordred for his life and kingdom. Gawain, 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 Mordred have slain each other. The knights are dead or scat-
tered, and the dissolution of Camelot is complete. Lancelot goes to the
convent at Amesbury for one more night of Guinevere, who has become a nun, then turns his face into the twilight and rides into the new world born of his non-undimmed Light. Lancelot, who rode long since, lay upon an unsteady Quest.

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 an attempt of various effects produced on men of the Round Table by the Holy Grail's 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 gaining strength, until now he is spiritually poisoned, so confusing possesses him and out-giving strength. For Lancelot returns to Camelot from the Quest spiritually of it comes to the destruction of tragedy that is to be the destruction of confused, and be caught by the love of the Queen, who thus comes between them and makes a destruction in which Lancelot and Guinevere are the him and the light of the revelation which he is not yet ready to follow with; the knight knows, and doubts the external love, or sustain.

Yet Lancelot was yet not sure well the "dark" love sent Guinevere.

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. Gawain 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 susstain, and so be done with us. 4

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1. Mark Van Doren, CIV., p. 71  
3. Ibid., p. 371.
Yet Guinevere cannot, for her love, send him away; and Lancelot's
resolution weakens. She reproaches him for his changed attitude toward her.
That I am leaving now. 1

Are you the Lancelot who rode, long since
Away from me on that unsteady Quest
Which left no man the same who followed it? 2
There may be time for him to weep.
But he is at a spiritual impasse. He loves her, beyond reason. Yet he
knows that ruin will overtake all of them if he remains longer that he has
And the cry of his tortured conscience and of the half-wild woman spirit is
not seen what he has seen. Says he,
expressed in other words:

...There are no more lies
Left anywhere now for me to tell myself
That I have not already told myself
And overtook.
This is the key-note to Lancelot's failure; that he has seen the Grail,
until now, he is spiritually poisoned. So confusion overcomes him and cut
symbolic "the air," as men may one man wit, Galahad, has; but Lancelot
of it comes the long crescendo of tragedy that is to be the destruction of
it all in its human being. He is yet too young and capable to leave a
all their world—a destruction in which Lancelot and Guinevere are the
comfortable and telling ones. He is yet in his soul and
moving internal forces, and Warded the external one.
unknown are now, for his price of perfect vision and will to follow it
Yet Lancelot does not fear most the "dark," for, says Guinevere,
Is death in this world. This Lancelot knows, for heuzally
There is a Light that you fear more today,
Then all the darkness that has ever been. 3

It is true. Lancelot darts questions the riddle of himself, of the vision
in his mind of this his illusion. Lancelot has seen the sight now
which drives him from the Queen's love, of the Light itself, of Arthur. He
near for his salvation at his advantage. He has, in effect, been blinded
questions the secret of the Court—why they all are there; and who Guinevere
by two lights—the pure grace of the Grail, which renders him out of time
really is, with her fatal fascination for him. He even questions the social
with this world, and the beauty of Guinevere, and the life of Lancelot, and the 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. 374.
3. Ibid., p. 372.
4. Ibid., p. 384.
For, he says... When are they...

Fur, he says... When are they... There is not such time left, he knows. Yet perhaps, he adds ironically, the last years of the dying sheep's cases when he realizes that his there may be time for him to prove basic defect in his charge from devotion to the light to devotion to the "How merry a man may be who sees the Light."

Queen

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-warmed 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

Lancelot, hero,Returned to 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, a practical and a voluntary reason... Do not I find... a pure sense of human experiences answer in the Mother's... Where the Light guided me, but the Queen came, reply, "To me, to you... And then there was no Light..."

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. and hope for Fausco. "Is living false and would not give him peace." Then came, and I did not yield itself to him. Then she came, knowing not what thing she did. And she it was I followed..." fallus: a world has died for you, that a world no live. There is no peace.

So it is that in the cold walls of the monastery Lancelot finds at last "the devil to be free, for, sometimes, she voice, end of Arthur's kingdom and of Camelot." It is the end, too, of his great love, one have come to the world's end, and it is best of confusion. Guinevere voices this finale in her own way with fallus: 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 foundHad I not always hindered you. Forgive me--in the darkness, I could not let you go."

Another lesser interpretation of the light that has confused (or does character make...) is his and Lancelot here is, of course, the light of tragic love, 4 which has blinded in turn, the characters of Lancelot or of his son creation. The light in this is:... It is not good the world at a time of error, in that there need more passion... fit into the individual pattern, life, as well as imagination.

1. Ibid., p. 437.
2. Ibid., p. 439. 447.
3. Ibid., p. 441. 433.
4. The tragedy-love light is also the light of Tristram, q.q. post p. 98.
say the whispering man after Lancelot’s departure. Practicality, and a voluntary resignation of one side of human experience answer in the Mother’s reply, "We who love God alone are safest."

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." Neithier is he to be free, for, continues the Voice,

You have come to the world's end, and it is best to die. You are not free, where the Light falls, death falls; and in the darkness comes the Light. 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. There were no more faces, then. There was nothing but the darkness. "And in the darkness came the Light," it is for him a time of shadows. He was, as once, experienced a "disillusioning fall, a blinding blow."

(6) Five Characterizations. -- In his insistence on the Light as a touchstone for character value and destiny, Robinson has not confined his self to characters of legend or of his own creation. He turns also to the worlds of art, politics, religion and history, to find those personalities who fill into his individual pattern. Life, as well as imagination

1. "Lancelot," p. 447. 2. Ibid., p. 448. 3. Ibid., p. 449. 4. Ibid., p. 449. 5. Ibid. 6. Ibid.
then, presents us with those whose spiritual essence is for Robinson
directly traceable to their super-vision of essentials. Yet often, as
with Shakespeare, that essence is tainted with a unique poison, in that,
having possessed or achieved so much, it is yet by its very humanity in-
hhibited from ideal achievement. 1

Among the historical notables who "see too much" are Rembrandt,
John Brown, St. Paul, Lazarus, Shakespeare. These figures are not pre-
sent 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 in the Amsterdam of
1649, three years after the death of his beloved Saskia, and during his
now "discredited ascendency." He has earned the wrath and indignation,

Of injured Hollander 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
in 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
"gloam" which comes, through darkness, at last, only for his portraits,
for himself, and for a few believers, 4—a gloom which even Saskia, had she

1. It is, of course, the old theme again, played this time on the
characters of historical notables.
3. Ibid., p. 584.
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 dream, he has suffered physically, socially, economically, because his fellow-Dutchman have failed to understand that

...there was no malice
Or grinning evil in a golden shadow
That shall outshine their slight identities
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

Furthermore, he realizes and accepts the fact that, as surely as Solomon and 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 had done from Holland, even "still Holland ears are told of it," 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. 129.

3. Ibid., p. 568.
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...

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

Rembrandt, continues his voice, must "bow" his "elected hand" and whip himself, as it were, from the sky in the city of Amsterdam, from the spirit of bitterness; for his odyssey is that of Johnson himself, the doctrine of forgiveness through entertaining. He realizes that an

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 agitated, except in unofficial preparation They put out first the sun... 3

Furthermore, he realizes and accepts the fact that, as surely as Saskia and

...there was a night to be begun, the old days are gone, too, the law that bids him see now alone likewise

Forbids his light from Holland eyes "till Holland ears are told of it." 4

His artist's conscience tells him that if he cannot accept the present social darkness as a tell inevitably exacted for remaining loyal to his Light, he had better seek the easiest way out in the convenience of an

2. Ibid. 5. Ibid., p. 591. 6. Ibid.
3. Ibid. 7. Ibid., p. 592.
Rembrandt is a typical Robinsonism 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, 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." He realizes that on him "God set the mark of his inscrutable necessity," and that for bearing the mark, some few will pity an old man.

Who took upon himself the work of God, and was cursed." Because he pitied millions.

...There was a work to be begun, a vision.
And when the Voice, that I have heard so long, announced as in a thousand silences...
John Brown
And of preparation, I began, the blunder of death. There is no other way.
Then the old way of war for a new land.
That will not kneel itself, and is tonight.
A stranger to itself..."

But a beginning. It shall have more to say when I am dead." He concludes.
His end is inevitable, he feels, for he has had the Voice, has seen the

1. Ibid., p. 487.
3. Lewis V., Ledoux, op. cit., p. 4.
4. Ibid., p. 488.
5. Ibid., p. 486.
Light, when St. Paul—St. Paul, on the way to Rome, is secretly reading:

Dear Disciple, do not despair. He is in the major file.

See only what their fathers may have seen, or may have said they saw when they saw nothing.

It matters not to him whether history calls him mad, or finds the question of the great light in the sky unsolved. He is going where Change of him unanswerable.

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

...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, he and she
That angry time dis credits and disowns, they say.

He continues, comforting her, to whom he writes, till but mark the beginning of his work. I was the one man mad enough, it seems, to do my work; and now my work is over.

And you, my dear, are not to mourn for me, for I am a universe.

Or for your son, more than a soul should mourn, to be done with evil and with earth.

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 Mars and fire, they are "to plant, and they to plant again," for their own eternal fields.

For men with every virtue but the Vision.

John Brown's Light is the glint 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 unconquered faith, he knows that his death is but a beginning. "I shall have more to say when I am dead," he concludes.
And there (c) St. Paul—St. Paul, 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 spoke to him, and he was told that he was to be released to the kingdom. He set out for Damascus. He wonders whether Caesar will take him. He is told to go to Damascus and see the Rabbi. The voices say, "You have been told by the Lord."

"And if he says, I give myself to make another crown And for the pernicious feast of time and man Well, I have seen too much of time and men To fear the raving or the wrath of either."

Like John Brown, he, too, realises 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 to find in the light and the shadow of the sun. And he says, for the first time in history, the Gentiles have "love and law" together, if so they will. And though Rome may yet hold for all of them a crown of thorns and fire, they are "to plant, and then to plant" 6. They all, he says, "Are on time for time that have left."

2. Ibid., p. 462.
3. Ibid., p. 464.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., p. 465.
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;

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

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.

There is a light of wisdom of faith, and ultimately, of loving the secret of the secret... of the hidden.
Fading behind the 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 gone love,
That measures and is of itself the measure
Of works, and hope and faith... I

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

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
That he should keep for me... "Yes it you, Varus?"
another heroic example of the Robinsonian "failure" who yet succeeds with
ecstasy and grandeur.

(d) Lazarus.—In the group of those who see too much,
Robinson has provided an interesting variation on the "seeing" theme in
that he could have known—his representation of Lazarus 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...

1. Ibid., pp. 470-71.
2. Ibid., p. 471.
4. Ibid., p. 581.
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?" 3

..."I should have wept," he said,
"if I had been the Master..." 5

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..."

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. 830.
2. Ibid., p. 830.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 836.
5. Ibid., p. 834.
It once was only his eyes, and they looked into mine—long into mine, Mary, as if he knew.

"He cannot know that there is worse than death," says Mary. But Lazarus answers, "in the eyes of Christ the futility that life is for the living.

...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.

But Mary is not yet satisfied. She asks him if nothing was all he found where he has been. So 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.

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.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p. 539.
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; 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 reassessment of life in the new Light are an inevitable result.

The usual Robinsonian physical and psychical use of light, where and that's as well, because to walkin' like it: twilight and night emphasize Lazarus' spiritual confusion; is especially evident here. This poem, however, is less clear and obvious, in its light He can't be here, yet once kind of | Shakespeare's Bodies of Death—
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 themes of the effect of the Light on ordinary, limited, earth-bound vision. And though the rest of his life is left to imagine—

1. This too is a favorite theme with Robinson. cf. Matttias, pass
tion, it must perform 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; or taxation—the mystery that is his—"mechanism".

(a) Shakespeare.—In contrast to the oblique vision of Lazarus, with which we are so easy, and at friends, the positive working-out of the symbol of excessive vision is nowhere more apparent than in Robinson's presentation of Shakespeare, through the lense of his fellow-craftsman and admirer, Ben Jonson. Speaking of the conflict of the elements in his genius-friend, Jonson remarks, "Then what is he feels when he remembers, he is the flame of the dust and sweat and ointment of his calling. The dust he leaves behind, the sweat he forgets; the ointment he carries in his blood." King as he is, he can't be king of facts, low drama, and that's as well, because he wouldn't like it; he'd frame a lower rating of men than he has now; and after that would conclude an adhesion or an apology, what they are. He can't be king, not even king of Stratford—be removed, transformed, and ordinary.

Shakespeare's somewhat divine discontent, Ben intimates, is the result of what he must have had even in youth—his eyes, and their way with his heart, and his friends but his fell; foretelling: his "disillusion, old aches and pangs of what's coming." There are no roads left for him, and accordingly, some devils of the book which is a novel little, little book.

1. Implication of this exists in the fact that even Mary and Martha are necessarily alienated from their brother and nothing.  

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-sane serenity that laughs at Fate For being won so easy, and at friends Who laugh at his 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 mock 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 else that keeps us out to Badlam,—
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 "hollow dreams." Again, and this time in the apparent success of the accomplished

He knows how much of what men paint themselves; Would blister in the light of what they are,
He aye how much of what was great now shares
An essence transformed and ordinary;

He knows how at what height low enemies May reach his heart, and high friends let him fall; But what is not even such as he may know In other men, of any, Bedevils him the worst; his lark may sing

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

1. Ibid., p. 23.
2. Ibid., p. 24.
4. Ibid., p. 28.
recalls Shakespeare's saying to him, as the immemorial and timeless worth of material life: all a world where bugs and emperors

Go singularly back to the same dust,

As each in his time and the old, ordered stars.Size Light, which

That sang together, men. will sing the same

Is supreme and, all tomorrows... and hallowing of much of life, has

For Shakespeare, man distrusts time and its possibilities for much more achievement. Where must come a reckoning, he feels, for men. His Light

which shines

The sessions that are now too much his own, the way for him

The ruling inward of a stillled outside,

The churning-out of all those blood-fed lines,

The nights of many schemes and little sleep,  

Those

The full brain hummed hot with too much thinking, various

The vexed heart over-worn with too much aching—

human are through sense vision of the light— which is at once its own

these all are the price of genius, which, from the standpoint of the

world and its own humanity. They are the creatures both of the world of

soul's endeavor, do not yet make for peace. Because of the very weight

that lies, one of their author's imagination. But formal as the

and responsibility of his genius, Shakespeare must live, insists Ben,

all of them, from Martin to Captain Craig, from Sir Paul to Rembrandt,

in "a phantom world before became and found wanting."

are shaming 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 moment, or the moral failure of the artist.

genius, in another kind of failure: the strength which is its own weakness:

the philosopher, or the editor, who makes hastily, losing the point,

another example of the fact that to no man, being man, is perfection

to be sure, but maintaining the integrity of his sincerest ideals of

vouchsafed. Having so much, by virtue of the insight which is his,

value. So such 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

empre. That the fall is the same for soul of life through a limitation

of inspite. Ibid., p. 39. Rest and, as that. Ibid., p. 31.

little." Sometimes this group, according to Johnson's emphasis,
him smile, knowing as he bitterly does the transitory and tinsel worth in whom the longer, a greater variety in degrees and types of failure of material things.

He too then, ultimately falls of the ideal. For his Light, which
like Nottingham, salon atmosphere, lighted by the lamp, since failure
is supreme awareness of the tragedy and hollowness of much of life, has
in the result of partial or disinterested vision, it is conventional again,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
himself. Perhaps has recently been made by the poet of the
beatniks cycle. Since the beatnik poems exist in a complementary re-
 trovaille, these are some representative figures who fall in their various
human ways through excess vision of the Light—which is at once its own
on only source and in the special major definition of the light as the
reward and its own penalty. They are the creatures of the world of
trivial light, the pochoirs. Two may incisively exist; one of the two
reality and of their author's imagination, but factual or fictitious,
third of the beatnik cycle, and so forth are, indeed, yet others,
all of them, from Merlin to Captain Craig, from St. Paul to Rembrandt;
and 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
social or of the social light poem. In each, the Light
value, so much as the latter must belong to the kingdom of the Light.
has a kind of consciousness quality, which to the extreme relatively only
in the ironic conception that the Light is not the Light is nevertheless
of sincerest. The 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 fall in the same two aspects of life through a limitation
of insight or vision; those who, in their author would state it, "see too
little" of the Light. Since this group, according to Robinson's emphasis,
Robinson's narrative of mortality.
is such 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, Euan Bartholomew, 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, all 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, 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. For Tristram, too, is cast in the time and the heroic tradition of the world of Merlin and Lancelot, and in plot the poem closely echoes the triangular human relationship of the other two poems.

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 very few moments where it comes into view. Nevertheless, it has a kind of subterranean quality, coming to the surface obviously only in the tragic crescendo of the denouement. Yet the Light is nevertheless essential to the inner power of the work. It is the failure to see the Light that becomes the result of the joint failure to comprehend and admit the implications of its particular situation, and of its own impassioned

2. This same relationship is a recurrent basis for many of Robinson’s narratives of personality.
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 poten-
tialities 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.

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 impartially,
He had achieved all this and might do more,
No doubt, if given the time. Whence 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.

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, outstanding the light of their loves.

2. Ibid., p. 604.
But ...a melancholy warning answered by Tristan’s ‘devoir’.

For all who dim their wits obliquely,

more and more, in his passion, Tristan draws his sword on the

...a ghostly ship

king, who thought

leaving away to Cornwall—silently. All in vain and of death

from Ireland, with himself on board and one

should be seen

That with her eyes told him intolerably to the insane

How little of his blind self a crowded youth,

trust and patience,

With a slight error—blamed and pleasure—flawed.

Cheerless words had made him see till on that silent voyage

So that there was no more to see than faith betrayed by

Tristan

Or life disowned...'

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

When Isolt joins him, there is further revelation of their now-

light of Tristan has an immediate premonition that he will not return.

Joint failure. She questions the fate that battles and destroys them, and

Of course he does not. There is a punctuation interval at Joyce’s Card

he answers her in words that reveal her defection also,

where Isolt of Ireland has been able to join Tristan, through Guinevere’s

...Your pride would not

visit to Cornwall had heeded my blindness; then, even had you prayed

For God to let you speak...'

tried passion, or would the voices that are erroneously open

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

...Tristan, Tristan,

speak so, saying,

we are those blind-folded words I have last

because a blind king sought of a blindisher

It was our curse that you were not to see

Until you saw too late...'

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

attired in their love, as outer what merits them. Love, they agree, is

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

for them the only reality. So, through woe and well, their too-brief

Oh God, if only one of us had spoken

What there was then that time...

If Tristan had but spoken, she muses, so kings nor crowns could have

outshone the light of their love.

1. "Tristan," p. 609. See also 2. Ibid., p. 614. Isolt to see

3. Ibid., p. 612. 4. Ibid., p. 614.

5. Ibid., p. 616. 6. Ibid., p. 522.
Tristram. But their rendezvous is discovered by Tristram's "lizard-like 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 and peace of Isolt of the White Hands, whom he later marries. But 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 repulsive interval at Joyous Gard,

... I shall know day from night 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 to ade... Tristram, Tristram, just sent to Where are those blind-fold years that we have lost, counseled Because a blind king bought of a blind father 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

Tristram with hope the night of time between 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 the White Hands of Arthur, for the two and Isolt 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 not seen before. There Mark was always attending her "in almost visible 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

1. Ibid., p. 680.
Tristram, so long as he himself does not have to face him. Mark also realises 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, that 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. With the light— the light of tragic love, which is deadly. 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 darkness! Inability to "see"

That I am never to know, by day or night;

All which is one more weary thing to learn,

Always too late..."

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 the shadow of ordnary dream of the light, and become in tragic consequences. Once Tristram had seen,

Exploring it, the light of a far wisdom

Tingling with hope the night of time between.

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 dam 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." 1

1. Ibid., p. 722.

2. Ibid., p. 666.

3. Ibid., p. 647.
the "sick, in somany of the Robinson poems, tragedy hinges on "dimness of vision". That image, or the transference of the light pictured 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 Pandalot, 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 hero 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 humbleness as a battle going on within us.

Avon and Cavender.—It is convenient now to consider two characters who may be analyzed 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.

Avon I (2) Avon.—Avon 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." Gradually

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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.

From January till June, Avon endures the hated presence; all the while, he says, 'once in London, there is a silent and sinister chance of the battle going on within me, wherever he is. 2 Of hate that fought remorse... Never to win...never to win but once, And having won, to lose disastrously, the victor And as it was to prove, interminably. 3

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, 4...

I still see him going on. I saw there once, 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... 5

For what was done. He was the friend of Prometheus, and ever mankind.

1. Ibid., p. 563. 3. Ibid., p. 564.
2. Ibid., p. 563. 4. Ibid., p. 566.
The next day, the boy goes home. There is nothing for Aron to
Calling to set the light. There was a light
utter but apology, and that he cannot, for hate is still dominant in
him. He is given his chance by the other, who goes at him with venge-
ance and "a cold sorrow" in his eyes, and who promises that if Aron
remains silent, he will know where he is until he dies. So, for twenty
years, Aron has "hovered among shadows and regrets," and "driven his
wheel too fast." To his hate and remorse has been added the burden
Reminding—only night, that's: east for shadows,
of fear—three diseases for which, he says, there is "no specific."

The "In Sometimes Aron hears of his erstwhile companion. He is out of
Aron's life, yet never quite out of it. For once a year, on Aron's
birthday, comes an anonymous card bearing the other's last words to him.
As if it were not real, and he were not
Once in Rome, and once in London, there is a silent and sinister chance
passing of the two. But Aron's doom is to see him, wherever he is. A
brief respite comes when the name of Aron's pursuing fate is listed among
the victims of the Titanic disaster. Later, Aron is invited to visit a
friend at the latter's Maine cabin; and for a time nature soothes his
lacerated spirit. Mournful glances of an uplifted arm,
are a commonplace of nature...

But one evening he is left alone. As he watches the sunset over
a state of reflection, he is found by his friend, one on the
the lake, he becomes aware of "hidden presences,"
tell his listener, he is to have another birthday on the mor-
That soon, no matter how many of them there were,
now's twenty-fourth is, in reality of his death is listed.
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. 687. 2. Ibid., p. 688. 3. Ibid., p. 682. 4. Ibid., p. 685.
All hurled into clusters in the dark.
Calling to God for light. There was a light
Coming for them, but there was none for me.

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.

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 "lake-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... 3
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 shadow glimpse of an uplifted arm.
And a moon-flush of metal... 3

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

Consider, too, about a psychological-precognition on Rossetti's
Avon's tomorrow never comes. The cause of his death is listed as "a
lapse for Heliodor's "Dark House"--a lapse of conscience
nightmare and an anemia." But, says his physician;

1. Ibid., p. 566. 4. Ibid., p. 569.
2. Ibid., p. 569. 5. Ibid., p. 571.
He died, you know, because he was afraid—
And he had been afraid for a long time.

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 backbone; the ability to see both of them with a clear 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 Cavender 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 least 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” symbolises his travail of conscience and guilty remorse for the murder of his wife, Laramie, twelve years

1. Ibid., p. 575.
before, there is within him "a darker night... that others not himself were not to know." Once, he remembers, there was a light; perhaps, the light of his early love for Laramee.

But now there must be no light in that house where no man went... "that I may see no more He sits in a chair, still standing where it used to stand, and a cold ray of moonlight intensifies the barren truth that is Laramee's at last. in Goramore's house, for she has called him back, through his constant thoughts of her, his And gone that he has not so much as opened, doubts, his fear, his anguish now to learn the answer to one question: was Laramee really unfaithful to him? Had he any excuse for the insane jealousy which had precipitated her murder? conjured up by his own conscience. in his brooding he sees the figure of Laramee taking shape in "a sense of unseen light not moonlight." When he looks up fearfully, there was someone in her eyes; she sits before him, apparently unchanged by the twelve terrible years that lie between them. She asks her answer, startled by "a composure more disconcerting than patience born of hate,", quite without mercy now, but also without hate; Laramee reminds him of his early pledges of faith and of his later neglect. for you

do not be too yourself with nature's eye.

Hearts are dark places. And if they were not, There might be too 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 veil, kid.

For you have eyes only to see the way out of it. That you are keeping, and not much of that.

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 A shepherd to attend you...

suspicion, which

"He is not the only one of Cavender's inadequacies he has lacked the capacity to handle. He has lacked faith in another phase of his nature that you are to learn of him: A best way to endure it is to the end. In Cavender's house,

As in the Lord's house, there are many mansions, And come that he has not so much as opened, Having so much to learn...

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 daily, and for the first time, that

...He might, perhaps, have seen that there was no evil in her eyes that was not first in his...

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 know 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 doubt and fear, 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.
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...

Here are two implications of Cavender's inadequacies; he has lacked

Out of this coming together of the past and the present, arises

the capacity to know the truth about his own nature; he has lacked

Cavender's human tragedy. He has been a man of "busy work and peace,"

faith in others, symbolized by Laramie. The Light for Cavender, would

a matter of his world; but there was wistfulness and ecstasy in his "closed

have been the double gleam of self-knowledge and faith, both of which

abundance." For with all of his positive traits, he has been guilty

he has been without.

of "salvation." He has lacked looking to that out beyond Laramie.

Cavender now questions God, Purpose, Law. He is hopeless of

he must fly from her or on the "dark slope" of his supererogation.

a way out. But Laramie insists she has "some drops of mercy" for him.

in his anguish, he longs to her to lead him out of his torment.

Perhaps he will not always suffer. Still, for the present, his lack

but she cannot. For his life was a "shining without light to guide

of faith remains, and remains as the basis for his ruin. Says she,

him." Then Laramie says:

If you had weighed your faith more carefully,

the thing, long a subject of contention.

You might have saved your house...

Each knowledge can serve to his only in depth, where, says she, he "say

She insists that he has seen her in a "twisted mirror," which once he

he learned all or nothing. But she says positively

his doubts in darkness. But now, with the wisdom of the dead, Laramie

knows that

and you might gain knowledge. She says of men,

right across the road. Why must "worse and worse"

...we must learn

Of our defects and doubts, however they hurt.

Love is not vengeance, though it may be death.

Beyond this, the thinking for him for his ledger was always

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. 978. 3. Ibid., p. 978.
2. Ibid., p. 978. 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
Gavender'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.
yet, Dully, he answers her.

...I took my dose
With ignorance for courage; fearing nothing
And knowing nothing...

Again he asks his reiterated question. But she can offer only the slightest 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 sun,
And waited for the light, careless of all
Unanswered questions that have haunted them.

...at least there was light out
...Others have not,
Preferring a black hazard of escape,
With no especial certainty of release
Thereafter for themselves..."

He was too "hesitant", she says, 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.

Then rising like "false 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 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., p. 1000.  
2. Ibid., p. 998.  
3. Ibid., p. 1001.  
4. Ibid., p. 1003.
in still time for him to think, and think he must. No penalty, impossible

had such been... 1:0 in the other...
But what your laws and purposes ordain,

He is not afraid to die; but he is afraid to live. There are, however,
3:0 at least against the background of his psychical. Yet...

...There may be still
it is wider
some riches hidden there; and, even for you,

characters...might throw his crown away, and in his madness all, and who

Now know what he had done till all was done,
are destroyed; and finally they are brought to feel the night; or those

With this final ironic gleam of hope, Laramie disappears. Cavender realizes
who have been immediately, or too late. Somewhere is an "establishment at
least there is this way out,

frustration," presented through the medium of a dream that causes to
...

Fargo, who was at least the lie within him, but out, and who
And tell men what he was. He could do that
he could do anything now but go again.

He was alone; they knew him. Now, in a darker house than any light

where he did not live. He was alone.

And into that house of his where no man went,

There where his hope had come with him so far

There where he lived. Yet there was light; for there

To find an answer, there was light enough of light:
To make him see that he was there again

Where men should find him, and the laws of men, the answer
Along with older laws and purposes,

To face the necessity to unite. He was not sorry for that; he had never;

And he was not afraid. He was afraid

only a tragic dream, or, at the present

destroyed courage; by the time they were in the firing area.

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, faithful love. Laramie's "too, has not been without fault;

be set to great claim above the stain for her failure, bound up with his, has been that of excessive vanity.

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1. Ibid., p. 1006. Mental note. 2. Ibid., p. 1007.
3. Ibid., sec. 64. M. R., May 1, 1896.
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 a heterogeneous world of neither light nor darkness; a world cut off from the influence of time; a world of place still larger that once became you, in its despair 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 memory of the night, he hears the voice of Amaranth, which once Fargo, who at thirty-five had destroyed all his pictures by fire, and who was, not by reason of any natural passion, art, now, ten years later, revisits his dream the half-world of pseudo-

the voice asks his way he has found艺术家. 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, 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 the blinding eye, or the Creator of Fargo alone has survived, because he "has stripped himself of all pretensions."

Before he should be dead...

But now, dreaming, Vargo 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 deep 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...

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
headed, and so escaped from unreality. Not 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.

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

...Freedom is mostly dreams,
By friend. As for your coming and your going,
I should not care—if it were not my doom
The innocent, and when disregarded or feared,
To save, and when distrusted or feared,
To quench or to destroy...

3. Ibid., p. 1313
4. Ibid., p. 1316
5. Ibid., p. 1316
Nevertheless, Fargo must now follow Amaranth on a journey through this land of many graves. It is, says Amaranth, just that, for

like yours —

... 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...

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.

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,
And they in black beard and red shirt,
Will somehow live...

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
All of them, for life in the wrong world, where I made music,
And make it still. It is not necessary,
But habit that has outlived revolution
May pipe on to the end.

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

which, he says,

This sounds like nothing now,
But once it sounded as if God had made it.

The impotent themes with which Evensong consistently leads his conver-
sations are required a certain amount of attention to retain, and the

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1. Ibid., p. 1317. 8. Ibid., p. 1319.
2. Ibid., p. 1318. 9. Ibid., p. 1320.
3. Ibid.
tion are a recurring symbol of the futility of his whole existence. His
tragedy Evensong introduces his companions, Pigg, a lawyer, "whose eyes,
like yours and mine, see backwards": 1 Dr. Styx, who might have been "a
silversmith or a ventriloquist;" the Reverend Pascall Flax, who became a
changeling, where Flax is seen disillusioned clergy, philosophers,
moralists; because he liked to talk, and to be seen by others of vested
lives. They saw nothing that he could believe, or they visited the
And one day said no more... 2
huses of Klaat and Deeka Volckman, "who writes, and writes, and writes." 3
Also, there is Pink, the poet, who
Evensong introduces Amaranth as "Pink:
...cuts and sets his words
With an exotic skill so scintillating
That no two proselytes who worship together
Are mystified in the same way, exactly, 5 who
believe we are mistaken and hear nothing
And there is Atlas, a giant with black beard and red shirt,
Amaranth then, who was "king everywhere" — a ruling-clans, incomparable
before he was a painter. Now he paints
croup-aster. Because he must; which is, it seems, the reason, which
Why there are painters, poets, or musicians. 4
who calls "true life." They move to leave, Evensong morning the novel
All of them, says Evensong, except Pink and Atlas, have
not in any one of their lives, or the few hours. But he will not find his
...encountered Amaranth face to face
visors. She and eye to eye; and so we are, you see us.
We are the reconciled initiates,
who know that we are nothing in sens' eyes,
That we set out to be—and should have been,
be said, "Had we seen better." We see better now. 5
not gray flakes of
dust; — Pink is "exact, 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

2. Ibid., p. 1321.
3. Ibid., p. 1322.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
comprises, and looks at him. 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 Amananth 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."

Evansong introduces Amananth 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,
But the false voice of doubt, common to men.

Amananth 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. Evansong warning the novelist not to see too far before or too far behind. But she will not heed his advice. She will look into Amananth's eyes. When she staggeres away from what she finds there, Amananth picks up one of her volumes. "Listen!" he said, "and smile." But where were leaves are now but grey flakes of dust; and Watchman herself vanishes in a thin scream, and "a little sound of lighter dust" which Evansong gently puts into an envelope and seals, adding her epiphon:

### Endnotes:

2. Ibid., p. 1354.  
3. Ibid., p. 1379.
There was no resignation born within her.

"Truth, coming first as an uncertainty,
Would have said death to her, and would have killed her
Slowly..."

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."  

Amaranth and Fargo go on; they visit successively a graveyard,
then an evilly-lighted wharf, where Ipswitch, a failed 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 obsessed by death, and frenzied against time," departs, to sink
beneath the black water." SAYS AMARANTH, "There is no way out of here
alive, like that."  

The studio of Atlas is next. Atlas is rough of tongue and strong
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 discuss, each of them—musician, doctor,
lawyer, clergyman,—on their respective failures in life. Says Evensong, 
of Atlas, "each of them there, there is a great fertility; though some by 
individually Color with him, when he discovered it this, and through the 

**********

fact that, some are drunkness—which he conceived.
As now, and revolution.
It is... like some others, 
Assured of more than they possessed, he flung 
but having some part to annihilate for ever, knows, and 
these ancient superfluities of line
knew that all of his was an obstacle between his arms, for wrong. 
And his desire, there was a blast of color, 
is sure,—in vain hid his farewell.
Until he knew the eyes of Amaranth, 

To himself, says Evensong, Amaranth had given the choice between "resigna-
tion or destruction," having found him "without incentive and without 
For once who see too late. Two heard my voice.
invention." Figs, the lawyer, had stilled his "proper flame" with 
many have heard it, and have only covered 
"indivisible and indecision," having followed others, because he saw them 
more constantly with their visions; 
and under such an insubstantial armour 
Against the slow rest of dissipations.
And without asking whether or not the fuel fail, 
in me was once to make their sort of fire 
And light...

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 nullity, 
With what we buried when we buried Atlas.

So stay with me; and you are wiser now.

Flex, 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 
once effective reality.

him, and now words, for Flax, have little meaning, and no truth, is sense. In each of them than, there is a great futility, though come by individually through a different spiritual deficiency, and through the fact that, for all, truth come too late, until it is too late for positive. It is time now for Fargo himself to look into Amaranth's eyes; but having once heard his voice, he has nothing to fear. He looks, and finds that all except Swansong and Amaranth have disappeared. Now Fargo is sure—and free to return to his own world. Amaranth bids him farewell, signet: futility...Remember all this.

As one who may not measure what he does
Here more than fate may, If it were possible, panicked worlds
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,
for the great
Many have heard it, and have only covered living. The
Their fears and indecisions and misgivings
All of it
More resolutely with their vanities;
And under such an unsubstantial armour
The Light was against the slow rust of discovery rising, somehow, the
Must choose rather to strive and starve and fall,

power of time, And be forgotten...a sense of the value and nobility of

...To a few
survive in a surpass not in vain; they fly from here and, leaving them,
As you did, and I see no more of them

For they know the peace of reason. So a few
I show myself; but only the resigned
Of art not art:
And reconciled will own me as a friend, and
The Man
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 tragedy of inability
The flower...that never...fades...

A story of Flax and in another, the incomprehensible slit of the
There is a great light, and Fargo awakes with joy into the world of his conscious sense of words. The poet illustrating that man failure through own effective reality.

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, Higg, Flax, Eternity. 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, this failure initiated by man storm and fall, the Light would have brought to Eternity, 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.

(6) 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. 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 that a failure through absence of the Light, but failure through betrayal of the Light once

actually possessed.

Fernando Nash is a musician. He has known since boyhood that he
one other thing, I should have seen done then
has but to wait, patiently, and fortified by the knowledge of his genius,
must to be secure... 1
to hear the music of his symphony "blown down by choral horns out of a
but his composition has contained within it a still impatience, a lack of
star." But he has dissipated his talent and become the victim of impatience,
spiritual shrinking, which has ruined even his great gift. For twenty
sensuality, and doubt. At forty-six, he is discovered by the narrator,
years he has been dead—
beating a Salvation Army drum on Broadway, resigned to defeat and waiting
for all these years while he had craved victory
to die. Now he is but "the ruin of a potential world-shaker," whose
than earth gives even to giants who are in live
... former dominance and authority still for me
had now disintegrated, lapsed, and shranken,
so an inferior mystery that had yet
The presence of defeat...
Or as Fernando might have said
He had always been

A young man, Nash was sitting in his
This failed initiate who had seen and felt
Meanwhile the living fire that moral doors
in a dusty box... For most of us held hidden... 3
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
sees no music either any less futile than his; he at least, as a drum-
ing evangelist, makes a music "heard all up and down Broadway."

...Mines are the drums of life—

After those other drums. I had it—ones,.
many darkened stages of his life, from his first boyish initiations of
But that was long ago. Now for years, Fernando Nash has inhabited his
a talent, up to the present moment. Why, he rationalizes, could he not
own dark world—a world whose wreckage came crashing down upon him, because
he was unable. The musical—chronic—Sunday after, Fernando Nash's world,
he had lacked basic qualities for the flowering of his talent. He had

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" for some time, he tells him.

One other thing, I should have gone down then

"... only upon my knees, for strength... I who believed Myself to be secure..."

A year before that a small accident occurred.

But his stubborn egotism has combined with a wild impatience, a lack of 

And incomparably great into his 

spiritual discipline, which has ruined even his great gift. For twenty 

years he has been lost,—

Therefore he'll not find it.

So he has fallen ...

For all those years while he had crushed unripe "devil-women":

The grapes of heaven to make a wilder wine

he has become

Than earth gives even to giants who are to live literally alive.

And still be giants... It may be well for men

his, only few shall have the grapes of heaven

to crush. The grapes of heaven are golden grapes—

And golden grapes are the worst dregs of all—

Or so Fernando绿地 would have said.

A year before...

A year before, on the eve of his forty-fifth birthday, Nash was

sitting in his baren 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 inscrutable Titan at a worm,

That once in adolescent insolence

would have believed himself another Titan.

Sick with futility, and recognizing now in himself the cause of his own

will tell you something, but if you listen again

ruin, he confronts his blurred face in a filmy mirror. He reviews the

in last within you that you may destroy.

weary, darkened days of his life, from his first boyhood intimations of

and show at the same time a reverence

talent, up to the present moment. Why, he reiterates, could he not

have waited? Five words—"Symphony Number Three. Fernando Nash"—would,
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 crept into it, because he was in bed, and made the miracle in it that was yours to float who found it—wherefore he'll not find it, some of seventy acts which perform for him the first act in his drama. He has followed the drumming devils of his doubt, and the "devil-women"; what he has become the creature of lust and drunkenness. Now he bitterly asks himself:

In a dark and dreary place, which at length broke horribly into noise and unseemly laughter, he rose above the crowning of the dome; and the sound of his soul, which was before the creation of the dome;

What do you think you are—"one of God's jokes?"
You slunk away from him, still adequate, but free;
For his immortal service, and you failed him;
And you knew what was your work. You sank, and
You damned yourself while you were still alive,
And at length vanished, leaving him in a cold sweat. For the next week he had no birthright, "saved away in fettered sloth," has vanished. He knows at last. He takes himself. Meanwhile he still enforces the hour of hour and it. Yet he is not "crazy" enough, or "solid" enough to kill himself out of desperation. Then how he is in awe of right. But there is, he reasons, another way. It is:

A lesser and a more monotonous one,
Yet one that has no slight ascendency
Over the rest; for if you starve yourself to death
Maybe the God you've so industriously offended in most ways accessible
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 save the same time a revenging
That's in you somewhere still..."
goes down the stairs for a last ironic debauch. Half-way down, he hears
before the night comes, and would not last long—
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,
wanting how he got there. A horrible fantasy appears to him, in the
nine of seventy rats which perform for him the first rat symphony. The
music forces along

to a dark and surging climax, which at length
Broke horribly into coarse and unclean laughter
That rose above the growling of the damned;
And through it all there were those drums of death!
Which always had been haunting him from childhood.

There is in his now
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

another coming wonder of surprise,
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 could not enter them—
Fearful of what was not there to be found
Should he go there to see...

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... and blinded him;
There would be recognition for a moment.

Motionless and weak, he lies upon his bed, trying to persuade himself

1. Ibid., p. 940.
2. Ibid., p. 942.
3. Ibid., p. 944.
That this new clarity was the light that 
Before the night comes, and would not last long—

For now his wise are clear again, he confesses

For the first time in his life, he knows a calm "to the confusions that
That after passion, arrogance, and ambition

There is in his novels

Fugaciously contemplating going out for good, he hears his drums of death

It would be

1. Ibid.
2. Ibid., p. 933
3. Ibid., p. 934
4. Ibid., p. 944
5. Ibid., p. 953.
6. Ibid., p. 953.
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.

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 and cynical beatings of his own drum, 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 knew that
his volition
All he had known and had not waited for was his; and having it, he could not wait now.

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—

It would be too bitter, were it not that out of this rain 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

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1. Ibid., p. 947.
2. Ibid., p. 952.
3. Ibid., p. 953.
It is of little importance that Nash lives but a short time after
of love and sorrow; he must find his path to salvation along a nature-
the human and artistic resurrection. The significant death was the
ly obvious way through one of the very types that had once helped
devastation and defeat of his genius; the tragedy of
crave him to death...
...an inviolable distinction

Thus, that was to break and vanish only in fire.

... endangered here in 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. 956. Alix Barr, Robert. Ibid., p. 956. his, usually,
2. Ibid., p. 956. In so far as he represents nothing, in being...
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 drum,” with a new 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—through 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—through the man of the very type that had once helped drive him to despair—of a ‘dead negation that could not lift him up.’

Out of this poem is no greater personal tragedy than that of one who has once possessed the spark of divinity and extinguished it wilfully and conscienciously. 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 not even a ghost that haunted him...

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 fall forever, or to fall 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 strained, 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.

Gabriel (6) Roman Bartholow. -- Roman Bartholow 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. Former loves. She has no faith in any such restoration; although "In the morning light of a new spring" Bartholow joys in his spiritual rest from out a "dead negation that would not let him die," 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 Bertrille, an eccentric and coquettish little Fisherman, has raised the veil and given Bartholow eyes. He has lifted

his out of a "drowning fear and hopelessness," when

When knotted with an intermittent flame
...Hope was a lost word and happiness
Not even a ghost that haunted him...He could...

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 Bartholomew'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 begat 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, not 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 smouldered with a darker fire behind
Which kindled with an intermittent flame
Along alone in haunted gloom, a woful spirit of not fantastic interest.

A nameless light wherein but feet could look
Song without flinching—Bartholomew being one
Who could...1

And yet

It was in his eyes

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

Penne-Reven 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 "inter-
mittent." And because of the brighter light that he has given Roman, the
latter cannot see into the dimmest crevices of Penne-Reven'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 Unraville, Greek and Latin scholar and fisherman,
of face

Socratic, unforgettable, grotesque,
incrutable, and alone...²

Out of his wisdom of ac tolerance for the ways of human nature, and out
of the absorbed wisdom of his beloved classics, Unraville remains a con-
stant factor to comfort Roman in his coming distress.

Unraville is sure of the eternal verities; but not as Penne-Reven
nor Gabrielle. Says Penne-Reven, "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 Penne-Reven. For coming to her, disillusioned, lonely, "proving
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. ² Ibid., p. 764.
² Ibid., p. 736. ³ Ibid., p. 741.
And if I read more by the light of it
Then 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.

In a climactic moment, Penn-Reven 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." He has, he says, found in her "all that he sought past hope of any finding." But her love is not for him, any more than the wisps which he vaguely surmises can truly be his. He has performed no miracles in thus resurrecting her.

Roman, he says,

There is a field for them, or their appearance,
Though I have never gazed 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 tests,
Our living thirst will have a living drink—
Dilute it or offend it as we may
With brazen draughts of cory consequence
Mingled with reason..."

But Gabrielle is beautiful, hard, unappreciative, with a necessity for admiration and a "final 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,

2. Ibid., p. 778.
3. Ibid., p. 779.
4. Ibid., p. 781.
which has full, if she had any, had not been born to see; and he had suffered hard. She knew all that, but she knew nothing else. And if a man had suffered much to see, had not a woman to humanity, suffered as much not seeing?

So Gabrielle is paying now for "comfort without love," in the realization of her wasted life. She is not one to flout the good of all your services for

Her desolation is at once apparent to Bartholow when he returns from his walk. Inarticularly, she conveys that all is over between them; the pain of Bartholow's house is tragic, but it is a necessary tragic, and suddenly and furiously, Bartholow knows Penn-Raven in a new guise, dressed which once more, says "Penn-Raven," a very wise Bartholow, with 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, your house is to be free, the need of truth 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. Nor tastes of it, and is not really starved, 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,...3

So Gabrielle leaves Roman, to go to her room, and later, to seek oblivion in the nearby river. Roman, 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 saddened 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 Bartholomew 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
but the greatest
That soon you are to see, and are to give,
When really you conceive yourself alive." 1

The ruin of Bartholomew's house is tragic, but it is a necessary tragedy
now, a vision for the truth.

"Your doom is to be free. The seed of truth
was 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
but not the truth perceived and she...She is not either yours or mine.

Penn-Haven 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.

So Penn-Haven 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-Haven 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

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2. Ibid., p. 325.
has learned.

Here, as in "Seaver's House," "The Glory of the Nightingales," "Matthias at the Door," "Salifer," 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."

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 Gabriela, are destined never to see truth; and for these the incomplete answer is death. Some, like Penn-Reven, have periodic flashes of intuition or wisdom, but these are not constant enough glances to be dependable guides for action. Roman Bartholomew 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. Of the four characters, only Untravilla 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 sinner among books"; his wisdom is pared down, to become an attenuated suggestion of all it might have been had Untravilla lived less remotely in his world.

Roman Bartholomew represents another excursion into the world of

1. Floyd Stovall, op. cit., pp. 22-23.

2. Roman is a blood brother to Matthias, who also, out of complacency, through despair and tragedy, emerges to a purposeful existence. Cf. post. 9.144

3. Floyd Stovall, op. cit., p. 10.
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.

Cover I. (7) Talifer. — In the poem "Talifer," Robinson has taken "his sabbatical year in the land of comedy." 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." In this respect, "Talifer," differs in its outcome from Roman Bartholo, or Cavender's House, or Lancelot or Tristram.

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 prolific, 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 "servants of time," her heart, money from Talifer and moves to 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 new 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...


² Ibid., p. 1267.
He admits as much to Althea, and his path home is cloathed in a new glory
and warmth that it had not held an hour before.

Returning home, he finds Karen asleep. He contemplates

\[ ... that seeming heaven-born sheath \]
\[ Of ice and intellect and indifference, \]
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:

\[ \ldots You never wanted him; \]
\[ You only wanted what Althea wanted. \]

\[ \ldots Althea—she stole him, as you might steal priests and bishops \]
\[ If you set out. You are the devil, Karen; \]
\[ And you must not go back to Talifer. \]

\[ \ldots for her. Nothing of yours \]
\[ That you're not wearing on your body and bones \]
\[ Is left... \]

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

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1. Ibid., p. 1279.
2. Ibid., p. 1287.
3. Ibid., p. 1388.
the plan, and vanishes from the problem she has helped create; vanishes with no penalty such to herself, if one may judge from a final reference to her as being in Oxford, happy with "a far-lined assignation with the past." Talifer, two years later, appears as the proud pater familias, surrounded by Althen, his wife, Dr. Quick, his mentor and practical guide, and his squirming young namesake, Samuel Talifer, Junior.

There is such sheer cleverness and humor 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, still 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 not have killed Karen, as Cavender did Laramie, though for a different reason. Althen—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 usually character, might have foreseen events, as did Unfraville, 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.
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, 
the wisdom ...will be notable, and will be observed. And envied, and will not escape, not wholly, 
ultimate 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 Deaconlot, for instance, who saw a light which
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 recall from Talifer—these brought about his ultimate 'achievement,' which amounts to the sum exactly of an apparently successful re-marriage.

So Talifer, like his fellow, 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.

more, (6) 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.” Matthias is one of Robinson’s most clearly conceived characters. It is as though in dealing with this one-time arch against 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 block rock which is, says Garth, interested in that rock, where two pillars stand “carved out of solid night...with narrowing sight between them.” He proposes that they go down...dark and large and heavy enough to the rock, then go on at last, still on stone and knoll.

Then there is Matthias’ house, and inside it is Natalie, his wife, in whom he manifests, when it pleases him, a pliant, possessive interest. As they remain, Garth continues to describe his friend.

Matthias, in his complacency, feels that he has done well.

As he sits harmlessly contemplating his possessions, Garth arrives. Garth is not old, but he is bent beneath “the weight of more than time.” He is not indifferently alive, for he has been too much.

He has seen, for example, enough to be able to read Matthias accurately—and not always to the latter’s comfort. Matthia, says Garth, may tell

2. Ibid., p. 1082.
4. Ibid.
the truth as nearly as a man may come to telling it without knowing it.\textsuperscript{1}

Here is a key to Matthias' character significant for tragedy. Furthermore, says Garth, men would say Matthias "was a man to emulate." He would not thwart their little pursuits——

in the dark

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 unavised, or to hide unseen;
Must abide Garth's actions,
Or to be elobed and anonymous
In a known multitude...\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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,
Crested you so wrapped in rectitude
That even your eyes are filled a little with it.
Like a benignant sort of catamant,
It spares your vision many distances.\textsuperscript{4}
That you have not explored...

As Garth proceeds, Garth's way out, saying, "I shall not go until A little later, as they gaze at the rock, Garth says,
my name is called." Yet he is less self-righteous than Matthias, who

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{1} Ibid., p. 1082.
  \item \textsuperscript{2} Ibid., p. 1083.
  \item \textsuperscript{3} Ibid., p. 1084.
  \item \textsuperscript{4} Ibid., p. 1085.
\end{itemize}
...Do you see it?
only a dark hole in a dark rock.
If you see only that, you will see more,
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, saying, "I have lived there." 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,

...I was friendly,
But I was not his guardian or torch-bearer,
My own torch was as many as I could carry.
And tried and kept alive...

...But I was not his guardian or torch-bearer,
My own torch was as many as I could carry.

holt.

When I see folly that has passed its wings
Hating itself because it cannot fly,
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. 1036.
2. Ibid., p. 1036.
Accomplishment and honor are not the same. 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.

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...

But Garth, 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 what the dogs are on the watch, or what they are waiting for.

As to Garth, "dying was his career." Natalie is secretly sympathetic to Garth, having a futility something like his "to nourish and nonchalant." 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. 1096.
2. Ibid., p. 1095.
3. Ibid., p. 1102.
4. Ibid., p. 1096.
that they should have married, in spite of Matthias' heroic deed.

Natalie feels that she should tell Matthias how things are. Black rocks,
a sharp pity ...There isn't so much to tell...

More than to say we are three fools together,

She is in a crumbling foolish human house,
The strain is writing,
Its story on 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.

She 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!

Matthias is But what if many a man like him should learn

Natalie with Sometimes 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?

with sure. Nothing, however, can be done to rectify the mistake. Timber-
lake is bound in honor to Matthias, though the fault is 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. Save

Timberlake, weak, at least ostensibly, sitting alone on a sister Sun-
day afternoon...Half the grief,

relate message of the dead lovers; he
Of living is our not seeing what's not to be
Death his fall. Before we see too well...3

pride. With pride, patience,
and "high" That might Matthias reveals that he has seen and heard them

both in the same, though he and Natalie will not separate, his faith in

the accident of helpless螺丝,
hers is broken. Now Natalie faces lonely and dark days. Her world is

His blindness to his insignificance

fatally disjoined. Timberlake has gone, and Matthias has withdrawn

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1. Ibid., p. 1105-06  
2. Ibid., p. 1107.
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 decay.

So things stand for three years. Meanwhile the strain is wearing on Matthias' face:

Tieck's idea: "An intangible, unattainable seal of something fine.

Herion, as was wearing off; and in his looks and words his not to be.

A primitive pagan rawness of possession, afraid, war.

Soiled her and made her soul and body sick.

Matthias is drinking and becoming brutalised. Now he begins to taunt and mock their constant devil, respectively.

Natalie with "not playing as well" as at first. Purus at him for his
tamility, ambition, power and glory,
sarcasm and spoiling of himself, she strikes him, and goes away. Hours
and truth. They are all very perilous.

Later, he awakes from his stupor, to find a brief apology, and to know
a passion that knows itself—when, if not broken
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 Sun-
day 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:

As why any of us
Are mere like sketches of ourselves, half dead.
A life without a scheme and to no purpose—
An accident of nameless energies,
Of which he was a part, and no small part.
His blindness to his insignificance
Was like another faith, and would not die.

1. Ibid., p. 1131.
2. Ibid., p. 1127.
No, says Matthews 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,
Now the kingdom itself, which may come out all right,
And truth. They are all very perilous,
Belief since And admirable, so long as there is in them
Passion that knows itself—which, if hot hushed,
is a woe 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,
He had more than that his inheritance
than there was; but why there was not remained an unanswerable question,
Only what he might see...³

So do not ask me why so many of us
Yet are mere like sketches of ourselves, half done,
By nature, and forgotten in her workshop,
Then like a fair or tolerable fulfillment
Of her implied intentions...⁴ living for,
If there was nothing else, to live alone.

¹. Ibid., p. 1135.
². Ibid., p. 1134.
³. 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 with pride arriving not infrequently too late. For me it was too early—which is granted, sometimes, to the elected and the damned."  

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..."

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, wound 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.

Matthias says...The only eyes...but to no avail, says Timberlake.

He had seen those that his inheritance had given to him, and he had seen with them what he might see...will not be wasted...Nothing is wasted, though there's such disorder—

Yet now, he lived as Matthias, she failed together, which in a personal way, you, having more

A man with nothing left but money and pride, lastly, neither of which was worth his living for, if there was nothing else, to live alone

Matthias may not even push the door open: for he has found it too small.

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1. Ibid., p. 1137.  
2. Ibid., p. 1142.  
3. Ibid., p. 1142-43.  
4. Ibid., p. 1142.
He has not yet been forgiven. To him, Garth, it seemed, the world was a barren place. The sun was a cruel ball whose light was a torture, and even the sky overhead was a dark and endless void. Life was a long death sentence, and he was the captor, a world where there were none who cared for him, and none for whom he cared.

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 unfulfilled faith, in the end 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.

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.

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 in wasted, though there’s much misuse—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...

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. 1146.
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. Matthia must go back, then,
for he lived in a dark world. Natalie and Timberlake must both pay for
their inattention to themselves, either with themselves
And to enjoy...³

Garth provides for Matthia 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 Matthia's old tower.

So, inexorably, the dark door swings shut, taking with it the
spirits of the three who had preceded Matthia.

...He had come down
and Matthia, the Light becomes the light, as his life proceeds.
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, Matthia 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. Matthia, Garth, Timberlake and Natalie all fail, Matthia 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.
². Ibid., p. 1152.
³. Ibid., p. 1156.
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 fall.

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 purposeful life.

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.

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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, one "burnt vision." Now Malory is
gong back.

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; for both Malory and the reader... to a critical light... that enege

(9) The Glory of the Nightingales.—In the earlier poem, 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
in himself, and all that's left to die for, with Nightingale. For years he has existed on the venenous nourishment
What's there, and that he knew it was alimed first
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
Nightingale might have killed her, he added; but that was too soft, not able to endure the shock of the tragedy induced when Nightingale,
who had invested all of Malory's money, allowed him, through jealousy,
...if someone else's rank
...to become financially ruined.
Malory is now no logic in his not using it,
Nor also was a man thereof.
A man of dreams more than of deeds—
Disaster is "manifest all over him," Nightingale is "alone with his rich
advantages," trying to believe that he had acted once as necessity demanded.

Malory "was not brave," for he is a man without any courage.

2. Ibid., p. 1014.
3. Ibid., p. 1023.
But the necessity was that of his own "shattered 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.

He had 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,
This is to feel a knife in his back before he knows
What’s there, and then to know it was aimed first
destination. 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 gallery our hero Nightingale emerges, as he contemplates his revenge cloud what might once have shone forth to Malory’s now-distorted barren vision, his name is called in a voice which

...had the sound
Malory “does not know.” How he is a man without any sense;

though he can still surmise that life can hold no peace until one learns

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¹ L. Ibid., p. 1023.
² R. Ibid., p. 1023.
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 anguish of despair 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." He simply exists in what he has always wanted—his house by the
sea, and he will not argue with him. But see with his childish comprehension
of his plan, and turn to leave. But a great marinade overcomes him
of his plan, and turns him back. He has not done his work...

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.

Arriving at last, Malory saw

More wealth, attesting an intelligence
That was another lonely waste... He
surrounds 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 mists of years
Another life than Malory's had been broken.

1. Ibid., p. 1026.  2. Ibid., p. 1028.  3. Ibid., p. 1031.  4. Ibid., p. 1032.
Realizing that 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." 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 with a foreboding realization of his own type of, and recent fate. "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 blunted 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 presses the trigger in his hand. In his eye and his faith,

I don't know which...

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 dull manner in whom no future," Yet, says Malory...

...He had not know how tired.

A weight that has at last been lifted leaves him. He sighs. Who carries it too far...

I have enough of other visions.

With the next morning Malory feels a new sense of desolation, But I had not the will to sacrifice.

1. Ibid., p. 1032. 3. Ibid., p. 1040.
1. Ibid., p. 1042. 3. Ibid., p. 1043.
2. Ibid., p. 1037.
3. Ibid., p. 1044.
For now he is without even the stiffening strength of the old fierce purpose.

...He was alive,
And was to have been dealt 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...

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 forthright 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...3

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 "made 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.  
2. Ibid., p. 1044.  
3. Ibid., p. 1045.
My vanity for my sins. I was the law—
And here I am...

Continued Nightingale.

I was a youth of parts and promise,
Enraptured 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 have been 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.

nothing but
So long as I was having my own way.

...I was the dominant bird,
Outshining and outshining and outflying
Everything else...

Before I learned,
I was a lord of a small firmament.

...I was untired
I my submissions and humiliations.

...I was a light that would be shining always,
A light for generations to remember

himself. No 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 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 course prepared
For me: I would not listen to my voices."

friend. So Nightingale reveals his fatal defects: a basic egotism, un-

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1. Ibid., p. 1046. 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 come to America, first advising Malory to invest all his legacy in a gold-mines. Warned himself of its imminent failure, he had sold his own stock, but "evaded and temporized," and told Malory nothing "but a few shadow 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

To that:

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 preludes 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.
Here! if glimmerings that attended him today, Nightingale sends Malory
were intimations of a coming light.
out for a time, there was only the warm body of
And with no friends in sight, if he deserved them,
his^wretb~h.
if his light required them in his picture, sight, con-
No doubt they would be there eventually.

templating

... If he should find a way back to himself,
life, and was at peace from both
would be his friends; for death, living in them,

Would be his life. There was no answer yet.

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 longer than that,
larger than self, and one that was not death,

For time and money and science, living in time.

Meanwhile, Nightingale has a plan. Though twice he has been blind--
for those who are not born to fail if
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..."

now he sees that Malory owns himself and his services to suffering humanity.
To that end he is bequeathing all his wealth, to make of his house by the
seen a haven for pain and misery. Then, he tells Malory, he will know why
it was built. By light that would be his and Nightingale's."

So Malory accepts his way back to the "long sentence of his use-
fulness." He is to be a kind of redeemer. Nightingale redeems himself
at least part... the lonely joy of being alive to the practical service that
in a good servitude, and of not being
wastefully and uselessly and unintelligently wasted. Yet lightest way through
"acknowledgment and recognition, humility and surrender."

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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, then if it threw a gleam too far To show my steps...

...I cannot know.

Crashed—quenched; For certain, that your way, dark as it was, Was not the necessary way of life.

By situations, there was in yours at least a buried light For time and man; and science, living in time, Intelligence may find at least a gleam nearer than yours, For those who are not born to follow it also the human Before it has been found. There is, meanwhile, A native light for others, but none born size of his life’s presence, or of man’s fear to die. Fear is not light, and you were never afraid! truth and humor You were blind, Nightingale, but never afraid; And even when you were blind, you may have seen, destroyed in the darkly, where you were going, and where you are.

So Malory faces his lonely way back to human effectiveness in periods of darkness where his own were to be guided.

By light that would be his and Nightingale’s, received presence of, and elevation to, the Light—which human in ever with—

Here, then, is a double presentation of failure, which resolves out price, and, again, is the requisite for spiritual effectiveness itself in each case in a kind of redemption. Nightingale redeems himself 1. The light, "Belated Poem," p. 1072.
2. Ibid., p. 1073.
3. Ibid., p. 1071.
4. Ibid., p. 1071.
aimed against than aiming 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 glances 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 revenge 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 flaunted 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.

(16) 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

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"disintegration of the capitalist system. 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." In addition, it is a narrative of six characters, of whom five perish in "a cataclysm of all that is life to them." 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, 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. Effiante, p. 69 (Merlin)
5. Ibid., p. 196.
chimneys of his factories. \(^1\) Zoe is also the unaccepted daughter-in-law of Honorina, 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, Honorina 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 unsound decay", Jasper continues, that unless Honorina can accept her son...all there was her son. But Jasper knew, too, that even this is not fully within his power; that Honorina has to be taught, to be taught, in the most subtle and profound manner, the strength of love, the beauty of life, the meaning of marriage, to which the future wife would have to yield.

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 these chimneys which are the "landmark of his power." Gently, he dispels Honorina's doubts, suggesting that they may originate in the problem of young Jasper.

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1. The old irony is still here what Robinson suggests in Jasper the deficiency that is to the poet so often a basic quality for spiritual defeat and material success.

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
Honoría's doubts are not primarily of young Jasper. Says she,

...He is still young.
And so must have his visions. If you fear
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 Honoría
can accept Zoe, she will lose her son. But Jasper knows now that even
this is not Honoría'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, she wisest man alive,
Before he died, gave her a little knife.
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 Honorina frowns upon Zoe, young Jasper adds significantly,

That's well for mother to be agitated,
Occasionally, for she draws and follows
For his own
A line too fixed and rigid, and too thin
For her development...

King Jasper invites them to be seated; he, at least, will listen

Further. But Honorina 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,
"Will you be my teacher, then, so as to make me but better than I am?"
"Will you, then, be my teacher, and be my friend, and be my father, not only
for his own, but also for the others?"

Zoe,太原
... With you for teacher, I might go back to school again,...
And might be punished...

Jasper adds, "If you say you will be my teacher, I shall be willing to learn from you..."

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";
and young Jasper leaves his then, alone in the dark with his new

premonitions of what is yet to be done.

The mightiest are the blindest; and I wonder
why they forget themselves in histories

1. Ibid., p. 1408.

2. Ibid., p. 1410.

3. Ibid., p. 1413.

4. Ibid.
all know that they cannot read because they have no sight, they will be known as
what useless chronicles of bloody dust.
Their deeds will be sometimed and all because
they cannot see behind them or before them,
and cannot see themselves. For them there must
be multitudes of cold and unseen hands
that reach for them and touch them horribly
when they're alone...

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;  
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 chimney, "measuring them with a sarcastic
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, "She 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 it was that you were doing
And what you see with them, and what's behind them,
Are more for you, and for your preservation;
Then are the names of unremembered parents;

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. 1415.  
2. Ibid., p. 1416.
3. 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 trailing 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 count frail shapes" 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 lice, 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 such gold, which were to "reward his genius," and compensate for present "diseased and foolish years."2 If Hebron's strength fails, he knows that Jasper will not leave him twice behind, and let him die. Jasper grows 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,

Will 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.

Jasper has lost his humanity. He has failed of the ideal through a con-

1. 1912, p. 1422.
2. 1912, p. 1425.
3. 1912, p. 1425.
4. 1912, p. 1427.
5. 1912, p. 1430.
6. 1912, p. 1433.
serving 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 assure 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,
Incredible! 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
Still press For me would not be long for you to wait.²

seeks: By this time, Hebron has leapt upon Jasper's shoulder, where he
grows heavier and heavier; for Hebron is changing into gold.

his heart was 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 meaningless
when young Hebron, the ancient murderer, found you a time

They reach a chosen, across which the figures of Zoe and young
father and Jasper, and of himself; a dark and narrow cross
Jasper broken to the frantic father. Zoe calls to him to throw off the
vicious weight and leap the chosen to them, and to knowledge. For, says
she, if he could see Hebron truly, he would see his kingdom and his power
were nothing to be held.

¹. Ibid., p. 1439. ². Ibid., p. 1430.
³. Ibid., p. 1438.
And glory as it truly was. Zoe reveals herself as his rightful child: she has never been born. She tells him that she saw him at once that they saw nothing, that the Time would have had no need or place for him, or for the coming trouble he must behold. Because you gave to me unwittingly "its nothingness by being. You should have thought of that before hearts You buried your brain and eyes in golden sand, that person, and in your personal desert saw the world."

Now, goaded by Hebron, nearing frantic, Jasper shuts his eyes, 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 "cold 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.

During the king's convalescence, Honorina takes her stand. Either she or Zoe will leave the house. But if, as she admits, Honorina hates Zoe, the latter pities her for what she knows Honorina is afraid to learn. Jasper insists that neither must leave. Yet neither Jasper nor Honorina can move each other, and after a time Honorina 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." He house, says young Hebron, "will be the world," which having never owned he cannot lose. He meets Zoe, and is enraptured. But Zoe will have nothing to do with him. He is a "wrong prophet," she says, who can-

1. Ibid., p. 1654.
not know. She adds that only a few may know, and they must go alone. 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 Memoria’s refusal to love her because of the latter’s pride and “its unwillingness to see.” 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.

Furthermore, Zoe feels the trembling of the chimney; and she knows that Jasper has felt their cracking long before she came. Further, with her, while they are discussing the matter, did Jasper come with a there are now two Hebrons to be considered.

Now Jasper, seeing too much for peace, is also aware of unseen the truth that “They had no other friend than silence.” Memoria has hands destroying his house and his world.

...Zoe had come too late
To make a new king of a striken one
Whose retribution was a world’s infection.

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 his, knowing that Hebron’s own “red

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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, ante 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 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. 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 eminent college 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-drunk" 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.

Young Hebron tries to persuade her that he and she together

Are God's elect to save the world With consecrated hate and sacrifice,

Leaving it warm for knowledge and for love.

He seizes her wildly, and when she does not resist, thinks he has won her. Accordingly, he tells her that she must leave the house, which is already "mind and woven with doom and flame." She must come with him, to help his "light for blinded man the fire of truth." 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—Jasper, reconciled to the destiny. She was always fond of him in his stormy world before he went the way of the storm. He had been too young and too old.

1. Ibid., p. 1482.  
2. Ibid., p. 1484.  
3. Ibid., p. 1485.
To change, or live; and one of them was too young
And wise to die...

Hebron rushes at her, cursing. She must get out, he insists, and go with him. He is not 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 his 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.

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. 1469.
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 forgotten of his madness. Young Jasper had vision, idealism, a sense of justice and real value, as is proved by his exposure 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 in 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 Califer, 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 reality. Far only through his perception and transmission to the light does man progress toward an ideal spiritual state.

In this respect, a positive force is accumulated, in that the good, 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 report of the light reveal.
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 experiences. 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." 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. 28.
drawn, through repeated failure, toward the Gleam which, no matter how
dimly, shines still for him.

Accordingly, for Robinson, human failure occurs because of the
imperfect vision which sees

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
Forbake us in the seeming, we are all
At one with a complete companionship;
And though forlornly joyless be the ways
We travel, the compassionate 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 mist of doubt and
pain and futility, gleams the Light. If it is tragic, it is also finally
triumphant.

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