The Tragic Light In Edwin Arlington Robinson

Margaret L. Dauner
Historical Background

The use of symbols in Robinson's treatment of failure has been an ongoing topic in critical analysis, which includes the development of symbolism, mythology, and literature as an expression of the 19th century American consciousness of failure. By all critical accounts, the poet of failure is the one who best represents the most significant subject—Margaret Louisa Dunn. It is a "failure" that he has been studied harshly; particularly, it is based upon his standard for determining such failure. This standard has been tried to explain in the term "the tragic light".

This study is not in line with the normal degree of adequacy. First, the criterion by which Robinson judged his personality for the effectiveness is lacking in his second, which is a limitation of his failure. A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the assignment to the Department of English at Indiana University. Robinson's philosophy will also be included in the dissertation work. In 1940, the dissertation was completed and titled, "The Light of Failure: A Study of Robinson's Poetry."
presence or absence, I shall analyze those of his characters who best illustrate its frenzied and tragic working-out in their individual situations. It should be stated that this was entirely volunteered.

Before the writer had access to the latest critical work on Robinson, Edwin Arlington Robinson is admittedly one of America’s leading "philosophers in the poetry of Maine Brother Robinson," by Malville Sligh, contemporary poet. As such, he has been variously hailed. He has been a leading Columbia University Press publication. Though philosophical in name, he is the creator of a new poetical technique, which implies a new use of viewpoint, rather than poetical; as in this essay, Miss Sligh’s work has the vocabulary, rhythm, and imagery; the interpreter of twentieth-century world much of the same ground, and often arrives at similar conclusions.

America; the voice of modern New England; a "modern classic" and, by all it will, therefore, he said occasionally in this essay, where under re- criticism, the poet of failures. It is, however, as a poet who finds his concern, differences of viewpoint, or substantiation may be interesting or most significant subject-matter in the personality termed a "failure" valuable, that he is to be studied here; particularly, with emphasis upon his ...

I wish to express my deep appreciation for the assistance rendered standard for determining such failure. This standard I have tried to ex- amine under the assumption of this necessity; particularly, to Dr. Allen press in the term "the tragic light". Instead, for certain kinships, critical evidence, and analysis, I am this study, then, hopes to point out with some degree of adequacy also included in the poem’s defense, head of the Department of English, first, the criterion by which Robinson judges human personality for its to Dr. Alice W. Goodwin, to Dr. Jean Barnes, and to Dr. Mildred Gerszen, effectiveness or lack of it; second, what the limitations of his failures are, and how these limitations operate in the peculiar world in which the character exists. By a specific application of the principle of the Light to nineteen representative poems, it will be possible to establish some interpretations of the Light itself, and to examine it as a character reagent. A concluding implication as to the quality of Robinson’s philosophy will also be a natural result. It should be stated here, however, that this study in no wise postulates the Light as a philosophical principle, but regards it, on the contrary, purely as a poetic symbol.

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

A. These Too See Too Much.

1. Richard Cory.
2. Captain Craig

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

B. These Too See Too Little.

1. Aron ("Aron's Harvest")
2. Cordwinder ("Cordwinder's Horse")
3. Anarchist
4. Ferdinand ("The Man Who Died Twice")
5. Louise ("The Hostage")
6. Walter
7. Matthias ("Matthias at the Door")
8. Nightingale and Galaxy ("The Glory of the Nightingale")
9. King Lear.

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That, then, were the prevailing characteristics of the time and the localities into which Robinson was born. But were some events pertinent to the formulation of his poetic and novel concepts? To answer these questions, it is necessary to examine the circumstances themselves: for, it is against these "backgrounds" that Robinson's parade of failures is to be seen.

A. Robinson's New England

Robinson's time and locality may be defined from a passing glance at the world of Gardiner, Maine, in the earlier decades of the nineteenth century, particularly the "poet of failures". His poems deal preeminently with the narrowness, the suffering and the religiousism of men and women who err through their various limitations, and the ways in which their lives and the life of society are conditioned by them. Since this is true, it is necessary to survey the materials from which the analyses were derived and observe the confluence of chance, is for this study will be drawn. Such a survey will follow immediately in this chapter.

It is, however, profitable in dealing with an author's work, to ascertain generally the background of his life before he goes on to describe his own reactions to life for some explanation of his particular view of any race, or any time, still, the setting occasionally may be viewed from the point of his own unique emphasis. For such views and such varying views of a declining New England society, the more people carry a direct result of the experience which has been conditioned in their world and beyond.

The New England of which I speak, thirteen years before Robinson's birth, would seem to be the case, at least, with the work of this poet. Without leaning too heavily upon some conveniently-apparent facts, I, for the Foster social concept, the idea arose in the mind in Robinson's life, it nevertheless appears probable that certain near-revolutionary influences were at work. In brief, in the lives and work of men and women who were part of a declining society, the "poet of failures" was seeing, thinking, and suffering through the lens of his personal emphasis and the purely New England "temperament", and temperament, were factors that intensified his interest in the "pathos" of eighteen years before the "principal characters of the "poet of failures"; and that these factors predisposed him naturally toward such emphasis in the character conceptions set forth in his poems.

C. Gardner, D. M.
What then, were the prevailing characteristics of the times and the locality into which Robinson was born? What were some events pertinent to the formulation of his poetic and moral concepts? To answer these questions, it is necessary to examine the circumstances themselves; for it is against these “darkening hills” that Robinson’s parade of failures is to march. And New England was still New England. Any dwellers of other 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 is a poet of hard and changing times; and since he so often details the confusion of change, it is important, for a fuller understanding, to note the milieu out of which such change has arisen. Even though the longer poems are set in a peculiarly generalized locality, 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. The New England of 1850 then, nineteen years before Robinson’s birth, was still a grandiose, self-confident nation.

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

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


birth, was still a landscape which differed materially from the scene as it
it would present to the wide eyes of a sensitive boy who walked the streets
of Gardiner, or wandered, during the '70's and '80's, along its then-
empty and rotting wharves. In 1880, the Western Atlantic was dotted with
the white sails of ships; the horizon was crested with masts from the
new steamboats. And New England was still New England. Mrs. Lowell writes
of Robinson's own town: "I know of no place in America so English in at-
mosphere as Gardiner." Mr. Coffin adds that "the most fundamental
concepts of older New England were...tradiitonal English and de
tinitely
old-fashioned." First year was a thriving milling, a center for shipping
with handsome mansions, formal, pillared, spacious, furnished with
-treasures from London, Paris, Venice; and the "best room" was "dedicated
to high moments," the funeral or the courtship. Furniture was of plush,
silk, or haircloth, and stood "price, severe and uncommon". Farms were
prosperous and orderly; their attic-storerooms stocked with apples, pe-
corn, jellies, jams—the setting of "Snow-Bound"—and farms were every-
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." The neat, peaceable little 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.
American In 1850, the "American doctrine of unlimited opportunity" was at its height. People still believed in "basic, sure, unchanging principles". Life was to improve, by generations, and to expand, individually. Everything was growth. The "doctrine of improvement was a vital adjunct to Emerson's philosophy of the Superior Man. The Transcendentalists preached a philosophy... of becoming." 1 These people were sure of their ancestors, of themselves, of their children. And, says Mr. Coffin, "their economic and social foundations made it easy for them to keep the faith." 2

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, Salbut, 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 blunted the tones of screaming saws, mill-wheels, tugs on the Kennebec River. And, there, always, there was the nine o'clock curfew, the determining voice of Puritan New England. 3

Gardiner—a pertinently typical town of "old" New England—had its aesthetic interests, too. It read the standard English poets: it

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 fogs from the Atlantic, carrying with it a timidity and longings, a melancholy, a longing more than ever for the vision of out-bound sails bulging in the wind, it was natural that the verse frequently the pastoral, romantic of verse and more mechanically turning wheel. 1 We are indebted to Mrs. Richards for one of the most intimate sketches of Hulsdonk, her N.A., printed by the Harvard University Press, in 1936.

2. Coffin, op. cit., p. 4.
3. Ibid.
4. 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", 1 was
"a wistful and unfleshly passion".

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

A single generation was to reset the stage in a dimming light, and
to replace the sturdy citizens, serenely sure of a purposive universe, with
eccentric, frustrated, and bewildered remnants of a now 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 1890's.
The Civil War had left its bloody marks on North and South. The accelerating
rhythm of westward-marching feet is recalled in Robinson's poem,
"The Klondike"—the song of
... five men together,
Five left o'twelve men to find the golden river. 3

Sensitive and increasingly bewildered provincial ears were catching ever
more frequently the metallic crescendo of more and more mechanically turning
wheels. We remember the individual industrial tragedy limned in "The Mill". 4

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


2. Ibid.


4. Ibid., p. 460.
New England soil. All of these were to exact their toll of the gracious ways of life, in conservative and elegant old New England. It was a darkening scene which unfolded before the contemplative gaze of Robinson between the years of 1870 and 1890—the years of his boyhood and young manhood. 

But the minds that were sure they had an important part to play it was a transition period for American poetry, too; for while it is true that great groups of writers were still in their noon, the afternoon of its decline was upon it. Says Miss Lowell again, "The robustness of Byron gave place to the sugared sentimentalities 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 imbued with theawan minor tones of his native New England, that that quality is inextricably woven into the emotional texture of his poetry. It was in the streets of Gardner 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...
area-ways; and stealing in the dark to the back door of the local hotel
for the basket of food which the proprietor set there for him.

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
taking into vital in the perpetua cultural of those great treasurers that
to play in the world" were become the "sons of families dispossessed both
were fifty years ago. Here was once this land an island than there
of material and spiritual wealth", They were "sons of rulers" who are
shortly gone to rest. A nation that is having light once out
longer-ruled. 2 Ill at ease in an increasingly mechanized world they did
never the house much moving. Witnesses are lost among the
not understand, and ever fewer in number, they were retreating into "empty
his forests... The dear ones and simple ones are designed for his
houses and long-silences". They were "aristocrats both in their ideas
childrens are in a similar place, or those anger who are being, a
about the means to life and the purpose of it." 3 Their qualities were
are elected, on their own, are located under the current. A measure of
the qualities of Flammands, of Richard Cory, of Aunt Emogene 4--charity,
how to be. for the war won.

reticence, tenderness, courage. But the world which created them had
The people are several ones with the land, interrelated times
passed; and they were left "without any life to shape to the code", 5
negative to families. They are the people of cooperation, as well as of
Three forces had reshaped the New England spirit and scene to
habits and tastes. The people will not live its then diminished mould. They were the "disintegration of an economic
the economic fabric" which occurred with the passing to West and South of New England
of the leading centers. They were the people which, in that leadership in sea trade and manufactures; the coming of a new kind
of economic rational situations, the cold atmosphere; or the era of the one
t hauling in the new science; "the insufficiency of
the New England code itself"--a code "not founded on standards that are

2. Coffin, op. cit., p. 31.
3. Ibid., p. 35.
5. Coffin, p. 53.
wide enough for a whole world to grow by. 1

So this three-fold instrument for change the very setting responded negatively. Mr. Coffin remarks that the houses along Robinson’s Kennebec River are not so well painted now, nor in repair. 2

The wild is coming back. You may come upon porticoed houses falling into ruins in the perpetual shade of enveloping trees that have grown from their very floors. There are fewer farms than were fifty years ago. There is more wild land in Maine than there was one hundred years ago. Earlier old landmarks, covered over slowly, years by year. A roadway lost. Another light gone out for good in the house across the valley. Shipwrecks singing nearer the house each spring. 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 man designed for his grandchildren. But the man is under the earth now, and his grandchildren are in a distant place, or have never come to being. A man can come upon a graveyard in the thick woods. The headstones are slanted, and some have fallen under the powerful twisting of live hemlock roots. An old man stirs uneasily in his bed in an ancient house too big for one old man. 3

And types of people which the new New England overlaid the growing past.

The people are keeping pace with the land, developing queer.

They met a shadow over him; they looked upon his path with a sense of negative tendencies. They are the people of Robert Frost, as well as of Robinson’s Adirondack; 2 they are the people who in their own way to the Robinson—the Hill rolls—they inhabit the back hills; who do not “live” gymnastics, for his last word came it is emphasized as in his first ones; but simply “stay.” They develop odd patterns of behavior: strange fears—sone has only to listen through his walls to find, time again, a of the twig at the window. They grow to like their loneliness. Or they eerfly assault landowners or a singly solved characteristic, which become restless vagabonds, like John Everaldown; or they are fascinated years the fate of smalllings, which make up into a people by rotting wharves, or called, like Lake Havergal, by dead voices.

“Children sacrifice themselves for elders; uncles for nephews.” 6

Their from the most obvious material re-presentations of the new England.

2. Ibid., pp. 17-18.
3. Collected Poems, p. 73.
4. Ibid., p. 74.
houses are too big for people growing smaller. Sheltering a dozen children a generation ago, now these houses harbor two spinster sisters of what it was that happened there, and what no mortal knows, who live together without speaking and far off a master shrinks, and then there are a light that shined the sea for men to see.

On the river, there is nothing moving at all. "Shipyards...are
so found it in the morning with an iron bar behind, gone as completely as towns of the Indians...ice-houses have sunk into
silk in the ashes that were left, or anywhere, the earth. There are wharves and warehouses rotting away in Gardiner, and Hallowell, Bowdoinham and Bath. 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, and no wind today...Maine has always bred her best children for other states farther
"The Tavern"-3
scares us with its sinister mystery;
West. Empty cradles are everywhere in Maine in towns, in houses, in
whenever I go by. More nowadays
minds. And look at the same scenes and the strange gowns,
the town when certain and the women grown.

This, then, is the world of Robinson; these are some of the scenes
and something sickness on our side we face,
and types of people which the new New England offered the growing poet.
Of all New England, she startled best.
They cast a shadow over him; they impregnated his poetry with a sense of
fatality, of decline, of futility and frustration, that was never to
be outgrown. For his last poems carry it as poignantly as do his first ones.
One has only to glance through his 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
being, the consciousness of all New England living, In equality tocontinue 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

1. Coffin, op. cit., p. 40
2. Ibid., p. 18.
3. Ibid., p. 19.
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 what no mortal knows.
And none one on the mountain heard of a master shriek,
And then there was a light that showed the way for men to seek
The broken Flutes. They are here, too—They are revealed in the vastness
We found it in the morning with an iron bar behind,
OfLoan Sawyer; there were chains around; but no search could ever find
Either in the ashes that were left, or anywhere,
In the A sign to tell of who or what had been with Stafford there.

Or there is the Dead, Village, where there is penance at the post
Repaid for something but the ghosts of things—No will, no love, no children, and no men;
"Death forgives": Not she in the dale halation of New England or of any
"The Taverns" mocks us with its sinister mystery:
Other lands—"unthought, unthought of and unknown".

Whenever I go by there nowadays
And look at the rank weeds and the strange grass, essentials
The torn blue curtains and the broken glass,
Are a man afraid of the old place;
And something stiffsens up and down by my face,
As all the world as if I saw the ghosts
Of old Ham Averly, the murdered host,
With his dead eyes turned on me all alike.

That tremendous fate for excitings of our own.

"The Wilderness" is burdened with the grimness of bleak November in New England;
The ground is snowed over, with the snow that snowed onapped
There, with its "frost along the marshes", its "frozen wind that shins
The shoal where it shakes the dead black water", its "moon across the
And I know that is some race
lowland". "Paeon Thalassa, Thalassa" 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
moderate is parting from being long to endures, that once took on the
Broken Flutes", where "the broken flutes of Arcady" lie on forgotten
activity, from eternity to eternity, more clearly and restless reserved than

2. Ibid., p. 98. 5. Ibid., p. 335.
3. Ibid., p. 93. 6. Ibid., p. 77.
ground, hushed forever by the iron blows of a mechanized and commercialized world.

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

And what of those few who even yet continue to strive to play the role of Luke Havernagl waiting by the western gate for the voice of his dead son to return? They are here, too. They are revealed in the wistfulness of returning to the scenes of tragedy once more. The voices of the Poor Relation are heard again, perhaps, but not in the same way. The voice of the western gate becomes a muffled echo, a memory of times past. But the love remains, the poignant reminder of the "poor relation" of New England, a place of both beauty and sorrow.

There is "Fragment," a swift small composition, whose essentials are evoked in the mind of the reader. It is a fragment of a story, a snapshot in time, a moment of profound emotion. The "Aunt Lomea" and "Aunt Ionesa" are contemporaries, sisters, both living in the same town, yet apart in their own ways. Their stories are intertwined, yet distinct. The aunt of Lomea's generation is almost unknown, a shadow of a woman, while the aunt of Ionesa's generation is a lively and vibrant character.

These are the "Dark House" itself, which confides so many of these twisted souls about whom Robinson writes: "It is not the story of the United States in the full generation of pride and commercial splendor; but an approach to the process of 1917, with its brutish and brutal events of war. It is a story of a small town, a town with a small number of people, a town with a small number of stories. It is a story of a town that has forgotten its past, a town that has forgotten its future." The story is a reflection of the times, a snapshot of the past, a look at the future.

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...
in "The Mill"

E. 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 smoky 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.

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1. Ibid., p. 460.
2. Coffin, p. 43.
E. Edwin Arlington Robinson

Another factor is significant for an explanation of Robinson's interest in failure. That factor appears in certain crucial events in his own life—events which made him 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, Nathan," he was only implying again that ancestral patterns have perhaps already determined in large measure an individual's capacities and directions. Probably the Robinsons who settled at Newcastle, Maine, would have contemplated with some unease, certainly with bewilderment, the quiet and apparently aimless lad who was destined, seventy-five years later, to add an entirely new 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 aligator's nostrils.
of verse, they knew the less, were to bear the Robinsonian touch of skilled
of enthusiasm, and expressed liberal passions as their own
and polished craftsmanship; and they were none the less fashioned by a
man of the world, all the more so for the devil's sake. They were affectionate,
loving hands, and measured, against the uncompromising standards of their
keep the mark of those that suffered and environs, imprisoned
own New England Puritan consciences. They were often
their friends. Their eyes. They were often
naturally born, between spirit and the flesh; they were
plagued. Robinson's immediate roots struck deep into the earth; where both
they must justify their existence in terms which, to men's senses.
sturdy, citizenly, and poetic, sensibility, flourished. His father, Edward
foundation.
Robinson, had settled at Head Tide, Maine, where he opened a general
store, and where, more important, he met and courted Mary Palmer.
A just, restrained passion, and stern commercial ambition, more on
Palmer had been a founder of Rowley, Massachusetts. Parsons, with whom
December 83, the shortest day of the year, 1830, a true son of the New
Palmer had intermarried, had founded the first textile mill in New England.
England's efforts had helped establish. He was an alien, externally,
and maintained the tradition for one hundred and seventy years. Thomas
was the flowering of their state, and during his lifetime, and
Dudley, an ancestor of Mary Palmer, had been a governor of the Massachusetts
most of it, the natural circumstances of many of his life, form an
Bay Colony, and one of his descendants, Anne Bradstreet, was New England's
squad's exemplification. If any be named, for the public sold into which
first post.
his political fury was in poor health, in a tradition of practical
For two hundred years behind Edward and Mary Robinson, Parsons,
ancestors; the world's future, and failures, who set about a fever kind
Robinsons, Parsons, and others of their ilk had
of success. Thus one that environment. That, briefly, were the
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-sensible, being mindful of devils,
large and small in ambush for the unwary... They were haunted by a
sense of incomprehensible and insuperable destiny; and the wisest
at times suffered from spiritual indications. They were not without
humor, though it was like their own chipmunks, elusive and

1. Mr. Robinson's exactness carefulness is aptly illustrated by the
following, related by his friend, Louis Ledoux: "Once a year he brought his
summer's work and asked to have it read aloud to him. Occasionally he would
interrupt with: 'Did the stenographer leave out the comma? I didn't hear
it.'" (Quoted from Ledoux article, "Physiologist of New England," Saturday

abrupt. They were neighborly... but they mistrusted any form
of enthusiasm, and repressed illicit passions as their sam-
sfaring 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 despaired, imprisoned
behind straight lines and unrevolving 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, 1869, a true son of the New
England their efforts had helped establish. He was an alien, externally.
He was the flowering of their stock, spiritually. His inheritance, and
most of all, the darkened circumstances of most of his life, form an ade-
quately explanatory, if any be needed, for the peculiar mood into which
his poetical fury was to pour itself, in a tradition of practical
reasoning, and we have frequently traced the strong affection from all the
successes who were failures, and failures who yet achieved a queer kind
of success. What was that environment? What, briefly, were the cir-
cumstances which, for the poet, were to be so significant? They were
beset, and "sudden", as he wrote in Lowell, forty years later, "the
particulars those of his childhood and early manhood.

Here Robinson was born in the "story-book village" of Head 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 im-
mmediate 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 the
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
three brothers would take turns telling stories to the family, who would
then gather about the kerosene lamp in the parlor, each with a
book. The boy early discovered the medical books which his brother Dean
had brought from college and set aside. He must have lain often under a
secretary desk, was studying, and was soon convinced that he was suffering from all
the maladies taught in school—of which he was always incurably fond—dying of
diseases detailed therein. He discovered rocking-chairs at an early age;
"unlike" in the eyes of the children, he was always moving to the sound of
the pages. In a chair, if the size was too small for him, he would rock himself for
many hours, and "sudden on his "chill" when exhausted, "perished" as
"the child who perished to write verse." He was occasionally dry—

dance I should have ever have been"

characteristics which was in accord with much suffering among most of the

life. For at the public school, at least, very little was proceeded.

1. Robinson's name was adopted on a visit to South Harpswell.

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

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

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

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 child's ruminations upon the ways of men.

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

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

1. There is no doubt but that American's devotion of verse loved books—especially Dickens, with his sympathy for the social misfits. At the high-school, he day-dreamed. He loved Vergil; and in his
third year, he amazed his classmates by turning Cicero's first orations
against Catiline into English blank verse.\(^1\) He was amused by chemistry;
he did not like mathematics.\(^2\) 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 sur-
prising in their completeness. They might well have seemed prophetic
of the portrait quality of his poems.\(^3\) 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 col-
leagues. "Why not write as the clergymen talked in the stores on Water
Street?"\(^4\) 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 of the individualistic technique which was to bring
him such quantities of rejection slips while he was struggling a decade
later for an audience.

\(^1\) Cf. Hagedorn, p. 31.
\(^2\) Cf. ibid., p. 41.
\(^3\) Cf. ibid., p. 41.
\(^4\) Cf. ibid., p. 41.
He met a physician, Dr. Alexander 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 Beazley, of Atlantic City, Monthly essayist, 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 planked and chiselled and hammered, with loving exactitude, the hulls of their ships. He learned to write a sonnet in twenty minutes, and to work over it for twenty days. And what made the failures who shuffled along? But at home, the clouds were gathering. Dear, who had been a 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".

Edward Robinson, nearly seventy, had at last fallen victim to old age, acting and Edwin, his graduate of high school, was unprepared for college, and quite incapable of accepting a practical "job". Unlucky who fascinated him. He went back to high school, 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."

1. Ibid., p. 37.
2. Ibid., p. 39.
3. Ibid., p. 46.
could want to see.

keep only one here, which I could lay all together by me, and the sate.

By saying Christian was not the 4th, 5th, 6th etc., but the 1st and 2nd.

... She was sitting down and a messenger came to the door and asked if

the 1st. "I have a letter from the governor," said she. "Could you grant me

permission to go to the letter?"

and thought to herself — two English words or something

but your reflection looked as fat. He,Seeppa the circle

ultramarine, but I seem to have seen a few at such times.

would have done, what did I mean to do such a thing. Here's

in doorways, of course, and by and by to go to a woman, and

of me, etc.. etc., and the letter. I could, let me, and the

from the letter, she was to be the letter, and then the

here.

I wonder that you are going. To the letter of no

and put in the post. Here's the letter, and the letter, and the

the letter and he could do it. When I am thinking of the letter,

we shall post it. Now he could do it. When I am thinking of the letter.

be the letter, a letter and her... says. The peddler. He had

life, and putting. Let me see. And the peddler: the letter or not.

you, too. Go on, the letter of the two English words or something in the

don't know what.
A moment All the time, at home, circumstances were growing darker. Soon 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 practiced the clarinet, receiving encouragement when the cat finally stayed in the room; and his hope of improvement perished when he realized that the cat had merely gone deaf. He gave up his. Already he had begun He alternated nursing his father with assisting a civil engineer, and in winter, keeping time for a local ice-house. He wrote innumerable wistful letters in which he recalled "the fellow down east who never seemed to amount to much in school (or anywhere else), but who was proud to believe that he was not altogether a nincompoop. He never had a great many friends; this fellow, but those he did have he has never forgotten, and I - never will." It was a time when...

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

In the Booth, in libraries, and among classical statues, he strove to perfect.

All the time, he was reading and writing. A visit to a friend at he laid the foundations for his 1837 and his 1837-1838.

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1. Hagedorn, op. cit., p. 56.
2. Ibid., p. 57.
3. 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 bone diseased. "If the ailment could be arrested, there might be no further complications, but if it moved farther inward, there would be 'the devil to pay'." 1 Herman, though spiritually 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 Ela 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


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, by the Atlantic, Century, Harper's, Scribner's, as well as before the year closed, however, Robinson was back in Gardiner for the death of his father. The next year he returned to Harvard. He continued to make little or no literary impression, and—though not ever communicative, he said at that time—"I have forgotten how to laugh". At the end of his second year, he left permanently, for Hermon, 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 1895, "It was there that I discovered and cultivated what is best and strongest in my nature—which—fancy—" is not much". He was literary writing him wrote reviews; to readers who might be amused. In 1896 he experienced one of his most tragic years when his mother died under peculiarly distressing circumstances. She contracted black's 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 moved down and away. The circumstances were bad, and he was dead. The undertaker left the coffin on the veranda. The eldest son, Dean, and Edith, the youngest, carried it into the house and laid her in it.
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, disgusted by the rejections of his work by the Atlantic, Century, Harpers, Scribners, as well as by newspapers generally, he had gotten together forty poems which he called "The Torrent and the Night Before", and published them himself. Fifty-two dollars got his three hundred copies, "in an inconsiderable 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 $15000 was offered for one copy.  
4. Laura Richards, pp. 46-47.
later, "It would not have mattered what, they would 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."

These, then, were the years when, particularly, his acute personal
sense of failure, according to the standards of Tilton Town but not of his
whole New England inheritance, made his sympathetic to failure in others,
and amid indications of spiritual victory behind the worldly defeat. 1

The very good and obvious reason, however, lay behind the consistent
rejection of his poetry. 2 Its very strength, its "new technique"—the
qualities which were, twenty years later, to place Robinson at the head
of the poet's list in America—now accounted for the almost dismayful
serenity, the lack of interest, with which it was greeted. Editors were
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.

Among high phrases were short, often staccato: for plain speaking demanded
a plain style. 3 Furthermore, these phrases and lines were not always
measured carefully, foot by foot. Often they ran over; or the rhythm would

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1. Rollin W. Brown, Next Door to a Post, New York: 2, Appleton
Century Co., 1907, p. 68.

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 narrative". Then there was the matter of Robinson's imagery, which may be said to hold the technical secret of his peculiarly effective irony. Says Mr. Coffin again, Robinson "has a combination of intense concentration upon dark emotional stress and... clean-cut, honest 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 dreams of Isaac and Archibald as two bearded and enthusiastic angels, playing High-Low Jack... 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. Llewellyn and Priscilla find domesticity together unsupportable, and Priscilla fades alone for twenty years.

Mr. Flood portrays a new and ironic New England chivalry, saving a less silent and less shining horn on his lonely road. Mr. Coffin thinks that law. James Gregory, writing about "Robinson's portrait of the Robinson was himself his greatest irony, suggesting that he found his best sellers must be a mirror of his own generation to him. The reason order in the old chivalric world, which thus became an escape for...

2. Ibid., "Mr. Flood's Party", p. 82.
now he could write, "I shall never be a prominent citizen, and I thank
there is, too, the element of his humor, of which it has been
and for that I am grateful. I am as happy and satisfied as a
written, "He uses humor as a means to saying some of the saddest things
that can be said ourselves and our times." I think, on, with this final statement as
written, "He uses humor as a means to saying some of the saddest things
that can be said ourselves and our times." It is a very humorous
the only thing he had ever believed in for himself, the story of the early
but it is also indefatigable, and often, even impudent. Added to it was its use
been several times with other variations.
that a capacity for indirect oblique approach, as in "The Mill," and a
1871 is a matter of history how he has consistently discouraged, now
in this manner of a "manufactured" poet as a special agent of the
millers any more.

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

For a year, he tried to give up writing poetry, and wrote short
stories; but neither would the magazines have them. Finally, he destroyed
his manuscript, and Robinson saw his responsibility; his
of failure. 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." 2 "The Weapon


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


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 desperately discouraged, how
desperately 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." He
had a talk that cleared the path to success, by any means. But the
presidential—and providential—letter arrived at a time when Robinson was,
in his own words, "dragging along; scraping bottom." Dean was dead; sensi-
tive, brilliant, defeated. Kermit, who had taken to drinking, was separated
from his family, and Robinson felt then as his responsibility. His
inability to aid them materially, as he wished, added again to his own sense
of failure.

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

1. Hagedorn, p. 103.

him two dollars, to keep house. There was a letter for him—a letter that was to be a check of tip-cart loads of slate in the construction of 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 paced the dark tunnel, heavy with the odor of damp clay and sickening gases, checking the loads of material as they were dumped at the gaping tunnel-mouths. The pay was two dollars a day.

One day he had received word of a possible position. It was that of an electrician at a salary of $15 per week. He was to work in the construction of 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 paced the dark tunnel, heavy with the odor of damp clay and sickening gases, checking the loads of material as they were dumped at the gaping tunnel-mouths. The pay was two dollars a day.

The pay was two dollars a day. He had kept the dreary job for months, and as the work became more and more of a horror, he turned to the only immediate relief accessible. Every night he visited the saloons. He had stopped writing poetry. He had stopped writing to his friends. He was pretty thoroughly convinced that at the end of the dark tunnel lay only a complete darkness for him, that at the end of the job there was only a complete darkness for him, that finally the job expired, and Robinson had learned at least one thing—that he could not hold a job and write. He tossed on the horns of his perpetual dilemma. He had to live. But he had to write poetry.

Apparently, the two were incompatible. A friend offered him a compromise: ten dollars a week to assemble material for advertisements for a Boston dry-goods store, the work to consume one-third of Robinson's time. He accepted.

It was in such circumstances that he had walked wearily one evening in the fall, arm in arm, with a girl he loved. He had said to her, "I love you, Miss Robinson.

He was to go to the office the next day, but with the same boy who had been his early companion, the "Collar of the Night," and walk with him back to his room.
into his dark rooming house. There was a letter—a letter that was to mark for the first time, the top of the long hill. It was the winter of 1905, these poinsettias, and the technique and subject-calling that in—

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 Zippincolli's had taken his sonnet on Poe eleven years before; and Gilder had accepted the poem for the main portion of the "Century," but for the department of frivolities called "In Lighter Veil." It was at best an indication; but even the most tempestive bite of encouragement meant much after so many years of being ignored.

The Veil 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 Fiske recalls in his "Critical Essay on Edgar Guest," that Washington had been practically a visitor to New York upon his birthday as a matter of dramatic interest. He was not formally on the list as a recipient, but with deep inner excitement, he took the letter to his room. He turned it over and over, dreamily; then, at last, he opened it. "My dear Mr. Robinson," it ran, "I have enjoyed your poems, especially, the 'Children of the Night,' so much I must write to tell you so. Will you permit me to ask what you are doing and how you are getting along? I wish I could see you. Sincerely yours, Theodore Roosevelt." P. 213.


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 laurel were relatively unchanged at the poet's meridian from what they had been since 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 Matthews and Cavender than it was in the prophetic projections of Richard Cory and Flamborough 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 Rotarian's 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 News in Council, The Riverside Press, Cambridge, 1928, p. 540.


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 ashamed;
There are builders of new mansions in the Valley of the Shadow,
And among them are the dying and the blinded and the maimed.1

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

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


the characters themselves are more significant than the stories of the single Hetzelian message is simply "man has failed." Louis deWittman's lives they lead; or, to turn it about, their narrative patterns are the inevitability of their inevitable results of their complicated personalities.

The characters are subject to a certain amount of formal external failure. Yet to judge correctly, and for present purposes, another view.

These characters are subject to a certain amount of formal external failure. Yet to judge correctly, and for present purposes, another view.

There are those like Cassandra, drawn from Greek or Roman mythology and legend; those like Nicodemus, Lazarus, St. Paul, taken as an example of the profane or the pious. They appeal directly from the Bible, Merlin, Lancelot, Arthur, and his courtly men

and women reappear from the time-honored pages of the Arthurian cycle; from that of the commercialized world in which he lives--a world which

Tristram and Isolt are steeped in the Celtic wastefulness and sense of fatalism. Ben Jonson, John Brown, Shakespeare, Rembrandt, step fresh from

If then, Robinson so often seems fascinated by that type 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; standards and their failures. The interest seems to center upon the

Mr. Flood, who tips his lonely jug under two moons; Miniver Cheevy, the facts that he is very old to live in the social failure a ritual of every romantic

romanticism born out of time. Reuben Bright, the butcher, with his unexpected sensitivity; Captain Craig, Tilbury's indignant philosopher-humorist;

with whom the naturally amusing for the characters' lack of Isaac and Archibald, those two engaging old men. Then there is the group

social satire. If it is not satirized, Robinson is more interested as a so peculiarly Robinson's own--the heroes of his long poems--those "faceless" ones in people who struggled and failed than the ones who succeeded. The characters who live in no particular town, and at no particular time, and said, "There is now to write about." Yet with the good faith with which

are set against a gray landscape where all the trees bear the same kind of barrenness, the social failure is the first symptom. He also likes to

leaves, and where the architecture is of no specific period or design. This results in an over-all unity, and in its result the"Charles生活环境 is the group of Roman Bartholomew, Avon, Cavender, Nightingale, Matthias, Falifer, Amaranth, Fernando Bash, King Jasper.

But various as these groups appear, and drawn as these characters are from widely differing sources, they have a single common characteristic, All are "failures," in a highly specialized sense. Thus Robinson is usually

recognized as primarily "the poet of failures." Says Clement Wood, "His
the characters themselves are more significant than the stories of the small punched message is simply "one bad failure." "Louis Untermeyer
lives they lead; or, to turn it about, their narrative patterns are the
remains最基本元素 or even more striking parts when he adds: "In an age
inevitable results of their complicated personalities.

These characters are subject to a certain amount of formal external
failures. But to these come, and for present purposes, another more
classification. There are those like Cassandra, drawn from Greek or Roman
definitive account must immediately be added. It is in this for Robinson
mythology and legends; those like Nico ofwus, Lazarus, St. Paul, taken
the term 'successes' and 'failures' are entirely applicable to spiritual
directly from the Bible, Merlin, Lancelot, Arthur, and his courtly men
文化传媒 and their actions. We oppose them in particular some 'definite'
and women reappear from the time-honored pages of the Arthurian cycle;
be that of the commercial world in which he lives—a world which
Tristan and Isolde are steeped in the Celtic wistfulness and sense of
often interpret them in the opposite way,
fatality. Ben Jonson, John Brown, Shakespeare, Rembrandt, step fresh from
if then, Robinson as often seems fascinated by that area of
the Elizabethan stage, the pages of history, the book of art. There is
characters, scenes of beauty, which are not merely by its own story.
the group who live in Tilbury Town—Richard Cory, the town's aristocrat;
blackened and locally familiar. A strange scene of commerce from the
Mr. Flood, who tips his lonely mug under two moons; Minver Cheever, the
fact that he is very out of time. In the social failures a spirit of strange
romanticist born out of time; Reuben Bright, the butcher, with his unex-
expected sensitivity; Captain Craig, Tilbury's incipient philosopher-humorist;
more, and which often actually accounts for the character's lack of
Isaac and Archibald, those two engaging old men. Then there is the group
social assistance. In his own characters, Robinson was more interested in a
so peculiarly Robinson's own—the heroes of his long poems—those "faceless"
and in people who succeeded and failed them and who succeeded, the
characters who live in no particular town, and at no particular time, and
said, "There is now to be written..." But with the same insight with which
are set against a grey landscape where all the trees bear the same kind of
be remembered the social failures in the final analysis. In the same time
leaves, and where the architecture is of no specific period or design. This
reflects the general fact that there is a strong admiration which
is the group of Roman Bartholow, Avon, Cavander, Nightingale, Matthias,
Talifar, 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, "This
single reiterated message is simply 'man has failed.' Louis Untermeyer reduces that message to even more specific terms when he adds, "In an age which exalts the successful man, Robinson lends us at least life to the failure." 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 them 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 the very idea of character, simple or complex, which the world judges by its own hasty standards, and labels 'failure,' his interest seems to proceed from the fact that he is very apt to find in the social failure a citadel of strength, or a sensitivity of perception, which becomes ultimately an intangible "success mark," and which often actually accounts for the character's lack of social eminence. By his own admission, Robinson was more interested as a poet in "people who struggled and failed than the ones who succeeded." He said, "There is more to write about." 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 clouded in spiritual failure, though the


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; the type whom the world easily classifies on the basis of its apparent and external social inadequacy. Second, there is the failure whose weakness is spiritual rather than social; who fails as completely in his ultimate comprehension as did Ahab or Gavender; or who fails in spite of a degree of wisdom because he is after all human and not god, as did Merlin. According to Robinson, the common basis for failure, however, is the degree of perception of the Light possessed by each individual. From this point it may be stated that actually there is but one kind of failure with which Robinson is really concerned, and that is the failure of the spirit; and further, that the two apparent types of failure are but two facets of existence, and become for Robinson simply the two modes for failure, 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 fail, if success be interpreted to mean a state of ideal perfection; since men are human, hence fallible; and that each man, then, falls short, by his very humanity, of the perfect ideal. This perfect ideal is, however, the same for no two men; being based always on the
individual capacity. Each man then fails in a different way.

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

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

1. Cf., post, p. 47.
2. Louis Ledoux, op. cit., p. 16.
3. Ibid.
ineffective yearnings, and accepting them; the Cossadoreas, crying out in 
for those who dare to dare enough to find it.

a commercialized world where "none heeded and few heard"; the Carmichaels, 
many of its most "disturbing" failures, like Doberman, or sightless, 
with their subtle kind of horror. Here too is the man Flammond, distin-
ction and tradition of Corduroy and, in India's Path of Light. It is a dis-
guished, generous, intuitive, one "who held his head as one by kings 
asked of convention for such a different way, by none ever actually 
accredited"; yet there is in him a "small salient kink" which makes him 
achieved, and for none ever obvious or conventional, but it is there to 
"a Prince of Castaways." Here is Mathias, who "gave with honors earned": 
imagination, its beginning is clearly among names, if it is yet sure 
who was, like his house, "somewhat on an eminence"; and who is fated to try 
make a star, as a God of the new generation.

to batter down with his two hands the doorway to oblivion. Here is Richard 

Yet the problem of rebirth is a separate one in itself. If Cory, who effectually contradicts popular opinion, which wished itself in 
steadily linked with its preliminary, the failure of the failure here 
his place, by the swift sure gesture of a bullet through his head. Here 
may be no question, "it must seem very late in the shape, but here is 
King Jasper, the rich and ruthless capitalist; and Merle, the mighty 
man in the north," failure is, with the difference, which, whatever our 
and wizard, who, with all his wisdom, is not immune to the weaknesses of his 
be worn out. Here, in fact, is humanity; a world of big and little people, all 
of them fall short, in greater or less degree, of the only real success 
for Robinson—the realization of significant spiritual value. Or, even 
having realized much value, theoretically, as some of them do, they still 
fall short, being but human in their ability successfully to shape life to 
be a perfect ideal pattern. All fall short, according to the degree to 
which they have perceived and obeyed, the guiding principle of the Light, 
(7) Robinson Crusoe, "Sarilla," etc.

Here then is the basic classification for this study. The Robinsonian 
characters fall into two main groups. In their author's parlance, they are 
the "Frisian," or those who have "seen" too much, or too little, of that Light which is 
the only Path out of the Wilderness. Though it is not the primary problem of this study, the problem 
of the Path, though difficult of finding, is not impossible of achievement. 
In Robinson's own words,
There's a way out of every wilderness
For those who dare or care enough to find it.

Many of his most "distinguished" failures, like Cavender, or Nightingale,
or Matthias, or Fernando Nash, do find that path at last. It is a sug-
gested way of redemption; for each, a different way, by none ever casually
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-
ticately 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 enter into the Robinsonian lives, and its connection
with his white and tragic Light, is the central issue of this study. It is

Nightingale," p. 1031; "Matthias At The Door," p. 1077; "The Man Who Died
Twice," p. 221.
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. 221, and also in the general Conclusion.
also the crucial problem for those bewildered and complex men and women who populate the Robinson universe; those whose excess or diminished spiritual sight contributes directly to their human and spiritual deficiency.

THE LIGHT SYMBOL AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

"It is the faith within the fear"

Allusion has been made to the Robinsonian symbol, the Light. The close perception brings the follow of the characters. Before presenting Robinson. 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-analysis. I have tried to express this best for character-analysis in the phrase "the steady light." It is a phrase with double suggestiveness.

First, the light symbol is present not only the most consistent theme is Robinson's story (though he interchanges it occasionally with the "word," but it applies at will implies the heart of his conception of life, and of character affectionate.

For those that never have the light
It means the same thing.
For those, the Children of the Light
They have lost it Fortune's demeanor.

Whose continued rise these words as the subject of his career as an artist, his adherence to the importance of the Light, persist consistent Robinson's concept of artistic life. Furthermore, the Light is an essential part of Robinson's...
philosophy guides and shapes the ultimate expression of his narrative patterns and his characterizations.

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 light and its significance.

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

For those who never knew the light The darkness is a sullen thing, And they, the Children of the Night, Seem lost in Fortune's winning.

Though Robinson writes these words at the outset of his career as an artist, his adherence to the importance of the Light remains consistent throughout his poetic life. Furthermore, the Light is an integral part of whatever.
philosophy 1 guides and shapes the ultimate expressions of his narrative structure and his ideas, it "shapes" through illogical patterns and his characterizations.

The word "philosophy," however, may be too large and firm a word to be accurately applied to his theories of the meaning of life, or to a neat package and conveniently installed. On the contrary, he tells his "answers" to the questions with which he was preoccupied both in his personal life and in his poetry. Many critics feel that he does not answer the questions in part because he is dealing with "philosophical" or metaphysical questions at all; that he is too fatalistic, pessimistic, negative, that he was not a philosopher but as a poet, he wrote poetry, not philosophy. His不定, ever to permit of attaching to his attitudes the word "philosophy." These terms, however, would appear to be convenient, if not the correct term, for his poetry, his poetry of "comparative" ease, which sometimes, perhaps, are heavy and perhaps superficial labels; labels which, moreover, Robinson and his work prefer to discourage an attempt to translate into himself consistently and vigorously rejected.

Not a word could change the reality; one only: the essence of poetry with the sabbath of logic.

Actually, he considered himself in the ranks of the joyous of the earth—though his was highly specialized kind of joy, very different from that of the "knight," for example, Robinson's "answers" on the questions to what he called "the nauseating evasions of the uncompromising 'optimist,'" assume the shape of a separate and separate "philosophy." For him, true optimism was closer to "a willingness to be honest, with all the consequences of being willing to be honest in his acceptation of the life as it is," and never the suggestion of surrender—or even of weariness"; and he considered as "austerity, a part of the content of the universe, a part of the general it "the most admirable thing in life or in art." 2 One feels that Arne Moore's "is the most admirable of the "national" poems." 3 Again, in Lowell wrote simply when she said of Robinson, "He has raised for himself a banner, and it bears upon a single word, 'Courage'." 4 The motto on the design of the seal of the United States, the motto on the seal of the nation, which is really a statement of our ability to accept a democratic interpretation of the universe and of life, is in use, or poorly

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1. The most complete critical work on Robinson's philosophy, Miss England's recent study, (cf., Foreword, ante p. 1) includes a chapter titled "Lights, and Shadows," p. 40, in which the light is studied as a philosophical concept applied to four major poems.


3. "Ode to America," 1792, edited for a statement in regard to Robinson's "poetry" and "philosophy of life in general."
other side of the banner, she adds, is "Success through failure," or "proven failure in finite terms--annoying words--and the rest in
profane.

But this is not to say that Robinson ever obliges by presenting
things. There is no sense in saying that this world is not a
statement of his answers to the riddles of existence done up in
peculiarly new and old one, the religious and the scientific. He
and conveniently labelled. On the contrary, he deals with
one. He is, in the word of his famous novel, "I still think that
rejects a philosophical implication for his poetry. Perhaps the critical
is not a single part, but probably the least important.

confusion in part has originated at exactly this point; Robinson insisted
in a letter to Dr. Will Durant, Robinson again denies his own
that he was not a philosopher; that as a poet, he dealt not with logical
kind of optimism and pessimism: "If man is a materialist, or a mechanist,
concepts, but rather with emotion; and obviously he dealt primarily with
... I say it for those to whom science seems a futility as
the effect of experience upon the spirit. These elements, however, are
more than merely; and as to the last point, though a logical
not the primary stuff of philosophy, and to attempt to force them into
believe that it is one... It is apparently not that that any
such a world is to confuse the issue, by confusing the essence of poetry
or not in the light of all logical fables is a success

with the essence of logic.

Aeschylus, Robinson's own definition of poetry, recorded by Joyce
Witness, for example, Robinson's answers on two occasions to
letterists. Robinson was asked by a letterist what he meant by "essential
students who were preparing theses on his poetical philosophy. In 1930
defines my personality. My actual personality is the original individuality.
he wrote, "There is, no philosophy in my poetry beyond an implication of
Poetry," he said, "A language that helps me, through a sort of
an ordered universe, and a sort of determinist negation of the general
have moral facts, amounting to something more than..."
He added that
futility that appears to be the basis of 'rational' thought."
Again, in
have the interpretation of the essence of essence, one of whom is called to be
1931, he wrote,

I am sorry to learn that you are writing about my "philosophy,"
which is merely a statement of my inability to accept a mechanistic
interpretation of the universe and of life. As I see it, my poetry
as well as the essence of aesthetic statement grows out of the fact that...

1. Ibid., p. 34.
3. Ibid., p. 194.
He is not pessimistic, nothing of an infinite nature can be proved
or disproven in finite terms—meaning words—and the rest is
probably a matter of one's individual ways of seeing and feeling
things. There is no sense in saying that this world is not a
pretty difficult place, but that isn't pessimism. The real
pessimist sees too much of one thing, and the optimist is too
likely to see only what he wishes to see—or perhaps not to see
at all beyond the end of his famous nose. I still wish that
you were writing about my poetry—of which my so-called philosophy
is only a small part, and probably the least important.1

I cannot find my way; things are no star.
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 bear it only as a test...

...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
abundance is not a fact, I can only know my native inability to
believe that it is not. There is apparently not much that any-
one can do about it except to follow his own light—which may
or may not be the light of an ignis fatuus in a swamp.

For though it all, Horrors, beyond its all—
Again, Robinson's own definition of poetry, recorded by Joyce
Kilmer in an interview for the New York Times, in 1916, definitely pre-
This is a powerful voice, belonging to the publication of 1899. It en-
closes any possibility of his actually revealing his literary scaffolding.
Kilmer's "poetry" was already permanently established. As
"Poetry," he said then, "is a language that tells us, through a more or
sixty-odd, he could still write of the light with conviction and joy;
less emotional reaction, something that cannot be said." He added that
it is "true to heart that the man was a light, for without any
it had two characteristics, one of which is "that it is, after all,
have always had me to keep my own...though I fear that you...\nundefinable." 3 In words that 1 am whispering quite low. Words it
was, but it cannot end, 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 grew out of the fact that

2. Ibid., Sept. 18, 1931, p. 166.
"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 viewpoint is already that of his early "Credo." The Light.

That I cannot find my way; there is no star
In all the shrouded heavens anywhere;
philosophie And there is not a whisper in the air
Or any living voice but one so far
That I can hear it only as a bar
Of lost, imperial music, played when fair
angelical and sweet angel fingers move, and sways,
Dead leaves to garlands where no roses are.

No, there is not a glimmer, nor a call,
For one that welcomes, welcome when he comes.
always is to be found, above, beyond it all—
For through 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..."

Directed against Robinson, because "I can't subscribe to the ready-acceptance of the right. That means..." A different sentiment, again.


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 Whimness," 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"...


2. It is perfectly possible, of course, to find in the "inspirational intuition" of Transcendentalism a link to the poetic symbol of the Light. What, however, is a different emphasis, since the Light here, again, is to be studied as a basis for characterization; furthermore, the matter of Robinson's "philosophy" has been carefully analyzed and presented by Miss Kaplan (op. cit.) particularly the chapter titled "Royce and Schopenhauer," p. 28. Other critical efforts to "place" the poet philosophically include Lloyd Morris (q.v., footnote #1, following page).
experience upon the spirit, and that action is important only in so far as it provides a release back into the external world of those forces which it has generated. 1 This goes far to explain why so often the action or narrative patterns of his poetry seem quite secondary, being sublimated to a profound exploration of the capacities of the spirit under a variety of stresses and problems, which, in so far as his characters are each unique, again explains the apparent business of the Light symbol, and the necessity for deriving from each set of circumstances the exact meaning of the Light that bestows it. For men, then, 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 utterly acquainted. Nearly all of his poems deal with the "big" questions. He chose "griefs instead of grievances to write about." 3 Since this is true, since the basic problems with which he deals are tragedies of frustration, failure, death, he is of necessity bound to propose some acceptable, convincing, or

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2. Cf. the 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 perception of the Light has made him. For each, then, the Light is a different light. Yet, in the same way in which blue, for instance, becomes an attribute of green, while yet maintaining its own identity as blue (in what Spinoza calls the relation of "mutual implication"), so does each individual instance of the light, possessing at the time its own specific unique spiritual quality, its own "attribute," ultimately merge with and identify itself with the one universal and original great Light.

So, specifically, the Light may suggest a dream-vision of an ideal state of men's being, never on this earth to be fully realized.

Such Dagonet, Arthur's Fool, recalls, in speaking of the "Siege Perilous"

Of the Grail, says her

Or it may be a vision, 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?
The shadows are all devil's, and the lights
Glean guiding and eternal? Very good;

But while you say so do not quite forget
That sunshine has a devil of its own.
And one that we, for the great craft of him
But vaguely recognize...

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.

Forget you not that he who in his work
Would mount from these low roads of measured shade
To tread the languidless highways must fling first
And fling forevermore beyond this reach
The shackles of a slave who doubts the sun.

There is the slave's dumb soul that might have been in
Aeol's heart—drowsy, silent, suggestion of
That makes you driven or invincible,
Dissolved or pulsed...

anger, blood, violence, destruction. It has none of the steady illumination...

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

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

3. Ibid., p. 195.
In "The Diary of the Light-Scale," Huxley's journey of passage,
connection with failure, several other light values and attendant symbols
with its varying intensities of emotion, is made against a corresponding
are so closely linked that they should be noted here. One of the most
background of light and time, as afternoon wanes into the diminishe
characteristic Robinsonian uses of light is as a purely natural pheno
light-world of twilight and nights and even dawn comes ominous and bloody,
to intensify emotion in a given situation. Consistently, with this purp
as before, a few fading clouds, dealing double deal in black. Huxley's bitumen
pose and effect, Robinson uses day and night, light and shadow, as an
as the hour nears before the last's book, merging with her theme, is
emotional "back-drop." One is reminded of Shakespeare's similar use of
A drama is a light that fades slowly.
Nature, so effectively does Robinson touch with light or shadow the
canvas upon which his character's moods and passions are revealed. He
suggests then definite emotional overtones by his use of varying and cor
responding degrees of light intensity.

Such a physical and psychological use of the light is particularly
and with all its well evident of man,
apparent in "Avon's Harvest," where no light appears at all, Avon's world
for the last time, he said, and that was well
being a completely shadowed existence dominated by hate, fear and remorse.

In fact, that night made new his meaning to his spiritual new house
There is the lurid gleam of the fire of hate and terror that burns in
of course, the light here, as in "Avon's Harvest," being the panorama,
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 illumina
tion 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
"light now like darkness to the eye."

the scene moves to its conclusion, says Avon,
Later, the moonlight line between him and a chair in which Lovers, whom
for time was hidden out there in the black lake
he has called me. He in it Penetrate the
which now I could see only as a glimpse
Of black light by the shore. There were no stars
dark pines close to me, and the moon was hours away
Behind me. There was nothing but myself
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 thread of his fate through a world after-background of light and time, as afternoon wanes into the diminished light—world of twilight and night; and even dawn comes crimson and bloody, shone in into night. Malory's bitterness is shared; he beholds a day for an intended double deed of blood. Malory's bitterness in the hour spent before Agatha's tomb, merges with her name, in

A dimness in a light that faded slowly
Into a twilight that would not last long,
Likewise, a crimson sunrise echoes his vengeful mood, as he tramps to his last meeting with Nightingale, on a day which, he plans, will be the last.

on earth for either of them.

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

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

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

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

For peace is not here and substituted.

Later, the moonlight lies between him and a chair in which Lestrange, whom he has murdered, used to sit. Seric, cold, remote, now it penetrates the shadows, in the house of that fatal evening, forming, on a victory in the dark places of his mind, intensifying the cold triumph of his now-tortured

2. Ibid., p. 1038.
3. "Cavender's House," op. cit., p. 961; also post p. 107
Vivian first appears to him as a "slim young cedar," with a complexion...
silver candlesticks etch her "dusky loveliness" against a deepening dusk; shadow, while Merlin and Vivian "twin" golden goblets. But a vision of
Camelot comes to Merlin; really it is also the searching heat that may affright
its object into madness. This is the reality revealed in Frostmund's
remark here 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 "wisty twilight" intercepting the sun which for him is
Vivian. "He leaves Camelot at the last in a fierce wind and a gloom that
depends into unrelieved night..." And there was darkness over Camelot,3
These, then, are a few examples out of many of Robinson's constant use of
light for emotional intensification.

As for specific light symbols, one of the most frequent of such
representations—what might be called the symbol of a symbol—is in the
concrete image of the sun. Here, through a transference of qualities, the
Light itself suggests universal, constant, and blinding comprehension
of life. Such understanding is vouchsafed to but a few, and for
these exceeds human capacity to long sustain, as witness Merlin.4 For,
with respect to those who see too much, it has been written of Robinson,
"In his passionate skepticism he refuses to agree that any vision is the
1. Ibid., p. 314; 2. Ibid., p. 342.
3. Of analysis of the poem, post p. 69.
universally valid one.\textsuperscript{3} The sun image then, is a particularly apt one; for the Light is the way to peace and grace and spiritual life;\textsuperscript{2} but in
perhaps, that eye of men pre-announced the inherent in its saving intensity is also the scorching heat that may thứ
one into nothingness. This is the quality revealed in Tristram's remark born of knowledge won too late: the darkSans and kills himself.

This I can feel only the sun behind me now--the light may be \textsuperscript{3}
which is a fearful thing if we consider it implied, and too long, or look too long into its face,\textsuperscript{2}
where symbolically it is.

There is an obvious physical corollary to the sun image in the opposite symbol, which appears frequently, namely, darkness. The inter-
pretation 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, the darkness actually is absence of the light, with all the emotional and spiritual confusion entailed thereby. Insight into the nature of things, not,\textsuperscript{3} 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 Earth,\textsuperscript{4}

\begin{itemize}
  \item 1. Mark Van Doren, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 87.
  \item 2. Robinson's epitaph for Captain Craig is, "He had the sun"--an implication suggesting the secret both of Craig's social failure and spiritual success.
  \item 4. "Matthias at the Door," \textit{op. cit.}
\end{itemize}
Matthias' mentor, lacked... failures, or ancient successes; the failures are paradoxically...er, or the success of earth and earthly works.

Perhaps, then, eyes of men are meant to see... 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 implied, even in such poems as "Deipher" where symbolically it is quite absent; for Robinson suggests it through transferring its quality—the essence of vision—to the eyes which do, or do not, perceive it. There appears then the frequent image of eyes whose vision is dim, or blinded. This deficiency again may become a basis for failure, and goes without saying that the majority of Robinson's characters see through a glass darkly. Only a few, as in life, bear the terrific responsibility of excessive vision or insight into the nature of things.

But, and here is the full implication of the "tragic light," in either case, whether because of too dim, or too acute vision, tragedy in the life of the character results. Or, it has already come to pass at the point where his psychic history begins to be revealed. So Robinson uses the presence or the absence of the Light as a constant character re-agent. Thus his vision is essentially tragic, in that it stresses the degeneration of ideas, the dimming of the light, when these become implicated in the rough action of the world. It matters not then whether these light...

1. Ibid., p. 1072
3. Mark Van Dorn, op. cit., p. 34.
characters are obvious failures; or apparent successes; the failures are paradoxically explained, not infrequently as imminent spiritual successes, or the successes, like Nathaniel, whose spiritual houses are built, as they ultimately realize, on sand, collapse in obvious failure, from which there may or may not be an arising.

And 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".

All of these qualities, capacities, meanings, signify the light for Robinson—the light which may be regarded them 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, the "escape from despair";

1. Of such are Capt. 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 much of Robinson's own reaction to life, perhaps the Light is finally no more complex than these:

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

As previously stated, Robinson is particularly interested in portraying the aspects of failure; that resulting from correct 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 emphasized in Robinson's "philosophy" was something of almost in the personal experience. The light will not be applied to nineteen points, in which it will be interpreted as a fundamental concept or quality, whose excessive or diminished perception accounts for certain failures. As the Light itself varies 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 emphatically to the Robinsonian world. The list will include: Captain Craig (1929); Marlin (1927); Landini (1929); Avar's Harvest (1928); Amos Harrod (1928); The Man Who Died Twice (1929); Tristram (1927); Cinderella's House (1927); The Glory of the Righteous (1928); Matthews at the Well (1929); Callier (1933); Amaranth (1928); Xion Jasper (1929). Brief sketches will be made...
also of the earliest group of short poems biplified by the short portrait of Richard Cory (1897), with the description of the latter, these are the

"heroes" of the poem, the most typical Robinsonian characters, in that, except for the Arthurian figures, they arise from actual history but

his own observation and knowledge of Nature. The poet will not be

treated in chronological order, for Robinson's poetry actually indicates

as previously stated, Robinson is particularly interested in

little growth, except in the length of his later poems, where he implied

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

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

vision. Such failure is, again, related to the degree of individual

consciousness. To his later poems of sickness, just as

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

"philosophy" goes something at least to his personal experience. The

Light will now be applied to nineteen poems, in which it will be inter-

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

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

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

It should be stated that analysis will be made of those representa-
tive characters belonging most distinctly and uniquely to the Robinsonian

world. The list will include Captain Craig (1902); Merlin (1917);

Lancelot (1920); Avon's Harvest (1921); Roman Bartholomew (1922); The Man

who Died Twice (1924); Tristan (1927); Carter's House (1927); The

Glory of the Righteous (1930); Matthias At the Door (1931); Talifer

materializes a second Arthurian-related division of a second work (1933); Anamannah (1934); King Jasper (1935). Brief mention will be made

1. Cf. ante pp. 48, 49.
also of the earliest group of short poems typified by the short portrait of Richard Cory [1897]. With the exception of the latter, these are the "heroes" of the long poems; the most typically Robinsonian characters, in that, except for the Arthurian figures, they derive from nowhere but his own observation and imagination. Furthermore, the poems will not be treated in chronological order, for Robinson's poetry actually indicates little growth, 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 drama, an astounding fidelity 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 contrast in theme or pattern.

If, for a complete study of failure, inclusion in one 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 them qualities which heretofore may have escaped more casual eyes; qualities which, high-lighted, give new character-significance, and often the opposite value from that usually accorded.

A. Those Who See Too Much

Analysis will begin with those who 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 poems)—Before beginning the first

1. I shall analyse 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 those 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 narratives; no psychological analyses—except by implication. Four stanzas suffice for Cory's brief and glittering walk across the pages of American literature; yet in those four stanzas is hinted (but never explained) the stark disillusion and sense of futility which, thirty-seven years later, are to lead Matthias to the door of his dark cave, and to intended suicide. For Richard Cory bears the unmistakable imprint of Robinson's sensitive and haunted touch.

He is, in every sense, prophetic, which was more, apparently, than he had
the material. Whenever Richard Cory went down town, all eyes on the
We people on the pavement looked at him;
valuable sample he was—gentleman from sole to crown, born for whom the light
Clean favored and imperially slim,
Is too intense, and we know him, and we, from the very best, good,
And he was always quietly arrayed,
Dressed he was always human when he talked;—look of ability to
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
"Good morning," and he glittered when he walked; such the

And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—
And admirably schooled in every grace;
In fine, we thought that he was everything.
To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and smiled for the light.
Life unaltered, and went without the meat, and cursed the bread, but, there, there
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.

2. Collected Poems, p. 82.
It is not surprising that Richard Cory baffled early readers of Robinson. Why did he do it was the obvious question—and it remains unanswered until one has worked backward from the more developed characterizations.

Then the chinks, where the poet's intuition has leapt the gaps of revealed fact, can be filled in. For if we cannot say that his despair was induced by an emotional disappointment, or by a material bankruptcy, or by this or that, however, not an implication of despair, and an almost beastly some other obvious circumstance wedded, before Cory's time and experience, his acceptance of the fact that silence and the social truce, may lead to nocturnal bullets, we may imply that he must have possessed enough of not he can, but God.

his author's "light" to have recognized himself at last for what he truly

(F) Captain Craig—like arch-enigma, Captain Craig, is another was; and so to have become aware of his spiritual deficiency. He must example of the coming out of this principle of excessive light, applied have realized, one day, the eternal discrepancy between the appearance and a little differently. Captain Craig "had the sun." But Captain Craig, the realities of life-values. With them, just as much of the light self-made, 'we had our feet on the moral ground, but we had discovered and knowledge, or of Truth, as he had, which was more, apparently, than he had listened up to five or six young men, instituted 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 by Tilbury prudence. He had lived his life is too intense, and so tragic. And so, from the earliest poems, this desperate love to fashion or himself.

freighted and burdensome ability to perceive Truth—or lack of ability to perceive it—is the single thread of fast color that runs through the 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 own Flammonde, of the shining clan. Flammonde was gifted with an extraordinary sensibility of a, transport with love, the sighs, spiritual apprises as the soul's perception; he could detect, and foster, a talent hidden from more casual eyes. 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.

1. To trust in one, and let the certain stars,

 Barely at once will nature give

2. If, by the power too be Flamen's and live.

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

(3) Captain Craig.—That arch-humorist, Captain Craig, is another example of the working out of this principle of excessive Light, applied to be an internal letter of the soul a little differently. "Captain Craig "had the sun," 3 But Captain Craig, unlike Richard Cory, is of the social drab. Yet he is discovered and in the Captain acts "like a king such as coming back of the sea shone", listened to by five or six young idealists for and presents the picture of a philosopher whose inner grace is the same

The spark in him...

of honor, or

Choked under, like a jest in Holy Writ,

Enraged prudence. He had lived his life

the tragic joke

And in his heart had shared, with all mankind,

Inevitably leave to fashion of himself

for "sun-gram"... into his activities in practical matters, and brought

Whatever he was not. And after time,

When it had come sufficiently to pass

That he was going patch-clad through the streets,

Weak, dizzy, chilled, and half starved, he had laid

Some nerveless fingers on a prudent sleeve,

And told the sleeve in forlorn confidence,

Just how it was. "My name is Captain Craig,"

He said, "and I must eat." The sleeve moved on... 3

and disappearing so that none could guess where the scent of men's

distribution side sense entered until long after I heard the sound.


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
overlooked his "one-faced failures." Socially, this
is his tragic downfall. Right on, with unsoiled adoration,
right on, withlime as it had always been, as is this quality.
To trust in God, and let the Captain starve.
If, by the grace of his young pensioners, he does not completely starve,
his ultimate history is disclosed in several philosophic letters, in a
magnificent number of conversations, and, finally, in an eccentric and triumphant
day, he decrees of nothing.

Death-bed scene.

That he would rather live than die himself
But he is triumphant. For he had

---a joy to find in his life
To be an outcast usher of the soul
For such as had good courage of the Sun
To pattern Love, and

So the Captain sits "like a king with an ancient case" on his one chair,
and presents the picture of a philosopher whose saving grace is the sense
of humor, or the balanced vision, which discerns, without being defeated,
the sadness, merciful the Captains, like the mark, has a bread over it in a
the tragic joke that life is for most of humanity; and whose very capacity
for "sun-grazing" has made him oblivious to practical matters, and brought
him to his last physical and social indigence. He looks at a world which
perverse of his town, achieved, one at last the realization, and even
the universe, the world, the whole, courage, 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,""
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 the eternal, unchanging, unchanging, unchanging. That he would rather do than be himself. To his young, "Windsor-ahive..." He is a "clescript, a "wondering, wise, questioning, sanctified, and cherishing, the living light..." He is one of the "God's universal, Forgetful of dead shadows..." The record of his failures and achievements is that of most of Schleem's. He may not have much strength in his arms, stranger to most of us, and yet, out of this quest, achieved, comes at last the realization, and even the possession of "the world's achievements"—wisdom, knowledge, courage, faith, Love. Of such is the Captain's Life.

Al in earnest eye for the aim fact Of what this dark world is...^5

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1. Ibid., p. 126. 3. Ibid. 5. Ibid., p. 137.
2. Ibid., p. 135. 4. Ibid., p. 131. 6. Ibid., p. 138.
But if these he indeed the Light, for his, and if the Captain has followed and captured its gleam, how can he be listed as a failure? He is such only in the accepted social and material sense. For Robinson, he succeeds, as a man, because of his perception of true values. So, slowly and almost majestically, he emerges as an example of Robinson's peculiar irony. For his, and his author's is Penniless as he is, he can still bequeath an ultimate Universe to his young friends—the staff of his last will and testament. Confessed in his last hours of his "world-worshipping, time-questioning, sun-fearing and heart-yielding," the Captain assigns to them "God's universe;" and hell shall have no power to wrack 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:

The best part... If I had won for success. It is also another statement of the eternal By giving less; but now I make you laugh By giving more than what had made you beam, and jubilo. And it is well. No man has ever done The deed of humor that God promises, For now and then we know tragedies— the Light— even he is reform, and in denial too divine Sacred was the thought of turning an acer um on a sacrifice, too firm for ecstasy. Record in letters, or in books they write, back. It is what fragment of God's humor they have caught. What earnest of its rhythm; and I believe That I, in having somewhat recognized The formal measure of it, have endured The discord of infirmity no less, servant call, through fortune than by failure. Shall after that call guide him? What his are

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

1. Ibid., p. 141 2. Ibid., p. 149 3. Ibid., p. 150
...What men lose
Man gains; and what man gains reports itself.
In losses we but vaguely deplore, nay,
So they be not for us; and this is right.
Except that then 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—

It is the flesh...it is the vision...it is the passing of the spirit.
That ails us, for the spirit knows no qualms,
Nor do we, for the spirit knows no qualms of our own.
And having set your steps regard not much,
That all afar for the spirit knows no qualms of our own.

The outward laughter clinging at your feet, has enabled
Nor the inward laughter clinging at your feet, has enabled
Nor overmuch the warning; only know
That there burns and shines and lives, unanswerable, and mystic
And always yours, the Truth.
As he is, the...it is the wisdom...it is the vision...it is the spirit...it is the vision...it is the vision...it is the vision...
...fly for truth.

And he shall have no storm to crush your flight; and
No laughter to vex down your loyality.

This, then, is the forthright and triumphant legacy of one who stands in

...the best Robinonian sense for success. It is also another statement of

gallery of those who fall by virtue of seeing too much of the light; and
the eternal conflict between the aspiring spirit and the constraining
in the figure of, the new of the same name. In this

and dubious flesh.

pore Robinson, and other another step in the succession of the historical.

For the Captain has discerned the Truth—the Light—even as "a

source, being born with the manner born; engaged to almost
scared man among men." After that, there can be no thought of turning
historical characters, and nor reached the novel proportions of legend.
back. It must be so for any man, he says, for,
Here, in three lines, based on Aristotelian legend, is the distillation and

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

1. Ibid., p. 150. 2. Ibid., p. 151.
universal all. The clash of all crossed voices and all noises

How shall he grope to be confused again,

disorder. As he has been, by discord? When his eyes have experiences
Have read the book of wisdom in the sun,

are again on earth. How shall he turn them back to scan some huge

Blood-lettered protest of bewildered men

That hunger while he feeds where they would starve,

finite and find all absurdly perishd now, 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 friends in his hope

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

1. Ibid., pp. 156-157.
2. Op. post pp. 81-97
universal significance. These men and women are not pure individual test representations then, but rather "eternal types," and their experiences are again not too much individual, but concerned with the timeless human effort to understand and cope with "an infinite universe" through "a 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 surface of pessimism to the ultimate heights of a new spiritual idealism. Says Mr. Morris, the war "served to turn men's minds inwards, in a discovery of faith." 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 the 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-visual, conceived light of the Grail. Said Robinson himself, "Galahad's light."

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2. Ibid., p. 47.
5. Ibid.
6. "Lancelot"
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 him, there can be no more Merlin, after their ten-year love-idyll with Vivian in Brittany, has reappeared at Caernarvon 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 Medrak who covets both Guinevere and the throne, Arthur, as the king of Camelot, as head of the Round Table, and as a man, numbers his days. Some of his sons and the world. Yet when Merlin first reappeared at Caernarvon, the once-mighty wizard, whose Light, super-bright, is yet inadequate to save Arthur and the doomed society of Camelot. Merlin goes away, a defeated man, without his Cuncio beard; an external and maddened man, the mere shadow of his wizard mightiness, in that he has vanished entirely in the great eerie cloud, unable to foresee the unforeseen tragic events to come, and recognized them as inescapable and inevitable. It was not man's light, but the Light of the Grail that could set him free—until he beyond his magic ability to divert or forestall the personal negative resolution of his life, his failure, comes for Merlin in the course andArthur's entourage, Merlin must die."

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 that his vision is dimmed. Merlin, they agree, will have "enough and a world. That is failure and penalty both; for he must witness the down- world and of the king he has created. For him, there can be no greater personal failure. How does it come about?

The Fall, Losi Merlin.

Merlin had existed, serene and competent, until he allowed himself to lose his sense of proportion, until he betrayed his intelligence, by falling in love with Vivian. Their affair is at first so satisfying that he is quite willing to divorces 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, according to hearsay,

weary, the vitality of an ageless youth, crowned with a glory of eternal peace. But, significantly, he has come back without his famous beard; an external change suggestive of an inward one. Once, Gawain asserts, he knew everything. At least, he "knew as much as God would let him know"—until he

3. Ibid., p. 239.
met Vivian. It is an important "until," in Round Arthur's skill, implies
that part of Merlin's penalty for excessive knowledge is actually
behind buried in Bracciolini.
For too much wisdom and clairvoyance.

But now there is a general feeling that Merlin is diminished in power and
vision. The Arthurian legend speaks of Merlin being "hardly wise, more seldomly
sounded and appraised" Arthur's anguish if he has his wisdom any longer. But has he
the love and power when he is unable to save Camelot. For even Merlin,
Even to Arthur he is

...the none, lost Merlin,
Whose name was made of him a slave.
A man of equal, and a sybarite. 2

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

Too smooth now for a wizard of a sage.

May written for the king's remembering eye,
A pathos of a lost authority
Long, faded, and unconsciously gone. 3

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

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

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

Yet he sees the coming of Galahad, for whom he founded the Siege Perilous,—
and back to a few words of a verse, the most important predictions, and
Galahad, who is to be Lancelet's son, and who is to find the Grail. But

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

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."

Yet goes on seeing till the inverted flame

Merlin's penalty for excess Light is then the madness—though an ecstatic

And leaves of what there was of him to his

madness—of his love for Vivian. His failure as a magician, the result of

that love and hate alike must hide away

the love-idyll, comes when he is unable to save Camelot. For even Merlin,

a distant failure, were the touch of time

like all "men who dream," has two heights: the distance between words,

From flower to flower into oblivion,

even words of wisdom, and deeds, that "crawl so far below them."3

Of moths and flowers, one glimmering 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."

Or Camelot. The Grail. For who says light,

she adds that both of them are "out of tune with time." 4 They are,

neither of them, she says, "strung for Today."5 So she rationalizes

their belonging to each other!

...Vivian is your punishment.
For making kings of men who are not kings;
And you are mine, by the same reasoning.

For living out of time and out of tune

With anything but you..."

But Time will have its revenge. The change inevitable is shadowed

when Merlin leaves her to go to Camelot. When returns to Brittany, he

too much must have an end to say it out;

comes back to a new loneliness; a "vague, soul-consuming premonition," and

that I shall feel before I went on to.

1. Ibid., p. 294. 2. Ibid., p. 295. 3. Ibid., p. 296. 4. Ibid., p. 297. 5. Ibid.
now he wonders if his "envying intellect" is to shine as a "twain mirror" with Arthur's dissolving kingdom. Vice takes a dazed revenge.

He tw... The man who sees
A picture and returns to Arthur: end he
may have seen too late
the path he takes unseen,' he told himself when he found thought again. 'The man who sees
may go on seeing till the immortal flame, that lights and lures him, holds him in its heart,
and leaves of what there was of him to die, does not get to see a
stream of inexpressible dust
again to Vivian. That love and hate alike must hide away Or there may still be a vizard for his feet
court Merlin. A dimmer faring, where the touch of time were like the passing of a twilight moth
from flower to flower into oblivion. But it 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.
Of Lancelot, the Grail. Nor this pure light
Merlin's "steat."
has many rays to throw, for many men to share of Grail.
To follow; and the wise are not all pure, nor are the pure all wise who follow it. There are more rays than men, but let the man
who sees too much, and was to drive himself from paradise, play too lightly or too long
power or air.
Among the moths and flowers, he finds at last work, and
there is a dim way out; and he shall grope
where pleasant shadows lead him to the plain thing in beyond That has no shade 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, meanest; and
And has an empty thought of empty rest.

...The man who saw
3. An interesting variation of this verse appears in "Lavater's" Poem, p. 77.
It is Merlin's own epitaph for greatness that he voices. So Broceliande becomes for him a prison-yard, as Tintin takes a delayed revenge on to
"Merlin. He feels that he must leave Vivian and return to Arthur; and he does. But on his second trip back to Camalot, he departs again without his,
seeing the king; knowing now that Arthur must meet his destiny without
further intervention from himself. Furthermore, he decides not to go back
again to Vivian, in the disaster-laden gnomes that falls over the stricken
court. Merlin and Dagonet move away together. And if Merlin is now an
impotent wizard, and a disillusioned and saddened man, it is because, he says,
to be convinced; but I was neither Fate nor God, refused to see and admit
I saw too much; and this would be the end,
with Lancelot Werc there to beg an end, I saw myself—
A sight to no other man has ever seen;
the flames and the pitch so many times, protected
saw two fires that are to light the world.
his, killing a number of the knights, including his of Grail's brothers.
Merlin's "two fires" are, of course, the destrucive blaze of Camalot,
and takes her to Joyous Gard, his domain. Container roads Arthur into
and the Light of the Grail.
abandoning Joyous Gard, and weary and fruitless fighting continues, until
Like all of humanity, Merlin may not exceed the limits of mortal
Lancelot he ordered my eyes to see, and to observe whatever, in absence.
not re-

power or experience without penalty. He may begin a great work, and

create in Arthur an example for coming ages; but the finishing is beyond
beneath him waiting him, and the realization that the war is to consume
powers. Merlin has seen too much of the Light—in his case, the
in France. Later, forever, in a letter from Camalot, Lancelot is advised
light of wisdom or intelligence. Vivian is his explicit punishment; and
Vivian should have been to his by the book and the Arthur is right
so punished, through the dimming of his powers, he has been rendered im-

able to save that which he has created and loved. It is his failure,
Lancelot to forget his beauty and recovers only what he once had
and perhaps his human distinction,

of his nearest friends, aguing that only Lancelot can cure, Lancelot,

Arthur and Lancelot agree to this, but he arrives too late too late.

Author of "Lazarus," says that only Lancelot can cure, Lancelot,


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 incompleteness of the other. "Lancelot" simply continues the story of Camelot, begun three years before in "Merlin."

Under the influence of the Grail Light, Lancelot has determined to leave Camelot and Guinevere, and to follow the lonely Gleam which the knights of the Round Table hailed as ultimate truth. His resolution to go yields to Guinevere's persuasion, however; and Arthur and his knights return unexpectedly from a hunting expedition, to find them together, and to be convinced at last of what Arthur has so long refused to see and admit. Lancelot flees, and Guinevere is to be burnt at the stake. Then the flames are actually licking the faggots, Lancelot returns, rescues her, killing a number of the knights, including two of Gawaine's brothers, and takes her to Joyous Gard, his castle. Gawaine goads Arthur into attacking Joyous Gard, and weary and fruitless fighting continues, until Lancelot is ordered by Rome to surrender Guinevere to Arthur. But on returning from escorting her to Camelot, Lancelot finds Arthur's word of banishment awaiting him, and the realization that the war is to continue in France. Later, however, in a letter from Gawaine, Lancelot is advised that Guinevere has fled for safety to the Tower, and that Arthur is fighting Modred for his life and kingdom. Gawaine, on his death-bed, urges Lancelot to forget his enmity and remember only that he was once the King's dearest friend, saying that only Lancelot can now, perhaps, save Arthur. Lancelot agrees to aid. But he arrives at Dover too late. Arthur and Modred have slain each other. The knights are dead or scattered, and the dissolution of Camelot is complete. Lancelot goes to the
convent at Almesbury for one more sight of Guinevere, who has become a nun, then turns his face into the twilight and rides into the new world born of his non-undimmed light. Lancelot who rode, long since
away from me on that unearthly 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 the study of various effects produced on men of the
Round Table by the Holy Grail pursuit. The result of looking too long
at the Light is, for Lancelot, confusion and darkness. Lancelot's
tragedy is the peculiarly human one of achieving clarity without gain
until now, he is spiritually poisoned, so confusing overcomes him and cut
ning strength. For Lancelot returns to Camelot from the Quest spiritually
of it, he loses the long asceses of tragedy that is to be the destruction of
confused, and to be caught by his love for the Queen, who thus comes between
all their worlds—a destruction in which Lancelot and Guinevere are the
him and the light of the revelation which he is not yet ready to follow
worth to enter Camelot, and turned the outward now.

Yet Lancelot was not fear well the “dare.” For, says Guinevere,
He knows only that the light has blinded him, and that there is
there is a light that you fear more today
really no place for him now in Camelot. Where is for him only the place
where the Light may lead him, 2. Gawain urges him, long before the final

catastrophe, to follow his Light, suggesting that Lancelot is himself.

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

To the Queen, Gawain advises that Lancelot
questions the Light. 4. For, says Guinevere,
really he, with no fatal fascination for him, he even questions the social
problem of stars—"the millions who are not like me." He wonders
has now inside his head a foreign fever
That urges him away to the last edge
Of everything, there to unflame himself
In sustane, and so be done with us. 4

1. Mark Van Doren, op. cit., p. 71
2. "Lancelot," p. 369
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 371.
Yet Guinevere can not, for her life, send him away; and Lancelot's resolution weakens. She repriences him for his changed attitude toward her. He has been learning now.

Are you the Lancelot who rode, long since, away from me on that uncertain quest, which left no man the same who followed it? there may be time for him to live. But he is at a spiritual impasse. He loves her, beyond reason. Yet he knows that ruin will overtake all of them if he assumes longer that he has and the cry of his tortured conscience—and of his too-fair human spirit is not seen what he has seen. Says he,

...there are no more lies
Left anywhere now for me to tell myself
That I have not already told myself
And over toll
This is the way-out to Lancelot's failure; that he has seen the Wall, until now, he is spiritually poisoned. So confusion overcomes him and out symbolizing the end as much as one can. Saith, liest, Lancelot of it comes the long crescendo of tragedy that is to be the destruction of is still a faithful human being, and yet feels one capacity to leave it all, or to return or to return. He leaves the Wall, or to return or to return. He leaves the Wall, or to return or to return. He leaves the Wall...

Yet Lancelot does not fear most the "dark," for, says Guinevere, it never comes to this world. This Lancelot knew, for he really

There is a light that you fear more today,
Then all the darkness that has ever been.

It is true. Lancelot darts questions the riddle of himself, of the vision in the world of men. He knows Lancelot has seen the light too, which drives him from the Queen's love, of the Light itself, of Arthur. He needs for his salvation his advantage. He has, in effect, been blinded questions the secret of the Court—why they all are there; who Guinevere by two lights—the purest light of the Wall, which renders him, if not as love is, with her fatal fascination for him. He even questions the social with this work, and the mere of Guinevere, one of love's: a two kingdoms problem of kings—and "the millions who are now like worms." He wonders when, if ever, wisdom will come.

1. Ibid., p. 373.
2. Ibid., p. 375.
3. Ibid., p. 379.
4. Ibid., p. 384.
There is not much time left, he knows. Yet perhaps, he adds ironically, the last act of his play may have come when he realizes that his there may be time for him to prove basic defect as he changes from devotion to the light of reasoning to the "How merry a man may be who sees the light."

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

"God, what a rain of ashes falls on him who leaves the new and cannot leave the old!"

This is the keynote to Lancelot 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.

In the words of Bors, his kinman, Lancelot has seen the Light too Lancelot knew, of course, the Light of Melusine; she has blinded near for his salvation or his advantage. He has, in effect, been blinded by two lights—the pure glair of the Grail, which renders him out of tune with this world, and the beauty of Guinevere. Now he lives in two kingdoms.

...For owning in his heart the king of either, and ruling not himself..."
For, he says, "reflecting on the downfall of Camelot, practicality, and a
voluntary read... Once I had gone of human experience answer is the Mother's
Where the Light guided me, but the Queen came,
reply, "To what light? 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 peace from being a living false that would not give him
peace." Not, the Light came, and I did not follow itself to him;
Then she came, knowing not what thing she did,
And she it was I followed... a false; a world has died
For you, that a world we live. There is no peace.
So it is that in the cold walls of the monastery Lancelot finds at last "the
end of Arthur's kingdom and of Camelot." It is the end, too, of his ordeal
he has come to the world's end, and it is best
of confusion. Guinevere voices this finale in her own way thus:
And in the darkness came 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 not
That I have cost, when I was worth so little—
There is no hazard that I see between you
And what you sought so long, and would have found
Had I not always hindered you. Forgive me—
in the darkness came the Light.

Another lesser interpretation of the light that has confused
Sir Percival Chamerley— is his and Lancelot's—his light as
Lancelot here is, of course, the light of tragic love, which has blinded
a love—three of the characters are blind or misled; and have hardened,
both the Queen and her lover,
It is not good
to know too much of love—

1. Ibid., p. 439.
2. Ibid., p. 438.
3. Ibid., p. 441.
4. Ibid., p. 440.
say the whispering muses after Lancelot's departure, 1 Practicality, and a voluntary resignation of one side of human experience answer in the Mother's reply, "We who love God alone are safest." 2

So, with his grievously won knowledge and a new fortitude, Lancelot goes on his journey, with a new consecration to his new 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."

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

You have come to the world's end, and it is best
You are not free, where the Light falls, death falls; And in the darkness comes the Light. 5

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. 6

The moment died their fifty years' worth
There were no more faces, then. There was nothing but the darkness. "And in the darkness came the Light," 5 it is for him a time of shadow, he was, as says, experienced a "dissolving fall, a blinding of his eyes, his heart, and the darkness broken.

5. Five Characterizations. -- In his insistence on the Light as a touchstone for character-value and destiny, Robinson has not confined that fall, that sense of sorrow, that sense of mystery, of the concrete, of the nitty gritty, of the personal, of the immediate, of the time, of the actual, of the known, of the lived, of the seen, of the documented, and the personages who fit into his individual pattern. Life, as well as imagination

1. "Lancelot," p. 447. 2. Ibid., p. 448. 3. Ibid., p. 449. 4. Ibid., p. 450. 5. Ibid. 6. Ibid.
then, presents us with those whose spiritual essence is for Robinson
directly traceable to their super-visions 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.

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 the Amsterdam of
1646, three years after the death of his beloved Saskia, and during his
now "discredited ascendancy." He has earned the wrath and indignation,

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

where Rembrandt has hidden it in his "new golden shadow." It is for him
a time of shadows. He has, he says, experienced a "dislocating fall, a
blinding fall," but "there are no bones broken." That fall, Robinson implies, is the direct result of Rembrandt's
"glare" which comes, through darkness, at last, only for his portraits,
for himself, and for a few believers,—a glare 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. 266.
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-Dutchmen have failed to understand that

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

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

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

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

"You might go faster, if not quite so far,
...if in your vaxed 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 Ophelia 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 returning love from Holland ever "still Holland ears are told of it," as he may, and to

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1. The opposite situation, that of an artist who does betray his integrity, is treated in "The Man Who Died Twice," cf. post p. 139.
3. Ibid., p. 568.
4. Ibid., p. 569.
...hold your light
So that you see, without so much to blind you
As even the cob-web flash of a mggiving.
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.

Reading faith is the guiding spirit of John
Rembrandt, continues his voice, must "bow" his "elected hand" and whip
his devil "each to his own nest in hell."

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

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

Furthermore, he realizes and accepts the fact that, as surely as Saskia and
the old days are gone, too, too, the law that bids him see now alone likewise
forbids his light: "till Holland ears are told of it."

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

1. Ibid., p. 389-90.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 397.
5. Ibid., p. 395.
Remberdt is a typical Robinsonian re-creation. His Light is the light of truth and artistic integrity. His problem is the eternal problem of gaining the world but losing his own soul. He prefers to lose the world; sure, with the faith of the martyrs, 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 up for years, more than a man would bear, that mark, some few will pity an old man.

"He took upon himself the work of God, and was called..." 1

...There was a work to be begun, a vision. And when the Voice, that I have heard so long, announced as in a thousandsilences, and of preparation, I began the coming work of death. There is no other way. And the old way of war for a new land, the old way of man, and in tonight, every martyr, every martyr, every martyr, and his heart is a stranger to itself..."

1. Ibid., p. 487. 4. Ibid., "John Brown," p. 485
3. Louis V. Ledoux, op. cit., p. 4.
Light, when St. Paul—St. Paul,—on the way to Rome, is secretly reading

...the major file

See only what their fathers may have seen; 1
Or may have said they saw when they saw nothing
A future made from now...

It matters not to him whether history calls him mad, or finds the question
A daughter of the great light have demanded, he is going where Cleopatra
of him unanswerable.

wants him. He is that Paul "That fell, and he that now, and he that

Meanwhile, I was:

And the long train is lighted that shall burn,

********

...Until at last a fiery crash will come
To cleanse and shake a wounded hemisphere
And heal it of a long malignity that has smothered it.

That angry time discredites and discouridences.

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

of his work. I was the one man mad enough, it seems, to think I could
learn to do my work; and now my work is over.

And you, my dear, are not to mourn for me.' 2 All a universe
Or for your son, more than a soul should mourn
where love
In Paradise, done with evil and with earth.

Yet 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

...growing everywhere external fields.' 3 They all, he says,
have gone.

For men with every virtue but the vision,

John Brown's Light is the glaze of social justice, which he follows to

...with a sense that the thing between two worlds—the
bitter end. The end is not too bitter for him, after all; for like
every martyr to an as-yet unaccepted faith, he knows that his death is
but a beginning. "I shall have more to say when I am dead," he concludes.

1. Ibid., p. 487.
2. Ibid., p. 488.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 490.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p. 492.
7. Ibid., p. 493.
And then: (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 made free...2

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

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

Like John Brown, he, too, realizes that Death will but mark the beginning of his work. He reminds the disciples that they may find what he has learned in what he has written; but that the world is still a universe to fathoms, both here and now, to realize that they are where love and faith are perhaps little more than words. Nevertheless, the first nor the last, and that he says, for the first time in history, the Gentiles have "love and law, the best of both" until we are beyond together, if so they will.5 And though Rome may yet hold for all of them a crown of thorns and fire, they are "to plant, and then to plant..." for they are working in "the eternal fields."6 They all, he says, ... may that hate: And so have they the Cross between two worlds—To guide us, or to blind us for a time: Till we have eyes indeed...7

2. Ibid., p. 462.
3. Ibid., p. 464.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., p. 465.
7. 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;

And a way home from shipwreck to the shore;
And so, through pangs and ills and desparations;

There may be light for all. There shall be light.

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

The best of life, until we see beyond
The shadows of ourselves...

...is in what we do not know.

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

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

Thou art not from the stars...
Fading behind him like familiar lights
That are to shine no more for my returning,
Home, friends, and honors—I that have lost all else
For wisdom, and the wealth of it, say now
To you that out of wisdom has come love,
That measures and is of itself the measure
Of works, and hope and faith...

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 far off... "Was it you, Mary?"
another heroic example of the Robinsonian "failure" who yet succeeds with
ecstasy and grandeur.

And then... (d) Lazarus—In the group of those who see too much,
Robinson has provided an interesting variation on the "seeing" theme in


1. Ibid., pp. 470-71.
2. Ibid., p. 477.
4. Ibid., p. 591.
Martha questions the Master’s action.

...Why did he wait
So long before he came? Why did he weep?

Mary, feeling her sister’s arms about her 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.” Martha entreats Mary to go out to him, to make him look at her, and to say once that “he is glad.” Finally, as she holds his hands, Lazarus sighs and speaks her name. He reveals then, mistily, the secret of his silence and inability to readjust to a living world.

“...Who made him come,
That he should weep for me?...Was it you, Mary?”

“.......

“I should have wept,” he said,
If I had been the Master...”

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—
To render him for a time oblivious to the usual motions of the world as

1. Ibid., p. 530. 4. Ibid., p. 535.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., p. 534.
"He cannot know that there is worse than death," says Mary. But Lazarus answers, "in the eyes of Christ the falsity 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 say how far I have gone.
Or why it is that I am here again.
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, 1 and he is not able to cope with his unique and awful privilege. He who has been the only man to have experienced two worlds, now belongs to neither.

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

The usual Robinsonian physical and psychological use of light, where and that's as well, because it wasn't 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 near, and as some kind of Shakespearean imagery than most. For here the Light quality is only an implication, found in the knowledge that exists in the eyes of Christ. But the effect on the beholder, Lazarus, is, as usual, significant; and the frequent concept of the terror and confusion for mortals who perceive too much for their mortality is clearly evident. Although Lazarus is not a failure in the accepted sense, he nevertheless presents an interesting variation of the familiar theme of the effect of the Light on ordinary, limited, earth-bound vision. And though the rest of his life is left to imagina-

1. This too is a favorite theme with Robinson, cf. Matthew, p. 141.
tion, it must 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. In contrast to the obliques of vision of Lazarus, their ignorance can be easy, and at firsts the mystery of his life—He is more apparent than in Robinson's presentation of Shakespeare, through It is a part, and penalty of his genius, that the lips of his fellow-craftsman and admirer, Ben Jonson, speaking of...he can't be king, not even king of Stratford—

Shakespeare's somewhat divine discontent, Ben intimates, is the result of what he must have had even in youth—"his eyes, and their we reach his heart, and high friends felt his fall; foretelling": his "disillusion, old aches and pangs of what's he won him the grief his last error coming." There are no tears left for him, and accordingly, some devils of the place that make the most of it.

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


4. Ibid., p. 22.
annoyance have taken him, of late, for their own; added to which, he

"itches, manner-sitten to the bone," 1 often there shines out of him

An aged light that has no age or station;
Mystery's light---his—a misleading
Half-mad serenity that laughs at ease;
For being won so easy, and at friends
Who laugh at him for what he wants the most.
And for his dukedom down in Warwickshire; 2

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

There must be a following, no fault, no
achievement. There must be a following, no fault.
For Shakespeare, for such much wear

The ground, that are now too much his soil,
The galls and garden, the fruitful soil.

These all are the leaves of the
soul's and man's image of the very weight
and reward.

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 "hel-
low dreams." 3 again, and this time in the apparent success of the unbeli-
gable... He knows now how much of what men paint themselves
would blister in the light of what they are.*

He was how much of what was great now shares
An existence transformed and ordinary.

To have the light of what the world has hurled in his
In others, to be loud not for himself;

Shakespeare. He knows how at what height low enemies
May reach his heart, and high friends let him fall.
For that ill luck, and his ill fortune, and his ill luck
But what not even such as he may know

To be in any, of any,
Devils him the worst; his lark may sing
Fate, either erring; his plight is
At heaven's gate how he will, but he sees no gate.
But one whereat the spent clay wails a little
Ironically before the churchyard has it, and the worm.

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

1. Ibid., p. 23. 2. Ibid., p. 26.
recalls Shakespeare's saying to him, as the intermary and tinsel vorth of material wits all a world where bugs and emperors
go singularly back to the same dust,
and the old, ordered starlight, which
That sang together, men, will sing the same
is supreme need tomorrow; and hallowness of much of life, has
For Shakespeare, man distrusts time and its possibilities for much more
achievement. There must come a reckoning, he feels, for man, His Light,
which shines through sessions that are now too such his own, the way for man
The rolling inward of a stiller outside,
in peace of
The churning out of all those blood-fed lines,
The nights of many schemes and little sleep,
The full brain hummed hat with too much thinking, various
The vexed heart ever-worn with too much aching
human were 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
vexed and its own reality. They are the creatures half of the world of
soul's endeavor, do not yet make for peace. Because of the very weight
realize one of their author's imagination. But formal at first, the
and responsibility of his genius, Shakespeare must live, insists men,
all of them, from Martin to Captain Drake, from Simeon to Rembrandt,
in "a phantom world he sounded and found wanting."
are shining examples of two phases of failure of the ideal: the spiritual.
Here again, and this time in the apparent success of the acclaimed
failure of the gifted and talented, or the social failure of the artist,
genius, is another kind of failure: the strength which is its own weakness.
the philosopher, or the writer, who fails gloriously, losing the world,
another example of the fact that to man, being man, is perfection
to be sure, but maintaining the integrity of his clausant ideals of
vouchsafed. Having so much by virtue of the insight which is his
value. So much as the latter was below 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

unfair. That the fall is the very top aspect of life through a limitation
of inside. Ibid., p. 30. See also, as that. Ibid., p. 31. Idea in it. "And her
little. Ibid., p. 30. Since this group according to Contra's emphasis,
his smile, knowing as he bitterly does the transitory and tinsel worth of man, the larger, a greater variety in degrees and types of failure of material things.

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

These are some representative figures who fail in their various relationships, differing from each other as much as the virtue of their human ways through excess vision of the Light—which is at once its own reward and its own penalty. They are the characters of the world of human reality, not of their author's imagination. But factual or fictitious, all of them, from Merlin to Captain Craig, from St. Paul to Rembrandt, are shining examples of two phases of failure of the ideal: the spiritual failure of the gifted and eminent, or the social failure of the artist, the philosopher, or the martyr, who loses gloriously, losing the world, to be sure, but maintaining the integrity of his sincerest ideals of spiritual truth in nearly any of the lower form phases. In each, the Light value, so much as the latter must belong to the kingdom of the Light.

In a class or waterless quality, which is to theZentra externally only in the poetic composition of the world, the Lighi is nevertheless of immense.

2. Those Who See Too Little

Analysis of Failures who exist for Robinson because of excess perception of the Light has exhibited failure in two phases—social and spiritual. The failure motif is now to be studied in the second main group—those who fail in the same two aspects of life through a limitation of insight or vision; those who, as their author would state it, "see too little" of the Light. Since this group, according to Robinson's emphasis,
is much the larger, a greater variety in degrees and types of failure appears here. There are those like Aven who have no light at all; others, like Matthias, Eoman, 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, as an unchangeable condition which

1. **Tristan**—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, Tristan. For Tristan, too, is cast in the time and the heroic tradition of the world of Merlin and Lancelot, and in fact the poem closely echoes the triangular human relationship of the other two poems.

In Tristan, 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 and vague references to it, but 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 development. The failure is another of the "frustrations of singular importance." For the double tragedy of Tristan and Isolt of Lyonesse, which Robinson commonly portrays, he is, he tells us, "blasphemous, becomes the result of the joint failure to comprehend and accept the implications of their particular situation, and of their 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 potentialities that, uncontrolled, must make only for tragedy.

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

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

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

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

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

2. Ibid., p. 604.
But this melancholy warning, answered by Tristan's 'liard-
For all who dim their wits obliviously.

...in the same manner as Arved, who tells Mark, who tells us on the parapet, what he
He sees again in memory

...a ghostly ship

...leaving a way to Cornwall, silently sail, no pain of death
From Ireland, with himself on board and one

...should he say that with her eyes told him intolerably to the inextinguishable

...little of his blind self a crowded youth,

...trust and passion

...With a sight error-flecked and pleasure-flamed, merrily,

...had made him see till on that silent voyage

...So that there was no more to see than faith betrayed into Tristan's

...Or life dissolved... I

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

...When Isolt joins him, there is further revelation of their new

...loft of Brittany has an immediate prosecution that he will not return

...joint failure. She questions the fate that hates and destroys them, and

...of course he does not. There is a repulsive interval at Jovansa 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 have mocked my blindness; then, even had you prayed

...for God to let you speak... 3

...treated passion, or would the youth that are irreconcilably meet,

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

...Tristan, Tristan,

...speak so, saying,

...are those blind-fold years in which we have lost

...become a blind king sought of a blind person.

...It was our curse that you were not to see

...Until you saw too late... 4

...They change the novelty of their situation, but now they are only

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

...dimmed to their love, as matter what merits them. Love, they agree, is

...wedded to Mark, but adorning Tristan, Isolt cries out,

...for them the only reality. So, through emptiness and felt, their too-brief

...O God, if only one of us had spoken

...Life carries in its very heart the burden of life, with a timeliness...

...When there was all that time...

...If Tristan had not spoken, she muses, so kings nor crowned could have

...outshone the light of their love.

...and so forth. Jovansa receives it upon her. Meanwhile, Isolt goes on

...with the Life... 1

1. "Tristan," p. 609. See also 4. Ibid., p. 614. Isolt to see

3. Ibid., p. 612.

5. Ibid., p. 616.

2. Ibid., p. 614.

6. Ibid., p. 622.
Tristran. But their rendezvous is discovered by Tristran's "lizard-like cousin" Ancred, who tells Mark, who has come on the parapet, what he has seen and heard. In his passion, Tristran draws his sword on the King, who thus sentences him to exile from Cornwall, on pain of death, should he return. Tristran goes back to Brittany, and to the innocent trust and peace of Isolt of the White Hands, whom he later marries, that he may live for two years; till Guenevere comes to take Tristran 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 renturous interval at Joyous Gard, where Isolt of Ireland has been able to join Tristran, through Guenevere's visit to Cornwall. Here they alternately surrender to their long-frustrated passion, or bewail the years that are irrevocably gone.

So Tristran represents, with Isolt and Mark, a Failure to use ...

...Tristran, Tristran,

...there are those blind-fold years that we have lost, counselled

Because a blind King bought of a blind father

A child blind and then 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

Tristran with hope the sight of time becomes

for them the only reality. Soon, through summer and fall, their too-brief idyll carries them to the day when Tristran returns to Joyous Gard to find that Isolt has been taken by Mark's men back to Cornwall. He is

stricken with a kind of madness, and hears, later, that Isolt, too, is

not seen before. There were no signs attending him. But almost visibly sick to death, Tristran 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 realizes now that Andred was mad on the wedding-night—made for hatred of Tristram and for an insane love for Isolt. Like the lovers, even Mark now reiterates the wish that he had "seen" in time. But time then pushes relentlessly on. Tristram and Isolt are re-united. Oblivious to all but each other, they do not see the misguided knife of Andred that marks the end for both—light—by the parapet where Tristram and Isolt lie united at last in death, voices the tragic limitations which have befallen all. After the fact, the wisdom that might have saved...

...I shall know day from night until I die, but there are dangers invisible 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 advancement—It is convenient now to consider the tragic limitations to life itself. There has been a too-dim vision which, coupled with the imperious resolution of their affair in time, must have only been known as more than ordinary elements of the night, and becomes in tragic consequences. Once Tristram had seen, exploring it, the light of a far wisdom tingeing with hope the night of time between.

But there was never, after that, the sure glimpse of a nearer wisdom. Even Isolt of the White Hands is fated for sorrow: for her doom 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."

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the "slight" in summary of the Robinson poem, tragedy hinges on "dimness of vision". That image, or the transference of the light imagery 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 Baudelo, there is here an implication of a "lesser light"—the light of tragic love, which is blinding for vision of the greater light. And as in others of these poems, tragedy comes too in that, human-like, none of the principal actors possess, 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 germ of his failure inherent in his humanity, as a battle going on within us,

As in the Work of Remorse,

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.

1. 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." 3

Gradually

2. Ibid., ibid., p. 546.
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 uncleanliness that, he thinks, would have persisted "even if he had washed himself to death."¹ "There was nothing right about him," he concludes, twenty years thereafter.²

From January till June, Avon endures the hated presence; all the while, he says, once in London, there is a silent and sinister presence of the boy. There was a battle going on within me, wherever he is.³ Of hate that fought remorse...

Never to win...never to win but once; And having won, to lose disastrously.

And as it was to prove, interchangeably.³

For in June, Avon's Nemesis voices a lie about one of Avon's friends.

In an instant of supreme hate and revulsion, Avon strikes the other, who does not return the blow, but simply looks at him, weeping, and finally turns away. Says Avon, recalling the scene,...

...I still see him going Away from where I stood; and I shall see him Longer, sometime, than I shall see the face Of whoever watches by the bed On which I die...³

For what was done. He thinks of Prometheus, and even mankind.

1. Ibid., p. 553. 3. Ibid., p. 554.
2. Ibid., p. 553. 4. Ibid., p. 556.
The next day, the boy goes home. There is nothing for Avon to say. He is on the edge of tears and that he cannot: for hate is still dominant in him. He is given his chance by the other, who goes at him with vengeance and "a cold sorrow" in his eyes, and who promises that if Avon remains silent, he will know where he is until he dies.\(^1\) So, for twenty years, Avon has "hovered among shadows and regrets," and "driven his wheels too fast", to his hate and remorse has been added the burden of fear—three diseases for which, he says, there is "no specific."

The *Titanic*有时 Avon hears of his erstwhile companion. He is out of Avon's life, yet not quite out of it. For once a year, on Avon'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 of the two. But Avon's doom is to see him, wherever he is.\(^2\) A brief respite comes when the name of Avon's pursuing fate is listed among the victims of the Titanic disaster. Later, Avon is invited to visit a friend at the latter's Maine cabin; and for a time nature soothes his lacerated spirit. 

But one evening he is left alone. As he watches the sunset over the lake, he becomes aware of "hidden presences," his birthday on the water. That soon, no matter how many of them there were, would all be one...\(^4\)

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

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, for dreams and mists and derelict eyes. The "lake wreck" of a moon moves into the cabin. Avon lies on his bed and falls into a sort of consciousness, frozen catalase.

... a man sees all there is around him. As if it were not real, and he were not alive... An extreme representation of the result of no vision or 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 glowing with "all their gathered vengeance." Then he catches the useful picture. His, too, is the expression of a tortured patience.

The shadow glimpse of an uplifted arm. And a moon-flash of metal..."

In a state of collapse, he is found by his friends. And now, he tells his listener, he is to have another birthday on the morrow. But Cissel, too, above a psychological preoccupation on Hester's Avon's tomorrow never comes. The cause of his death is listed as "a heart attack." A "dark house" prevails his soul in a whirl of conscience nightmarish and an aneurism." But, says his physician:

1. Ibid., p. 566.
2. Ibid., p. 566.
3. Ibid., p. 567.
4. Ibid., p. 567.
He died, you know, because he was afraid—
And he had been afraid for a long time. 1

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

(3) Cavender.—In the latter respect, at least Cavender 2 presents
a more hopeful picture. His, too, is the experience of a tortured con-
sience. But for Cavender, a path out of the darkness that is his spiritual
environment is at last suggested; and Cavender, it is implied, will follow
the path.

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

1. Ibid., p. 573.
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..." truth and ruin together.

He sits in a chair, still standing where it used to stand, and a cold ray of moonlight intensifies the barren triumph that is Laramee's at last, in Gerlanzar's house. For she has called him back, through his constant thoughts of her, his and gone that he has not as 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 no light, nor any she sits before him, apparently unchanged by the twelve terrible years that lie between them. She awaits his 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 to see yourself with nature's eye.

Hearts are dark places. And if they were not, there might be so much less for us to learn that we who know so little, and know least the nobleness of the best. Might not learn anything. I have not once, like a wise star to lift my veil, wind, for you have eyes only to see the way, and not that of it, that you are making, and not the way of that.

1. Ibid. 4. Ibid.
2. Ibid. 5. Ibid. p. 969.
3. Ibid. p. 967. 6. Ibid. p. 97.
She knew, she tells him, that his last account would find him "a lord
of ruins." He has let this come about, through neglect of her, and
suspicion, which

... are the implications of Cavender’s inadequacies; he has lacked
the capacity, the power, the grace, to take in that I may say no more
of life than that you are to learn of it
A best way to endure it to the end.

In Cavender’s house,

As in the Lord’s house, there are many mansions,

And some that he has not so much as opened,

Having so much to learn...

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 con-
science, he realizes daily, and for the first time, that

...He might, perhaps,

Have seen there was no evil in her eyes
That was not first in him...

He begs her not to go away; to exorcise him, if necessary, but not to

Calmly, she addresses him. She has no wish, she says, to make him
suffer more than is just.

...The worst for you
is not to see yourself with nature’s eye,
And therefore know how much you are of nature,
And how much of yourself, I come forbidden
To light the way before you, which is dark
For you and all ages 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—so;
Therein 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. 968.
2. Ibid., p. 970.
It was a part of me when I was born,
But not of you; and I am sorry for that,
it would have helped you when you needed most
A shepherd to attend you...1 passion felt

Here are two implications of Cavender's inadequacies: he has lacked
out of this complex together of the past and the not has evolved
the capacity to know the truth about his own nature; he has lacked
Cavender's human tragedy. He has been a man of "noisy wars and peace,"
faith in others, symbolized by Laramie. The Light for Cavender, would
a master of his world, but there was wistfulness and yearning in his "always
have been the double gleam of self-knowledge and faith, both of which
abounded."
Of all his positive traits, he has been guilty
he has been without.

Cavender now questions God, Purpose, Law, He is hopeless of
he must fly from her on the "dark side" of his companions.

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 best way is "shining without light to guide
faith remains, and remains as the basis for his ruin, Says she,
him." 6 "This is not a worship of the beautiful, but a remembering
the thing, in all its action. You might have saved your house...

Much knowledge can come to his only in death, she says she, says
She insists that he has seen her in a "twisted mirror," which once he
learn all or nothing.8 But she also positively,
his doubts in darkness.3 But now, with the wisdom of the wise, Laramie
knows that

\[ \text{we must learn} \]
\[ \text{Of our defects and doubts, however they hurt,} \]
\[ \text{Love is not vengeance, though it may be death,} \]
\[ \text{Beyond this, which may be life...} \]

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,
she says.

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

Out of this weaving together of the good and the bad has evolved

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

In his anguish, he looks to her to lead him out of his turmoil.
But she cannot. For him her eyes are "shining without light to guide
him."⁴ There is no reason, she says, for his continually rehearsing
the thing, in the hope of finding a rational excuse for his action.

Such knowledge can come to him only in death, where, says she, he "may
learn all, or nothing."⁵ But, she adds positively,

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

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

¹. Ibid., p. 980.
². Ibid., p. 986.
³. Ibid., p. 987.
⁴. Ibid., p. 986.
⁵. Ibid., p. 989.
⁶. Ibid., p. 990.
⁷. Ibid., p. 988.
yet, Dolly, he answers her.

Here is nothing for you new
He took my love-
With ignorance for courage, fearing nothing
And knowing nothing.

He is not afraid to die nor afraid to live—There are, however,
Still scenes in the heart's house, but only he may open them.

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

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

...Others have not,
Preferring a blank hazard of escape,
With no especial array of release.
Thereafter for themselves... To walk a straight

He was too "haughty" in throwing her over the cliff; too haughty in leaving
the town after her burial, with the mystery of her supposed suicide to
engage its waging tongues. No, she says,

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

Then rising like "lame laughing" before him, she adds:

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

You have had life and death together so long
To play for you their most holy music,
That you have not on ear left for another;
You are a living dissonance yourself,
And you have made of grief and desperation
Something of Larmire's 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. 995.
3. Ibid., p. 1003. 4. Ibid., p. 1002.
in still time for him to think, and think he must; and he was, it was impossible.

Covender, there is nothing for you now, and he was, and what your laws and purposes ordain,

for what your laws and purposes ordain.

He is not afraid to die; but he is afraid to live. There are, however, still doors in his locked house, and only he may open them, in that it, too, is not against the background of his psychological. Yet...

There may be still...

it is wider. Once riches hidden there, and even for you, an earthly treasure.

Who spurned your treasure as an angry king.

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 face the night, or those with this final ironic glint of hope, Laramie disappears. Covender realizes who have "seen" inadequately, or too late. "Frustration is an" and at least there is this way out.

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

...There was no more to do

Fargo, who as much as he could do anything, now but do again. into that house of his who no man went, and where he did not live. He was alone. In them there.

Now, in a darker house than any light.

Might enter while he lived. Yet there was light for them there where his hope had come with him so far.

To find an answer, there was light enough

only a trace.

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 light. He was not sorry for that, diminished.

And he was not afraid. He was afraid only of peace..."

So with a clearer vision and a new courage, Covender finds a "door" behind him in the dark, and goes out to meet the ways of human justice. Such a "door" would have been unnecessary had he at first possessed the light of self-knowledge, faith, love, Laramie too; but, has not been without fault; so not to cast oneself upon the blame for her failure, bound up with his, has been that of excessive vanity.

1. Ibid., p. 1005. Mental inst. 3. Ibid., p. 1007.

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

(4) Amaranth.—Amaranth may logically follow the last two poems,
in that it, too, is set against the background of the psychological. Yet
it is wider in scope, being allegorical, and dealing with symbolical
characters. They are those who fail for having no light at all, and who
are destroyed when finally they are brought to face the Light; or those
who have "seen" inadequately, or too late. Amaranth is an "epic of
frustration," presented through the medium of a dream that comes to
Troy, who had no light to guide him, of his own volition, to his
dream, which he once
chose the wrong life-work, following a false Light that was for them
only a tragic illusion. The poem concerns, then, the fate of poets,
who have been debtors and may be more so for certain
musicians, writers, and professional types who have never had the courage
to face the truth, personified by Amaranth, and who are annihilated, or
destroy themselves, when finally they gaze into his blinding eyes, and be
Fargo alone has survived, because he "has stripped himself of
all pretensions,\nfriend, as for your daring not your doing,
...Art has no rest if it were not my lamps
until, like the old guard, it surrenders,
Or, like the old guard, dies. He had surrendered,
so not to great himself among the slain

Before he should be dead... 1

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... 3

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

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

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, the poor, the just, to save, and when discredited or feared,
To quench or to destroy... 5

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 raiment of their congenial misgivings
Will die; while others who care more for life
Without a spur than for no life at all,
And there is a 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

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 revolutes
May pipe on to the end.

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

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

The impotent themes with which Evensong consistently lends his conversa-
tions... "do require a master touch,..."

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1. Ibid., p. 1317. 2. Ibid., p. 1318.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 1318. 5. Ibid., p. 1320.
tion are a recurring symbol of the futility of his whole existence. His tragedy Evensong introduces his companions, Fidge, a lawyer, "whose eyes, like yours and mine, see backwards"; Dr. Styx, who might have been "a silversmith or a ventriloquist"; the Reverent Pascal Flux, who became a charlatan, where Fidge saw disillusioned clergymen, philosophers, and moralists, "Because he liked to talk, and to be seemed others of vested As one appointed for an elevation, lives. But he saw nothing that he could believe, nor they visit the And one day said no more..."

Also, there is Pink, the poet, who

Evensong introduces Amaranth, a God-demon...

cuts and sets his words
With an exotic skill so scintillating
That no two proselytes who worship Theone
Are mystified in the same way exactly;
his
Believe we are mistaken and hear nothing
The only "real life." They move to leave, Evensong warning the novelists

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

...who was a king elsewhere. He was a king elsewhere, unbeatable
before he was a poet. Now he paints

...because he must; which is, it seems, the reason, which
Why there are painters, poets, or musicians...

...the only "real life." They move to leave, Evensong warning the novelists

All of them, says Evensong, except Pink and Amaranth, have
not to see the far before or the far behind. But she will not lead his

...encountered Amaranth face to face

And eye to eye; and as we are, you see us.

We are the reconciled initiates,

Who knew that we are nothing in men's eyes, 

That we set out to be—and should have been,

be held, for we have seen better, we see better now,

but gray flashes of

light; Pink is secret, impersonal, 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. 1331. 5. Ibid., p. 1332.
3. Ibid.
complies, 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 Amaranth then visit a succession of scenes. There is an old house, where Fargo sees disillusioned divines, philosophers, moralists, economists, lawyers, deceived inventors, and others of wasted lives. They go to where Pink is hanging from his rafter; they visit the home of Elaine Amelia Watchman, "who writes, and writes, and writes."

Evensong introduces Amaranth to Watchman:

...He is a mighty one
Just in time, his grace, but realize the danger.

Evansong warns the novelist not to see too far before or too far behind. But she will not heed his advice. She will look into Amaranth's eyes, and then stagger away with what she finds there. Amaranth 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 mound of lighter dust" which Evensong gently puts into an envelope and seals, adding her epitaph:

funeral. In the graveyard, they discover, much of those—misanthropic, doctor,

2. Ibid., p. 1347.
3. Ibid. p. 1378.
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 Ipswich, a failed inventor, offers

Fargo a siren drink and a place with his 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 obscene" decked and frizzes 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

of stature, but as a palater of blue horses he does not know Amaranth;

and he cannot bear for him to think that he fears him. So he too looks

into Amaranth's eyes. Having seen, he takes his sailor's knife and

slashes all his paintings into ribbons, then he leaves the room, and

commits suicide.

Next, Fargo finds himself in his old studio—where, however, there

is now no place for him. The diminished company decides to attend Atlas',

funeral. In the graveyard, they discourse, each of them—musician, doctor,
lawyer, clergyman,—on their respective failures in life. Says Evensong, of Atlas, "not all of them then, there is a great folly, though some to
individually Color with him, when he discovered it, and through the...
fact that, in" long drunkenness—which he conceived
As new, and revolution. It is...
like some others, assured of more than they possessed, he flung
but having his first base to annihilate for ever. So looked, and
Those ancient superfluities of line finds that were an obstacle between his: heart. See fancy
And his desire. There was a blast of color, in vain—
and Atlas never knew that he was blind
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
invention." Figs, the lawyer, had stilled his "proper flame" with
many have heard it, and have only covered
"indolence and indecision," having followed others because he saw them
shining, more resolutely with their visions;
And when met an insubstantial armor
Against the show most of disasters.
And without asking whether or not the fields fail,
in me was song 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 futility. Friend,
With what we buried when we buried Atlas."
So stay with me, and you are winer now.
Flax, the clergyman has failed through a devastating doubt of what "for
remember me... We have our times..."
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
our effective reality.

3. Ibid., p. 1383. 4. Ibid., p. 1387-90.
him, and now words, for Flax, have little meaning, and no truth. In each of them then, there is a great futility, though come by individually through a different spiritual deficiency, and through the fact that, for all, truth came too late. Until it is too late for positive action. 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 me here.

As one who may not measure what he does, here more than fate may. If it were possible, personalised worlds I should hold only pleasure in my eyes of art and; of those who see too late. You heard my voice, after all; and heeded it, not knowing whose voice it was, for the great, and many have heard it, and have only covered it, their fears and indecisions and misgivings alluded in more resolutely with their vanity;

And under such an unsubstantial armour the Light was against the slow rust of discovery, not shown, the must choose rather to strive and starve and fall,

power of triumph...a sense of the value and nobility of...
...To a few surviving in a surge not in vain; they fly from here a-biding, as you did, and I see no more of them all the same, far from this illusion of delusion,

They know the best there is for man to know;

(2) They know the peace of reason. So a few I show myself; but only the resigned

of Art he! and—reconciled will own me as a friend, reconciled, 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...tragedy of inability The flower...that never...fades... .

In perspective there; as in panorama, the inconceivable chain of the There is a great light, and Fargo awakes with joy into the world of his conscious scale of sensations. The poem illustrates than not failure through own effective reality.

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

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

(5) Fernando Nash. — A less symbolical and less general treatment of art and artists is presented in the history of Fernando Nash, The Man Who Died Twice. 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 unendurable sin of the conscious waste of genius. The poem illustrates that not failure through absence of the light, but failure through betrayal of the light once presented. — "The Man Who Died Twice," Collected Poems, p. 931.
actually possessed.

Fernando Nash is a musician. He has known since boyhood that he One other thing, I should have gone down there has but to wait, patiently, and fortified by the knowledge of his genius, himself to be secure... to hear the music of his symphony "blown down by choral horns out of a but his reborn syphony has retained within it a sed impression, a loss of star," But he has dissipated his talent and become the victim of impatience, spiritual shrinking, which has roiled over his great gift. For twenty sensuality, and doubt. At forty-six, he is discovered by the narrator, years he has been beaten a Salvation Army drum on Broadway, resigned to defeat and waiting for all these years while he had counted upon to die. Now he is but "the ruin of a potential world-shaker," whose to face the fact that he must counts ever to giant who are in live ..., former dominion and authority still for me. Had now disintegrated, lapse, and shrunken. To an inferior mystery that had yet The presence of defeat... First things of all— Or so Fernando might have said He had always been before... A paean to the dawning, Nash was The marks of devils—who must have patiently And slowly crucified, for subtle sport, sitting in his heart, must now bare his soul. Meanwhile the living fire that mortals doors in a dusty back For most of us held hidden... Yet, even now, Nash can rationalize his fall and the desolation of present. For those who once feared and "helped" at his have made, he says, no music either any less futile than his; he at least, as a drumming evangelist, makes a music "heard all up and down Broadway."

...Mine are the drums of life— After those other drums. I had it—once, weary darkened ages of his life, from his first boyhood intimations of But that was long ago. Now for years, Fernando Nash has inherited his a talent, up to the present moment. Why, he rationalist, would he not a new dark world—a world whose wreckage came crashing down upon him, because have written The marks of devils, Nash says, Fernando Nash—found he had lacked basic qualities for the flowering of his talent. He had

2. Ibid., p. 222.  
3. Ibid., p. 223.
scorned those who hated and doubted him. And he says, he would have been "master ... if I had known." But he tells the woodsman, 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, he was among the stars, and we sought for spirit-weave, 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 than earth gives even to giants who are to live eternally And still be giants. It may be well for men himself, that only few shall have the grapes of heaven To crush. The grapes of heaven are golden grapes—and golden grapes are the worst grapes of all— Or so Fernando secretly would have said. A year before... And service, and you called him, and you knew all the time that you were wrong.

A year before, on the eve of his forty-fifth birthday, Nash was sitting in his barren room, on his iron bed. His music was beside him— in a dusty box waiting for the janitor. The "competent plain face of Nash" looked down on him—reason, another say, it is 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: can if you live again, in ruin, he confronts his blurred face in a filthy mirror. He reviews the weary darken stage of his life, from his first boyhood intimations of a talent, up to the present moment. Why, he reiterates, could he not have waited? Five words—"Symphony Number Three. Fernando Nash"—would.

1. Ibid., p. 934-35. 
2. Ibid., p. 934. 
3. Ibid., p. 926.
he knows, have placed him among the mighty. In due time, he would have been "master of a new machine." But he built the machine, he tells himself, "only to let it rust." He tells others, "and you have come too may times before.A fog of doubt that a small constant fire
would have defeated had invisibly
And imperceptibly crept into it, because he knows in bed,
And made the miracle in it that was yours.
No flout who found it--wherefore he'll not find it,
gives of seventy rats which perform for him the first act symphony. She
so he has followed the drumming devils of his doubt, and the "devil-women";
he has become the creature of lust and drunkenness. Now he bitterly asks
himself,
What do you think you are--one of God's jokes?
You slunk away from him, still adequate
For his immortal service, and you failed him;
And you knew all the time what you were doing.
You damned yourself while you were still alive,
and at length vanish, leaving him in a cold sweat. For the next week he
His birthright, "signed away in fettered sloth," has vanished. He knows
that he has cheated himself. Meanwhile we must go through some and
it. Yet he is not "crazy" enough, or "solid" enough to kill himself out-
right. But there is, he reasons, another way. It is
A longer and a more monotonous one,
Yet one that has no slight ascendency
Over the rest; for if you stave yourself to death
Maye 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 show at the same time a revenging
That's in you somewhere still...

\[\text{actions}\]
So he tears up his first two symphonies without regret now, and
goes down the stairs for a last ironic debauch. Half-way down, he hears before the light comes, and could not last longer in a kind of warning the drums of death again; but he sets his jaws hard together. "You are too late, he tells them, "and you have come too many times before."

His spree lasts three weeks. One afternoon he awakes in bed, wondering how he got there. A horrible fantasy appears to him in the guise of seventy rats which perform for him the first rat symphony. The music forgives along to a dark and surging climax, which at length broke horribly into coarse and unclean laughter that rose above the groaning of the damned; and through it all there were these drums of death which always had been haunting him from childhood.

The rats dance madly to the infernal noise, leer at him, bow mockingly, and at length vanish, leaving him in a cold sweat. For the next week he tries to starve himself. Miserable and alone, he fights through days and nights of retribution. Then one day he is aware of a coming wonder of surprise, for a new clearness which had late begun to pierce forbidden chambers long obscured within him had 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

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1. Ibid., p. 940.
2. Ibid., p. 943.
But the dream that this new clarity was the light that came, until before the night comes, and would not last long—

his "dream..."

...true to what it was not..."

For now his life is clear again. He confesses,

"To know that there could now be telling on his...

...true to what he could not..."

He feels that with time and care this power would come, and coming might be used..."

Brightness and forgiveness meant the "dream home..." and such realities.

For the first time in his life, he knows a calm "to the confusions that at last the "falsehood messengers" whom he has so frequently "instructed" were born with him." A "grateful shame" for his past sins, and a "vast hope have found his peace, mingled in the lower visible heavens are the well joy" suffuse his spirit, to tell him

bold, fear, defeat, sorrow and desperation, "—and a new note of the ignominy of death, the cries of the living are yet heard.

That after passion, arrogance, and ambition

of freedom..."

There in him now:

...a grateful shame had not waited for

of infinite freedom and humility, not wait now."

After a bondage of indignant years

In the glory and evil-schlock..."

Vaguely contemplating going out for good, he hears his drums of death roll again; and for the first time, without flinching, he can let others follow them, if they must. The drums roll closer; but now with a "singing flame" that leaves his trembling in fear. For they roll to the rhythm of the songs that are now written in the books of musical predestination, and by "falsehood messengers.

For one who would no longer recognize them..."

...he could only wait, come...

Therefore, and in his helplessness be seared

It would be with his own lightning. When the music lamp changes out of that fiery cloud and blinded him, positive fact.

That would be recognition for a moment, only; and his dream And then release..."

of death are so many in his unquiet hours of life, with which he still...

1. Ibid.

2. Ibid., p. 943.

3. Ibid., p. 952.

4. Ibid., p. 944.

5. Ibid., p. 958.
But the drums are destined to sound intermittently, after all; until his "choral gold" come down to overcome them gloriously.

"But the Lord...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, cynical beatings of his own drums, the cries of the living who are yet dead, of the ignorant, of those "punished from the house of life"—and a new note of freedom and "deliverance and return."

He knew that the importance that Nash lives but a short time after his violent death was the one thing that was the only thing that he could not wait for. 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...

...with a lesion
Like his there would be no more golden fire
Implication. Brought vainly by perennial messengers.
For one that would no longer recognize them
Or know that they had come...

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

1. Ibid., p. 947.
2. Ibid., p. 953.
3. Ibid., p. 963.
"Make a joyful noise unto the Lord." He knew the full extent of what he lost on that golden afternoon. He will, he says, "go slow" henceforth;

"but the Lord's ways are strange." Once, says Nash, with a new humility, he was given a "golden sheet," which God, in his wisdom, took away again.

...Once, for an hour's rest, I lived; and for an hour my cup was full of wine that not a hundred men could taste. I have tasted that are told in history.

...But I have found far more than I have lost.

...And so shall not go mourning. God was good to me with a sufficient to give my soul to me before I died.

... Entirely, and not more than justly, had a character. In taking all the rest away from me, I had it, and I knew it; and I failed him in so doing he I did not wait.

... gaining his immortal soul. Second, bearing within him a "golden sheet"—his spiritual and artistic resurrection. The significant death was the death of the body, not the body, a feeling that was a type of the very type that had once helped to give his genius.

... Devotion to himself; the tragedy of himself; the mystery of himself; the inviolable distinction.

... That was to break and vanish only in fire. When other fires that had so long consumed him could find no more to burn...3

... Here is the specialised and tragic failure of genius betrayed, the light in Nash is not particularly obvious, existing largely by implication. But it exists, none the less; for the light, for Nash, was the light 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, unbalanced sensuality, impatience; thus, his failure as an artist... consistently says that Nash was false according to his own nature. For ideal achievement.

1. Ibid., p. 954. Life Block. 2. Ibid., p. 956. As a rule, usually, to be held by Nash. 4. In so far as he represents something, 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 drums," with a new positive rather than the previous negative connotation. But there is an extra touch of humiliation in the circumstance, because 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 thronged with men of the very type that had once helped drive him to despair; of a "dread negation that could not but kill his dreams."

Out of this there is no greater personal tragedy than that of one who has once possessed the spark of divinity and extinguished it wilfully and consciously. Yet, with his usual tolerance and sympathy, and with his customary negation of any man's right to pass final judgment on a fellow man, Robinson does not condemn Nash utterly. His artistic penance is severe enough. "Spiritually, he does find a way out," Robinson allows him to find it when he subordinates the light of Nash's genius to the Light he saw a ghost that haunted him... of ultimate Truth which Nash finally is allowed to recognise.

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 fail in so far as he represents mankind, in being
the possessor of an immortal soul. There must still be a final hope, or
life would be unbearable. If that hope, as appears here, comes as a
straitened, difficult, and less glorious way than could be wished, it is
also a more realistic way, and thus according to life itself. Perhaps,
too, it represents the only possible method for the ironic and subdued
temperament of the poet whose solution it is.

Gabriel(6) Roman Bartholomew.-- Roman Bartholomew 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 Bartholomew finds at length
the Light of wisdom, and re-shapes the meaning of his life for an implic-
ation of worth. Former loves. She has no faith in any such restoration;
although “In the morning light of a new spring” Bartholomew joys in his
spiritual rebirth out of a “dead negation that would not let him die,” 1
out of a “burial repinence” he has been resurrected, through the spiritual
offices of Penn-Reven, who has appeared mysteriously, and who for nearly
a year has lived as guest and neighbor to Bartholomew and Gabrielle, his
wife. Penn-Reven, according to Bertraville, an ascetic and semiaced
Fisherwoman, has raised the veil and given Bartholomew eyes. 2 He has lifted
him out of a “drowning fear and hopelessness,” when:

Which kindness with an intermittent gleam
...hope was a lost word and happiness
...not even a ghost that haunted him...the河 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 antithesis—"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 murmur 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 bade 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, for he realizes that she 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 rival—though seeming later to exemplify the opposite qualities. He has a strange violet eye

That shone with a rarer light behind
Which kindled with an intermittent flame

That shouldered with a lighter fire behind
Which kindled with an intermittent flame

A nameless light whereto but fee 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—Barthlow being:
For price of larger sight, one who could not.¹

Penn-Haven 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 dimmed crevices of Penn-Haven'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 Unfraville, Greek and Latin scholar and fisherman,
of face
Socratic, unforgettable, grotesque,
incrutable, and alone...²

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

Unfraville is sure of the eternal verities; but not so Penn-Haven
nor Gabrielle. Says Penn-Haven, "Once I believed I knew more than I know."³

Gabrielle too admits her inability to reflect philosophically about her
limitations—or to do anything about them. But for her, and tragically,
there is Penn-Haven. 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;

2. Ibid., p. 736.
3. Ibid., p. 764.
4. Ibid., p. 761.
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.1

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 glass 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 Roman, he says.

There is a field for them, or their appearance, though I have never dreamed or wandered in it; There's also an unfalling fountain-head Of power and peace; and if but once we prove The benefits of its immortal stores, Our living thirst will have a living drink— Dilute it or offend it as we may With thirsty draughts of easy consequence Mingled with reason...2

But Gabrielle is beautiful, hard, unappreciative, with a necessity for admiration and a "tinial 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.  4. Ibid., p. 781.
which has felt if she had any, had not been born to see;
And he had suffered hard. She knew all that,
So will you, if 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.

Her desolation is at once apparent to Bartholow when he returns
from his walk. Inarticulately, she conveys that all is over between them;
the pain of Bartholow's house is tragic, but it is a necessary tragedy,
and suddenly and furiously, Bartholow knows Penn-Raven in a new guise,
always which once passed, says, "Penn-Raven, a man and Bartholow, with
How much 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 name 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
For you to eat alone. You cannot share it,
she feels that she lacks the necessary wisdom.

May taste of it, and not wholly starve,
If it be the bridge, then, over which you pass,
Here in the dark, to find a lighter way;
To a new region where I cannot follow.
And where there is not either sand or moonshine,
Penn-Raven will add,
And a new sun shines always..."

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 wound pride, Roman strikes him, and would have killed
him—Penn-Raven safely controls his startled 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 sworn 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.

"Yes, perhaps... you are not one to flout
The power of all your services unknown but the great
That soon you are to see, and are to give,
When really you conceive yourself alive."

The ruin of Bartholomew's house is tragic, but it is a necessary tragedy
through which must come, says Penn-Haven, a more vital Bartholomew, with
represent a lesson drawn, since, like the worm, a necessary
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 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 resemblance 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

2. Ibid., p. 826.
has learned.

Here, as in "Sevenor'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 Gabriella, are destined never to see truth, and for these the incomplete answer is death. Some, like Penn-Reben, have periodic flashes of intuition or wisdom, but these are not constant enough glimpses to be dependable guides for action. Roman Bartolow 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 mummy 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. If he has broken his engagement with Athba, a kind of "White Bird," Roman Bartolow represents another excursion into the world of

1. Floyd Stovall, op. cit., pp. 3-5.

2. Roman is a blood brother to Matthias, who also, out of complacency, through despair and tragedy, emerges to a purposive existence. Cf. post. 5/44.

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.


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 prolificous, 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."

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

...a soul-frozen disillusionment.

That was not woman and was not for man.³

2. Ibid., p. 1257.
He admits as much to Althea, and his path home is clothed in a new glory and warmth that it had not held an hour before.

Returning home, he finds Karen asleep. He contemplates:

...that seeming heaven-wrought sheath... 

Of ice and intellect and indifference, 

and the face of Althea rises before him. He raises his arms in angry questioning, groaning, "Why was this woman born?" As he looks at her, Karen awakes, shrieking and terrified, and sure that the look in his eyes means only horror for her. He tries to calm her, but she will neither listen to him nor let him touch her. He tries to tell her that both have made a mistake, and that now they must try to re-shape their "mishandled lives." Karen, however, escapes from Talifer and flies to Dr. Quick, to whom she relates her fear of Talifer and her version of the incident. Quick explains the real basis for their present confusion:

...You never wanted him; 
You only wanted what Althea wanted.

Althea—get the name right. 
If you set out, You are the devil, Karen; 
And you must not go back to Talifer.

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.
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 Althæa, 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. Yet, though the poem is exceptional in treatment, and in its downright happiness of ending, as, 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 Cavander did Lamar, though for a different reason. Althæa—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 fire, 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 will be envied, and will not escape, not wholly, the qualifying eye and the true tongue. For truth will say that no man has a right to look so great and still be not so great.

If his apparent happiness at the end of the poem is to serve as argument for his "success," it must also be admitted that Talifer is left with most of his life yet ahead of him; unlike many of Robinson's characters who die, or have lived through what one believes must be their most eventful and tragic years. Life cannot surely be said then to hold only peace for Talifer. There is no way of knowing that the same blindness which entangled him in his unfortunate marriage with near-tragic results, will not re-appear. Though for the time his life falls in pleasant placen, there is no pledge of security for the future. Robinson is saying not that Talifer is the one man of all his characters that achieves "success," but only that for once, because someone on the spot was wiser than men usually are, a tragic possibility is worked out without complete or too harrowing consequences; and there the poet is content to leave his never-too-enlightened Talifer.

Talifer is simply another representative human being whose destiny has been more kindly shaped than is usual. But he is never portrayed as a regenerated spirit like Lancelot, for instance, who saw a light which
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 Athene, 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 fellows, is a kind of failure, too. That he is not more harshly punished is no merit of his. Furthermore, though he does not even admit to having a Light, it was the lack of Light in him that made him what he was. Blinded by the superficial charm of Karen, as many a man before him has been blinded by a superficial feminine charm, he abandoned his wiser instincts, his loyalty to his word and to Athene, and buried his intellect 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 Athene, though innocent, must suffer for a time for Talifer's mistake, and that even Dr. Quick, who has mainly 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." 1 Matthias is one of Robinson's most clearly conceived characters. It is as though in dealing with this one-time arch archist 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, intersected by a rock, where two pillars stand "carved out of solid night...with cannot night between them." He proposes that they go down...dark and large and heavy enough to the rock, and into the gorge, all on there and knock.

Then there is Matthias' house, and inside it is Natalie, his wife, in whom he manifests, when it pleases him, a plaid, possessive interest. As they pass, Garth comments he becomes his friend. Matthias, in his complacency, feels that he has done well.

As he sits tranquilly contemplating his possessions, Garth arrives. Garth is not old, but he is bent beneath "the weight of more than time." He is but indifferently alive, for he has seen too much. He has seen, for example, enough to be able to read Matthias accurately—and not always to the latter's comfort. Matthias, says Garth, may tell

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2. Ibid., p. 1082.
the truth as nearly as a man may come to telling it without knowing it.\(^1\)

Here is a key to Matthias' character significant for tragedy. 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, indeed.
There was nowhere a more agreeable bondage
Than his was to himself;...

later, in his solitary moment, for
He was not one
To move unseen, or to fade unseen; emulate Garth's actune,
Or to be beloved and anonymous
Being told that his name has not yet been born.

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 particularly interested in that rock, where two pillars stand "carved out of solid night...with darker night between them." He proposes that they go down to the rock. One day, says Garth, he will go there and knock,

And that will be the last of doors for me.\(^3\)
I have knocked on too many, and for nothing.

As they proceed, Garth continues to analyze his friend.

You are strong in body and in soul, yet I'm not sure
That you are sound in your serenity.
Your God, if you may still believe in him,
Creaked you too 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.
That you have not explored...\(^4\)

A little later, as they gape at the rock, Garth says,

A little later, as they gape at the rock, Garth says,

\(^{1}\) Ibid., p. 1080.
\(^{2}\) Ibid., p. 1081.
\(^{3}\) Ibid., p. 1084.
\(^{4}\) Ibid., p. 1085.
...Do you see it?

only a dark hole in a dark rock.

see only that. You will see more.

late, Matthias. You have not yet seen anything.

Still later, Matthias clings back up his hill alone, leaving Garth still in the dark where, Garth says, he now lives.

The next day Matthias speaks 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 might not die, for he has not yet been born.

Meanwhile, Timberlake, the other of Matthias' two friends, visits them, drawn by the news of Garth's death. Timberlake, however, is not surprised at the suicide, having, he says, "outlived surprise." Matthias regrets Garth's action, not so much for Garth's sake, but because he feels that Garth has thus made a show of his envy of himself. For Matthias, sure of his own 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 this and keep alive...

Natalie realizes, but he has no such clue to Matthias. Misspent life.

out of a mist, and there is no saving grace saved...

his life.

When I see folly that has passed its wings

Nating 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. 1085. 2. Ibid., p. 1083.
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. 2

With a new sharpness, however, Natalie takes exception. To Matthias she says,

...I'm not
So sure that you know all there is to know
Of dogs; and dogs...

But Garth, Garth could have told you. He had felt their teeth,
And he had bled where they had bitten him.
None of us knew for certain when the dog
Are on the watch, or what they are waiting for. 3

As to Garth, "dying was his career." Natalie is secretly sympathetic to Garth, having a futility something like his "to nourish and conceal."

For she had married Matthias for comfort without love, in place of
starving with Garth, or marrying Timberlake, "if he had seen it so."

Natalie really loved Timberlake; but he had resigned her to Matthias
out of a mistaken sense of gratitude for the latter's having once saved
his life.

Thinking of Garth now, Natalie is strangely drawn to the dark
cave. There she finds Timberlake. They discuss the four of them, now
three—and suddenly Timberlake finds Natalie in his arms. They realize

1. Ibid., p. 1096. 2. Ibid., p. 1096. 3. Ibid., p. 1096.
that they should have married, in spite of Matthias' heroic deed. Black rooks
Natalie feels that she should tell Matthias how things are. Black rooks
a sharp pity... There isn't so much to tell,
More than to say we are three fools together,
Be he in a crumbling foolish human house,
The strain is writing.
Its story is--And one of them built happily on a lie.
He thinks I love him, and so throws away
No time or pride in asking why in the name
Of heaven and earth I shouldn't. That's his way.
He married me and put me in a cage
To look at and to play with, and was happy--
Being sure of finding, when he came home,
With my face washed and purring. Poor Matthias!
Matthias is...........
I was thinking about you. Why do you want to teach
But what if any man like him should learn
Natalie with Some things that any 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 in the situation
has always lain in their partial vision of the truth of the affair, and
in the inexorable consequences of having flouted that truth. Save
Timberlake. Break, at least--extremely, sitting alone on a sister Sun-
day afternoon...Half the grief
That night Matthias reveals that he has seen and heard them
both in the very, although he and Natalie will not separate, his faith in
his blindness to his insignificance
fattally disjoined. Timberlake has gone, and Matthias has withdrawn

1. Ibid., p. 1105-06
2. Ibid., p. 1109.
3. Ibid., p. 1109.
into his own remote world. He has his "Olympian pride," and she—has her dense of desolation, a constant vision of Garth and the black rock, a sharp pity for Matthias, and a tacit acknowledgement of her own deceit.

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

Tieck: "...An intangible, unturnable seal of something fine."

Fraudulent as was wearing off; and in his looks and words his not be by:

A primitive pagan rawness of possession afraid, our

Soled her and made her soul and body sick.

Matthias is drinking and becoming brutalised. Now he begins to haunt Natalie with "not playing as well" as at first. Furius at him for his humility, exhibition, power and glory, sarcasm and spoiling of himself, she strikes him, and goes away. Hours and truth. They are all very pitiful, later, he wakes from his stupor, to find a brief apology, and to know his passion that knew itself—whom, if he wanted, with surety that they have reached the end. For Natalie too has sought the dark rock—for the last time.

Now Matthias has lost nearly everything but his pride. The rock has become in very fact "the tomb of God," he reflects. Yet he still cannot break, at least outwardly. Sitting alone on a winter Sunday afternoon, he hears the desolate message of the dead leaves; he doubts his faith, but clings still to his pride. With pride, patience, and "high scorn," he meets: we why we why of us

Are mere like shadows of ourselves, half dead, a life without a scheme and to no purpose—

An accident of nameless energies, trifleless

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. 120.
2. Ibid., p. 112.
No, says Montho [illegible], Timberlake reappears at Matthias’ door, now and
raged. 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
fractured 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 wise music...2

Four days Timberlake stays with Matthias, then he is found in his weakened
condition out in a cold flooding rain. He has taken refuge, quite ex-
hausted, 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,
Not more than that his inventions
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 more like sketches of ourselves, half done,
By nature, and forgotten in her workshop.
Thiene like a fair or tolerable fulfillment
Of her implied intentions...3 living for,
If there was nothing else, to live alone.

1. Ibid., p. 1133. 3. Ibid., p. 1135.
2. Ibid., p. 1131.
He, says Timberlake, has found gold where Matthias has found only gravel. But he cannot give it to Matthias, who must find it for himself. Matthias' eyes are still too blind, and, continues Timberlake, 

...There is no curse 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, [1]

Matthias, says Timberlake further, is not old.

...You are so young
That you see nothing in fate that takes away
Your playthings but a curse, and a world blasted,
And stars you cannot reach that have no longer
On A proper right to shine... [2]

questions now Matthias confesses that he has had neither knowledge nor belief since the evening when Natalie last spoke to him. His devastation is complete when, three days later, Timberlake dies. Alone now, wounded more by life than he would have believed possible, Matthias turns half-heartedly to searching "the darkness in him." He reviews his life, its plan, purpose, structure. He had built as best he could; yet now he is surrounded only with ruins.

Matthias says...The only eyes he had were those that his inheritance had given to him, and he had seen with them only what he might see... [3] will not be wasted...
Nothwithstanding, though there's much discretion—Yet now, he is not, Matthias, she failed together, though in a personal way. You, having more
A man with nothing left but money and pride, sadly.
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 much.

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1. Ibid., p. 1137.  
2. Ibid., p. 1142f–47.  
3. Ibid., p. 1138.  
4. Ibid., p. 1149.
A captive in a world where there were none
Who cared for him, and none for whom he cared,
Was he dark sentence, and might be a long one.1

Now at last Matthias is ready to say that Garth was not the
fool he once judged him. He himself is lost, tired, alone—and "alive,
with pride for company."

Matthias was a man who must have light,
Or darkness that was rest and certainty,
With no fool-fire of an unbelief faith
Invading it and losing its own spark,
Such as it was. Matthias was alone,
And there was only loneliness before him,
Because he was Matthias, and had failed.2

So he looks at a hand which may well end his futility, and
questions, "Why not?" He makes his way to the dark Egyptian door of the
cave. He is not afraid, and he has no longer any doubts. He is about
to push open the door when a voice which he recognizes as Garth's says,
"Not yet, Matthias."

...No matter what you do,
You are not coming. A way was found for me 3
To meet you here and any you are not coming.
You cannot die, Matthias, till you are born.
You are down here too soon, and must go back. 3

Matthias would argue with Garth, but to no avail. Says Garth,
the long dark hours must he make his way through.

Your generous language and its implications
Although a little delayed, will not be wasted.
Nothing is wasted, though there's much mixed—
Like you and me, Matthias, who failed together,
Each in a personal way. You, having more
To fail with, failed more thoroughly and abjectly,
But that was not the end.4

Matthias may not even push the door open; for he has found it too soon.

1. Ibid., p. 1146. 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. Matthias must go back, then,
for he lived in a dark world.² Natalie and Timberlake must both pay for
their initiation with themselves; either with themselves
To build another tower—a safer one
This time, and one for many to acclaim
And to enjoy...³

Garth predicts for Matthias a re-shaping of his life under a new emphasis
of service to his fellows, instead of the old consciousness of self, which
was the first rotten pillar under Matthias' old tower.

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

...He had come down
and Matthias followed him, and found he was not wanted.
He must go back again; he must be born
The Light回归 here, and he his own life; and he who had been always
So promptly served, and was to be a servant,
Must now be of some use in a new world
That Timberlake and Garth and Natalie
Had strangely lived and died to find for him.³

With this new positive vision, Matthias gropes his way back from
the rock, feeling a grateful "warmth of life" through the cold night and
the long dark hours until he meets his new dawn.

It is not necessary to dwell long on the implications of this
poem. Matthias, Garth, Timberlake and Natalie all fail, Matthias less
obviously at first, but more agonizingly as his life proceeds. For he
must fight through the barrier of his own apathy and selfish complacency

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1. Ibid., p. 1150.
2. Ibid., p. 1152.
3. Ibid., p. 1154.
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to a new sympathy, and a new realization that no life can be even remotely successful which finds its sole emphasis within itself. Garth's failure is equally obvious, for his suicide was the final admission that what he saw exceeded his spiritual strength to sustain. Garth had not the light, for he lived in a "dark world." Natalie and Timberlake must both pay for their initial blind error in not having been honest either with themselves or with Matthias before it was too late. They, too, saw insufficiently, in that when wisdom came, the error was already tragic. All then, have lacked their peculiar types of light. All, as is inevitable with Robinson, must then fail.

Actually, of course, the Light is not so specific here. But as usual, it exists by implication, symbolized by all that the characters, and Matthias in particular, cannot "see," until suffering opens his eyes. The Light becomes here Truth or self-knowledge, surrounded in this case by the attendant graces of sensitivity, generosity, humility. For it is upon these foundations that Matthias is to erect the structure of a richer and 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

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, and "vision." Now Malory is going 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 literary and the historical, as a political allegory that exposes blastingly (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 and in himself, and all that's left to die for, with Nightingale. For years he has existed on the venomous nourishment of thought of revenge; ever since Agatha, whom both loved, but who had betrayed Mrs. had married Malory, has died, taking their child with her. Agatha was Nightingale might have killed him, as many but that one too soft a not able to endure the shock of the tragedy induced when Nightingale, who had invested all of Malory's money, allowed him, through jealousy, to become financially ruined.

Nightingale is now no longer in his heart.
Paradise is not here in his seeing it,
But life is a new vision, A

A man of dreams more than of deeds—
Dreams that had not abundantly come true.

Disaster is "manifest all over him." Nightingale is "alone with his rich advantage," trying to believe that he had acted once as necessity demanded.


1. Ibid., p. 1014.
2. Ibid., p. 1022.
3. Ibid.,
But the necessity was that of his own "shot out vision." Now Malory is going home to Sharon, with a plan to end both their lives, for neither of which he can see any reason for continuing.

Having withdrawn himself from his intended service because of his personal tragedy, Malory sees nothing left in life but the hard insistent drive of revenge. His scientific passion has crumbled, till nothing remains but his unholy passion. Stopping on his way to Nightingale's at the cemetery where Agatha is buried, he can resolve only one plan for peace—death for both himself and his betrayer. In a crimson twilight that argues bloodily for his intention, he summarizes his tragedy. To lose faith in God is disaster.

...But to lose faith in man
And in himself, and all that's left to die for,
Travels to feel a knife in his neck 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...

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 glory war once Nightingale's frame. As he contemplates the revenge cloud what might once have shone forth to Malory's now-distorted barren visions, his name is called in a voice which vision...

...had the sound
And then he has had it in the hills of years
Malory "does not know." Now he is a man without any certainty;

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

¹. Ibid., p. 1022, ². Ibid., p. 1022.
that "living is not dying." But though he can state the principle, he
can not illustrate it; for he has lived too long in the world of living
death. In such a state of mind, he passes by the house where he and Agatha
had once lived. There will be one more stop for him—a "mansion somewhere
by the sea."

After he has spent his last money for a night "with other derelicts
in Sharon," he sets out in an anguish of sunrise to revenge and death.
Nightingale will be found in "a new house with towers and trees," Nightingale
himself, he hears, inhabits his house "like a large and powerful worm in a
stone shell." He is a "stationary monster, doing no harm, and doing no
good." He simply exists in what he has always wanted—his house by the
sea, and he will not argue with him. But now with his conduct better under-
stood...

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 surmises the satellites—not friends—who may be admitted there; those
whose flattery may make Nightingale "forget." As he contemplates the
barren elegance, his name is called in a voice which

...had the sound.
It might have had if in the mists of years
Another life than Malory's had been broken.

1. Ibid., p. 1036. 2. Ibid., p. 1028.
3. Ibid., p. 1031. 4. Ibid., p. 1032.
Realizing that if he is to act, he must act quickly, Malory yet stands motionless, clutching his hidden pistol. He stands, and waits, silent; gazing at "one who had grown older than time had made him. ¹ For Time has judged Nightingale and delivered its own sentence. In velvet robe, half lying, surrounded by tiers of books, and facing a huge window that looks upon the sea, Nightingale reclines in his wheel-chair, paralyzed.

Gazing upon a face which he had once idolized and now hates, Malory knows bitterly that Time and Fate have removed his power of destiny and vengeance. Now there is no need of killing the other. He was dead with a sweet kind of desperation of his own type of, and reason for, failure. "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 blinks 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 received the gun quietly and his faith.

I don't know which...²

After a brief review of old history, Malory sees the futility of his plan, and turns to leave. But a great weariness overcomes him, Nightingale, "a deep weariness, a deep despondency." Yes, says Malory...

...He had not know how tired
With the next morning Malory feels a new sense of desolation.

¹, Ibid., p. 1032. ², Ibid., p. 1040.
³, Ibid., p. 1045.
For now he is without even the stiffening strength of the old fierce purpose.

...He was alive, And was to have been dead with Nightingale, Who sat with death already; he was awake, And he could see too clearly and too far, Or so he thought, over an empty ocean Into an empty day, and into days That were to come, and must be filled somehow with other stuff than time...¹

Nightingale tells him that he wants him there till the morrow. Malory objects to watching even his "worst friend" suffer. But Nightingale replies with a 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...²

Nightingale has allowed passion and jealousy to dim intelligence. Says Malory to that:

...You may have been the devil, But you were never a fool...³

Sitting before the window, and watching the sea, Malory reveals to Nightingale the tragedy that has destroyed his family and his faith.

Agatha and her child went together, he says, she not being "sand 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.
...I was the dominant bird,
Outshining and outshining and outflying
Everything else...

...Before I learned, my only light
I was a lord of a small firmament.

...I was untried
I my submissions and humiliations.

I was a light that would be shining always,
A light for generations to remember
...Others have made a show
Of my initiative for their dull sons
To copy, and have clucked at my foresight
In seizing what another could not see.
It is not always criminal to be first,
But there's a poison and a danger waiting
For him who will not hear, and will not listen
While choruses of inner voices tell him
When to be second. That was the curse prepared
For me. I would not listen to my voices.

my vanity for my sins. I was the law—
And here I am...!
Continued Nightingale.

....I made a better town
Of Sharon, and I never sang outside
That made me live, I should have done more shining

all his legends, and the most imitated figure, he
had told him

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

...I was the youth of parts and promises,
Endowed with a convenient fluid of conscience
That covered the best of me with a bright varnish
And made me shine. If none had thumbed me,
I might be shining still, instead of dying

in this expensive nest. If had learned

In time, to know I was not the law
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 inflow hate for Malory whom she loved. Malory, says Nightingale, had his science; he himself had nothing. He saw Malory as one who had "betrayed him in the dark"; for Nightingale had introduced Malory to Agatha.

So Nightingale had gone to America, first advising Malory to invest all his legacy in a gold mine, warned himself of its imminent failure, he had sold his own stock, but "evaded and temporized," and told Malory nothing "but a few 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

Now, while yet realizing Nightingale's falseness, Malory finds himself watching the waves that flash with the power of life, a power that was like a wish...

To live, and an awakening wish to serve.²

When Nightingale sends him to walk on the beach, he goes, with a strange new resignation which precludes the beginning of a more positive philosophy. He will not die, he knows now—even though death, which had seemed his last friend, has for the time abandoned him.

¹. Ibid., p. 1060.
². Ibid.
When Malory returns to Nightingale, he is beginning to perceive what his problem of spiritual regeneration is:

...There was time
For living in himself and on himself,  
Like a thought-eating worm, and dying of it,  
Unthought of, or for life larger than that,  
Larger than self, and one that was not death.  

Meanwhile, Nightingale has a plan. Though twice he has been blind--
For those who are not born to follow it  
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 sea a haven for pain and misery. Then, he tells Malory, he will know why it was built.

So Malory accepts his way back to the "long sentence of his uselessness." His is to be a kind of redemption. Nightingale sacrifices himself at least partly...the lonely joy of being alive to the practical service that

in a good servitude, and of not being

orally but obdurately and unintelligently wasted. The lightest way through

"acknowledgement and recognition, humility and surrender."

Malory, more

1. Ibid., p. 1063.
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 warm 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.

Surely he could not go on—

The light you could not follow is not mine,

Which is my light—a safer one for me,

So doubt, then if it threw a gleam too far

To show my steps...

I cannot know,

Crashed—quelled—

For certain, that your way, dark as it was,

Was not the necessary way of life.

By situation

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

A sight of his life's purpose, or of man's fear to die.

Fear is not light, and you were never afraid—

Truth can be blind, Nightingale, but never afraid;

And even when you were blind, you may have seen,

Darker, where you were going, and where you are.

So Malory faces his lonely way back to human effectiveness in

periods of such darkness where his eyes were to be guided.

By light that would be his and Nightingale's.

2. Ibid., p. 1073.
3. Ibid., p. 1065.
4. Ibid., p. 1067.
5. Ibid., p. 1075.
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 ravage wrought by
jealousy, hate, egotism, revenge. Yet here, too, is the usual implication
of some redemption achieved through understanding and the forgiveness it
creates—qualities which come with the ability to see the truth, represented
by situations and men as they are. Here the Light is for Nightingale the
intelligence and integrity which he flouted and eventually discovers, with
also the humility that accompanies his belated self-knowledge, and admis-
sion 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 Matthes 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 with-
out price, and, again, is the requisite for spiritual effectiveness.

(10) King Jasper—"King Jasper" 1 is Robinson's last work. One is
tempted to say it is also his "Biggest." He himself called it "his treatise
on economics," 2 and he made of it a dramatic representation of the

"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 frequently spiritual holiness 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 blend, when it can, as sure as enduringly 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 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. Offante, p. 69 (Merlin)
5. Ibid., p. 195.
chimneys of his factories. Zoe is also the unaccepted daughter-in-law of Honoria, who is Jasper's wife, and the symbol of social propriety, prestige, and tradition. Zoe is the wife, "under the stars and under God," of young Jasper, the prince.

When the latter brings her in to meet his father and mother, Honoria is already uneasy under the "touch of hidden fingers everywhere," 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 unaccustomed decay." Jasper continues, that unless Honoria can accept be all there was her son, but Jasper knew she was that ever this is not the least of her distress, lies in the fact that Jasper, who really loves her, and whose material success has given her what the world envies, cannot see what she at least dimly envisions. Jasper can wish that she could find more things to see which he could share; but Jasper has his own horizons. "They are the backgrounds for those chimneys which are the "landmark" of his power." Gently, he assuages Honoria's doubts, suggesting that they may originate in the problem of young Jasper.

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.

2. Ibid., p. 1338.
3. Ibid., p. 1338.
Old Jasper, a "small, tight man," with his face "of amiable
deceit and pleasant dangers," does not understand their son. But
Honoria's doubts are not primarily of young Jasper. Says she,

...He is still young.
And so must have his visions. If you fear
He sees today too far beyond your chimneys,
Why be alarmed? Be quiet, and let him grow.
The chimneys are still there...

Old Jasper is grateful for that fact. Perhaps in time, the boy
will re-evaluate the despised chimneys, he says, and the "supremacy" which
now he calls "a dragon." Meanwhile, he is pre-occupied with a woman—Zoe.
He is so much pre-occupied with her, Jasper continues, that unless Honoria
can accept Zoe, she will lose her son. But Jasper knows now that even
this is not Honoria's real distress, which, though she cannot voice it, is
a ghostly but increasingly sure premonition of catastrophe.

Jasper, however, is not without his ghost either—a ghost with
"living and invincible hands." But for the time, says Jasper, the ghost
remains invisible, and while he does, they will imagine that he never was,
and not mention him. Yet he is with them, nevertheless, in the picture
of old Hebron, who was Jasper's friend, whom Jasper had betrayed, and
who has died, that Jasper may live and "succeed."

It is into this psychically disturbed atmosphere, this situation
rife with tragic implications and the ghosts of a demoralized past, that
young Jasper introduces Zoe. Says he, modestly and I wonder

They forget themselves in histories
When she was young, the 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 wake...

When Honoria frowns upon Zoe, young Jasper adds significantly,

You see, it'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 Honoria refuses to countenance Zoe, whom she regards as an

unstart, and "with a pallor-covered face," she leaves them. Jasper admits

that he likes Zoe, but also that he is afraid of her. Says he to Zoe;

"Come, come, my dear! With you for teacher," "prospecting them with a curious

eye," as they say, "in Jasper, to the implication that

Zoe can be fercious, if incited;

She can be merciless, and all for love; and

Old

And not for love of one, or two, or three.

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 learns his fate, alone in the dark with his new presen-

tions of a situation that he doesn't

1. Ibid., p. 1406. 3. Ibid.; p. 1418.
2. Ibid.; p. 1414. 4. Ibid.
They cannot read because they have no sight, they cannot be known. Their deeds will be something; 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.¹

Young Jasper pleads with Zoe not to annoy his father, not only for his own sake, but

...for the sake of all who are too old
To see the coming of what they have called for;²

through their ignorance and practical ruthlessness; which amounts to a
violation of the principles of love, wisdom, and morality. Further, says young Jasper to his father, he has seen old Hebron, who has been long away, down among his father's chimneys, "measuring them with a sardonic eye," as though they did not belong to Jasper. To the implication that Jasper owns 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
And what you see with them, and what's behind them,
Are more for you, and for your preservation
Than are the names of unremembered parents,"³

Zoe and young Jasper leave him then, alone in the dark with his new premonitions of disaster, and also with Jasper's realization that he does

¹ Ibid. ² Ibid., p. 1415. 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 tossing up end-
less rocks and hills, alone and lost in a dead world with no hope anywhere
in it. He is hailed at length by "a gouty frail shape" that is old Hebron,
who has seen him coming and waited him. But Hebron has changed. Was the
change due to death,

Or was it a king's fear that wrought the change,
in one the king had crushed and left infirm,
To starve on lies, and perish?

Hebron says that he will follow Jasper in his bitter sleeping, and they
will talk; as once they talked, when Jasper used to measure him of peace,
health, independence, and much gold, which were to "reward his genius,"
and compensate for present "diseased and useless years." 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 dreams, 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-

LITFILE 13968
1. 1914, p. 1421.  2. 1915, p. 1425.
2. 1914, p. 1422.  3. 1915, p. 1430.
2. 1914, p. 1433.  3. 1915, p. 1439.
suring 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 assumed me there was nothing then
Forsaking 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,
Incredibly, and on your lies, till all of it was yours
That you might use...1

...You reckoned well your time,
And mine. You knew thou that your need of me
Was done; and that another sick year or two
Still pressed For we would not be long for you to wait.2

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

I am the gold that you said would be mine—
Before you stole it, and became a king.
Fear not, old friend; you cannot fall or die,
Unless I strangle you with my gold fingers.
...They are as cold and hard as death,
For they are made of death...3

On they go, Jasper pleading for mercy; admitting that he had lied because Hebron’s cautions, hesitations, uncertainties, would have been misleading to young folks, the common unassumed weaknesses of all,

They reach a chasm, across which the figures of Zoe and young father and Jasper, and of himself, a dark nullity, are seen. Zoe calls to him to throw off the vicious weight and leap the chasm to them, and to knowledge. For, says she, if he could see Hebron truly, he would see his kingdom and his power would nothing to do with him. Zoe's prophecy.

1. Ibid., p. 1429. 2. Ibid., p. 1430. 3. Ibid., p. 1436.
And glory as it truly was. How Zoe reveals herself as his rightful child: 

Zoe, she has Without you I should never have been born. She tells him Without you, and your folly, and your shrewd eyes that not she That saw so much at once that they saw nothing else. She Time would have had no need or place for me. Or for the coming trouble I must behold regrets because Because you gave to me unwittingly "its most holy 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.¹

Now, goaded by Hebron, nearly 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 "calm hatred" in her eyes, he is denounced, and renounced by her. Still pressing on, despite her warnings, he tries to seize her, and is struck, if regretfully, with Zoe's sharp knife. Jasper falls, clutching the edge of the chasm. The dream ends, and he awakes, with a wound in his heart where Zoe's knife had found its mark.

During the king's convalescence, Honorita takes her stand. Either she or Zoe will leave the house. But if, as she admits, Honorita hates Zoe, the latter pities her for what she knows Honorita is afraid to learn. Jasper insists that neither must leave. Yet neither Jasper nor Honorita can move each other, and after a time Honorita leaves him. To him then comes young Hebron, who speaks satirically of the past relations of his father and Jasper, and of himself, "a dark child...marked for disaster." His house, says young Hebron, "will be the world," which having never 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. 1634.
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 breathing long before she came. Further, there are now too Hebrons to be considered.

Now Jasper, seeing too much for peace, is also aware of unseen hands destroying his house and his world.

...Zoe had come too late
To make a new king of a stricken one;
Whose retribution was a world's infection.

For he has been dominated by the urge for power; and a world so immorally created must fall. But Zoe has come in time to wound him to a revelation of the truth about himself and that world.

Again, Zoe continues, if Jasper's downfall is to be accomplished by young Hebron, he must accept him, knowing that Hebron's own "red

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1. Ibid., p. 1464. This theme is aptly developed in other poems in the group of those who see too much. (Cf. section 4, The Tragic Light.)

2. This characteristic belongs also to Jael, g.w.aniste p. 106.


4. Ibid., p. 1459.
rhetoric" will defeat itself through its own ignorance and violence.

Before she leaves, Jasper promises 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 raised 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 collapse of their world. But Zoe knows that old Jasper cannot go; and she knows that young Jasper, though a natural necessity that is "more than love, more than all knowledge," cannot go either. She alone

1. Ibid., p. 1471.
must go, for she must live. This is her destiny.

Destiny is upon her. For now the king looks upon the actual fiery disintegration of his world, and the fall of his chamoys. 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.

...a blistered hatred of all things there are
That are not your, or yours, and cannot be. 1

Young Hebron tries to console her that he and she together

Aren God's elect, who shall fire the world
With consecrated hate and sacrifice,
Leaving it warm for knowledge and for love. 2

He seizes her madly, and when she does not resist, thinks he has won her.
Accordingly, he tells her that she must leave the house, which is already "mired and woven with doom and flame." She must come with him, to help his "light for blinded man the fire of truth." 3 Here is another flaw in young Hebron's character. To him, truth is fire, out of which comes only chaos and dissolution. But to Robinson, truth is the white light of accurate vision, which does not destroy, but saves.

Before she goes, Zoe asks for a moment alone with her two dead--

...One of them was too old and worn

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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 met by the flash of steel, and he too dies, gasping out what he learns too late—that Zoe cannot die with him.

Now Zoe goes, fleeing through a darkness lit by flames of the burning house, where

...More than a house
Was burning; and far below her more than chimneys
Were falling...Now she could rest, and she could see
Two fires at once, that were a kingdom burning.
In one of them there was the king himself,
The prince, and their destroyer. In the other,
With chimneys falling on 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 first 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. 1463.
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ruthlessly trampled whatever stood in its path. That he was allowed at last through pain and recrimination to recognize the irony and tinsel of his kingly crown makes his tragedy more poignant. Old Hebron was the impediment to Jasper's success, so was crushed and his genius betrayed. Young Hebron knew only hatred, revenge, violence, and tried to right a wrong by adding another to it. His defect was ignorance—an ignorance which knew itself only through the violence that was begotten of his madness. Young Jasper had vision, idealism, a sense of justice and real value, as is proved by his adoption of Zoe. But he, too, was a victim of his father's world, and rendered impotent for good by a larger necessity that bound him to that world. Zoe alone was left; and Zoe, as is the case always with the few who "know," must go her way alone.

As is usual, there is considerable physical use of light here; but here it is not the golden positive light of Califer, or the sensuous glow of Merlin. It is the angry flame and destruction that overtake 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 necessity to penetration of the Light. It is also true that light giveth and light taketh away; and will appear to teach a cosmic lesson to us when we have learned to use it.

The lessons to the Light does man progress toward an ideal spiritual state. In this respect, a positive force is accumulated, in that the effect 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 revealed.
In each of the nineteen poems here analyzed, the Light has appeared either as a dominant, a secondarily important, or an implied motif or principle. In all but the Arthurian material, where the Light is the Grail light, it exists as an illuminating symbol of Robinson's most profound beliefs, observations, and deductions concerning a fallible, mortal world. If, on the one hand, men lack the Light entirely, or in part, they fail. If, on the other hand, they have too much Light, like Merlin or Lancelot they must pursue a lonely path through the wilderness of human ignorance and passion. Even in such cases, failure is implied in preliminary experience. Being but human, even these must ultimately achieve the Light at the expense of most, if not all, of the things that the flesh holds dear.

Such is the hard but inescapable price of the Light. Yet if all this is true for the individual, and would appear to lend a certain negative quality to possession of the Light, it is also true that there remains an inherent positive quality. For only through his perception of and obedience to the Light does man progress toward an ideal spiritual state. In this respect, a positive force is accumulated, in that all men, working individually for good, present a universal and composite implication of what ultimately will be good for all men.

This then is the most significant aspect of the Light symbol.
Robinson "looks beyond the tragedies of persons and societies, and beholds life as an eternal and creative will evolving through a succession of changing patterns toward an ideal of perfection." 1 The Light, through a series of widely varying specific applications, becomes a universal principle, and applies, finally, to no individual man, or time, but to universal, timeless existence and experience.

Thus, like all universal concepts, the Light must be infinite, eternal, unchanging. There are few such concepts. None of them are new. They have been suggested in every significant religion and philosophy. Robinson has indicated them by their positive presentation in his portrayal of the group who see too much. He has implied them negatively, by revealing the overt tragedies consequent on their absence, in the group who see too little.

By the constant use of the phenomenon of physical light, with its overtones of spiritual vision, he has suggested the basic quality for moral effectiveness, the capacity to recognize life for what it is, in its human and material aspects, with all the potentialities of those aspects. He insists that such clarity of vision must always be the basis for the only real success, spiritual competence.

So the Light finally resolves itself into a composite, poetic essence which is Truth, Knowledge, Wisdom, Faith, Love. The last four qualities are attendant upon, indistinguishable from, and component parts of, Truth. Truth, then, becomes the beautiful, the good, and, by extension, the God, implicit in His faulty image. That image must still be

1. Floyd Stoval, op. cit., p. 23.
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 forsake us in the seeming, we are all at one with a complete companionship;
And though forlornly joyless be the ways we travel, the compensating spirit-gleams of Wisdom shaft the darkness here and there like scattered lamps in unfrequented streets.\(^3\)

There remains one thing more to say here. The Light is the first and last refutation of the old charge of pessimism directed against Robinson. It is the way home through the dark for the lost children of men. It is the positive and bright avowal of the most significant kind of optimism—the belief in the ultimate capacity of man to perfect his destiny through the implications of his divinity, expressed in Wisdom, Love, Faith, and thus to rise above the limitations of his earth-bound mortality. Birth, for Robinson, is not "a sleep and a forgetting," but the embarking on an eternal and perilous road. But always, through the mists of doubt and pain and futility, gleams the Light. If it is tragic, it is also finally triumphant.

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