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EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON: THE POETRY OF THE ACT

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By

William Ronald Robinson, B.A., M. A.

The Ohio State University
1962

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Your doom is to be free. The seed of truth
Is rooted in you, and the fruit is yours
For you to eat alone. You cannot share it,
Though you may give it, and a few thereby
May taste of it, and so not wholly starve.

Roman Bartholow

Growth of Man - like Growth of Nature -
Gravitates within -
Atmosphere, and Sun endorse it -
But it stir - alone -

Each - its difficult Ideal
Must achieve - Itself -
Through the solitary prowess
Of a Silent Life -

Effort - is the sole condition -
Patience of Itself -
Patience of opposing forces -
And intact Belief -

Looking on - is the Department
Of its Audience -
But Transaction - is assisted
By no Countenance -

Emily Dickinson

PREFACE

For some time now it has been customary to regard the literature of the American Renaissance as falling into two traditions stemming from Emerson and Hawthorne, and it is sometimes assumed that the two traditions are mutually exclusive views of life with truth being the prerogative of one or the other. They are not alternatives, however, but complements, for man is simultaneously a transparent eyeball and a link in the great chain of humanity, a private and social creature, a metaphysical and moral being. Because Emerson went to one extreme in abstracting man from society in order to define and free his spiritual being, it was inevitable that Hawthorne, to right the balance, should go to the other extreme of identifying man's humanity with his moral responsibility to a community. But in giving dominant priority to one aspect of life, neither achieved a comprehensive account of man's being; both vividly isolated one term but at the cost of telling only partial truths. Yet taken together their work is a symptom and definition of human existence as they experienced it, the complete truth of a world in which life is a taut dialectic between the radical antitheses of individual and society.

The intrusion of one man into the scene, Emerson felt, spoiled the meditative value of nature ("the poet," he wrote in "Nature," "finds something ridiculous in his delight until he is out of the sight of men"¹), and Hawthorne, as exemplified by the forest scene in The Scarlet

¹ The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Centenary Edition (Boston and New York, 1903-1904), I, 66.

Letter, viewed the retreat into nature out of the sight of men as the surest way to self-alienation. A direct heir of their thought and art, Edwin Arlington Robinson inherited from them the task of reuniting what they had set radically apart. In his early years Robinson's closest affinity was to Hawthorne, whose tough humanism he found to his liking, but a strong streak of Idealism or Transcendentalism drew him closer and closer to Emerson as he aged, until in his late poetry he was near to being an outright Emersonian or Transcendentalist. But though he eventually eliminated from his canon all his poems on American poets except the one on Emerson and spoke of Emerson as the greatest American poet,² he never went all the way; though he finally located the higher source of realization and morality outside society, he acknowledged as an essential truth of the solitary self the need to live for others. Robinson, in other words, was unable to eliminate the man from the scene, and therefore the delights of solitude were always somewhat ridiculous for him. Yet social morality was also ridiculous for him--indeed, it was malicious and destructive--and moral sanity could be achieved only through a transcendental spiritual enlightenment. So, for Robinson, no matter whether alone or in a crowd, a man always carries his social life and solitariness with him, each eternally qualifying and limiting the other.

Although Robinson worked out what was to him the necessary relation between the transcendental and human, he did not put an end

² Robinson's words were, "Emerson is the greatest poet who ever wrote in America. Passages scattered here and there in his work surely are the greatest of American poetry. In fact, I think there are lines and sentences in Emerson's poetry that are as great as anything anywhere"--Joyce Kilmer, Literature in the Making (New York, 1917), p. 270.

to the problem which results from the radical antitheses of individual and society initiated in America by Emerson. That problem is still very much with us, and, in fact, after a period of otherworldliness in which disgust with man drove writers to disaffiliate themselves from contemporary social life, we are reconsidering the problem in an attempt to arrive at a more balanced view than that extreme disjunction. In the work of Albert Camus, Saul Bellow, and William Golding--to mention only a representative example of fiction writers--an attempt is being made to achieve a more viable relation between the transcendental and human. The effort is slanted in favor of the human, but it is recognized that man's existence is the meeting and mating of the two. William Golding writes, for instance, in Free Fall,

Nick's universe is real he is a scientist, socialist and rationalist . . . and this mode we call the spirit breathes through the universe and does not touch it; touches only the dark things, held prisoner, incommunicado, touches, judges, sentences and passes on. [This, Miss Romona Pringle's] world is real; both worlds are real. There is no bridge. Both worlds exist. They meet in me.³

And after a mystical experience of the great cosmic unity of being which he finds useless as a guide for human conduct, the narrator-protagonist of this novel sees clearly what is between man and man and says,

The substance of these pillars supporting the order of things among men as opposed to the cosmic order was a kind of vital morality, not the relationship of a man to remote posterity nor even to a social system, but the relationship of individual man to individual man--once an irrelevance but now seen to be the forge in which all change, all value, all life is beaten out into a good or a bad shape.⁴

³ London, 1959, pp. 210-211.

⁴ Ibid., p. 189.

As Golding sees life, man inhabits two worlds which cannot be derived from one another and which make conflicting claims upon him, but his final allegiance is always to man, to other individual persons. The transcendental experience--for him, Camus, Bellow, even for Jack Kerouac, in On the Road--is not an end in itself, is not sufficient, but is a catalyst in the achievement of a good life between specific human beings.

This continuous concern with the relation between the transcendental and the human from Emerson to the present amounts to a tradition which can perhaps be identified most dramatically as the meeting of East and West. Emerson and the Transcendentalists in general, it will be remembered, read widely in Eastern religion and philosophy, and frequently preferred quoting from these sources rather than Christian or Western ones. And they found there a concept of reality and man--of the divine, nature, and the soul--compatible with their own sense of things. This concept, also latent in the naturalism of Western science, has become progressively free of Judaeo-Christian and Greek habits of mind, until in the last one hundred years it has effectively challenged the established concepts of the tradition. Consequently, the attraction of Eastern thought has increased rather than waned, with the result that George Santayana proclaimed an affinity with Neoplatonic and Indian philosophy,⁵ and Robinson could say, ". . . J. and I are reading up . . . on Oriental Religions. I have been interested to find out that Christianity is in reality nothing more than Buddhism

⁵ See "A Brief History of My Opinions," The Philosophy of Santayana, ed. Erwin Edman (The Modern Library, 1936), pp. 1-21.

humanized."⁶ And we are all familiar, if not sympathetic, with the rage of Zen Buddhism today. The phrase "the meeting of East and West" can be misleading if taken to mean nothing more than the introduction of ideas of external origin into Western culture or the interpenetration of two cultures facilitated by technology. Actually, the meeting is a clash of contradictions inherent in the Western tradition which Eastern thought helps to clarify and perhaps resolve. Now there are other contexts in which this study of Robinson can be placed--such as the history of the idea of poetry or of the influence of empiricism on the arts--but this meeting of what is in effect Eastern metaphysics and psychology with Western morality seems to me to be the most illuminating and fruitful. And this context or tradition comes most clearly into focus when it is recognized that the essential task created by the meeting is, in Robinson's terms, the humanizing of Buddhism.

⁶ Untriangulated Stars: Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson to Harry de Forest Smith, 1890-1905, ed. Denham Sutcliffe (Cambridge, Mass., 1943), p. 274--hereafter cited as US.

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CHAPTER I

THE INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND

The world is at heart an aesthetic phenomenon.

Erich Heller, on
Nietzsche's philosophy

A work of art is an abstract or epitome of the world. It
is the result or expression of nature, in miniature.

Emerson

I

Comparing Edwin Arlington Robinson to Amy Lowell and Edgar Lee Masters, the ranking contemporary poets in his mind, Edward Sapir said, in 1922, "Mr. Robinson is the one American poet who compels, rather than invites, attention."¹ In the sense that Sapir meant it--as a tribute to the stature of his art--Robinson still compels some attention: He continues to hold a place in textbook and commercial anthologies, and he is still granted the rank of a major American poet by professional students of American literature. But in the sense of being enthusiastically read, he no longer compels attention. Nor has he for some time. He was aware in his own lifetime that he was being neglected and on occasion, despairing of an audience or misunderstood, he found consolation in believing he would have more to say

¹ "Poems of Experience," Freeman, V (April 19, 1922), 141-142.

when he was dead.² Perhaps he was right, but if so that time has obviously not yet come. For some years now he has not only not been the one American poet who compels attention but has been eclipsed by a host of luminaries among American poets, Eliot, Pound, and Stevens being but the brightest. Furthermore, the New Criticism, which has been the arbiter of taste in poetry for the last two decades, has almost completely ignored him,³ and on practicing poets of the last twenty-five years he has had no appreciable influence.⁴ So Robinson not only does not compel genuine attention today; he hardly even invites it.

The truth of the matter is that, though dead only twenty-five years, Robinson is a historical phenomenon, a thing of the past.

² Elizabeth Bates reports Robinson as saying that he was "perhaps two hundred years in advance of his time" because of "his habit of understatement, his absorption in the unconscious and semi-conscious feelings and impulses of his characters . . . in which he was unlike his contemporaries"--Edwin Arlington Robinson and His Manuscripts (Waterville, Maine, 1944), p. 3. Despite the exaggeration and dubious reason, the sentiment is genuine.

³ Studies by Ivor Winters, Edwin Arlington Robinson (Norfolk, Conn., 1946) and Allen Tate, "Edwin Arlington Robinson," Collected Essays (Denver, 1959), pp. 358-365, are the only attention the New Critics have given Robinson's poetry. Winters praises him for not writing the kind of poetry the New Criticism favors, while Tate criticizes him for failing to write that kind of poetry in his late long poems. Both, that is, agree that Robinson's poetry is not compatible with the taste of the New Criticism.

⁴ While some of the French Symbolists, Whitman, and Yeats, for example, have been honored by their successors, Robinson has to my knowledge been mentioned only once by a fellow poet, and that is in Kenneth Rexroth's lines,

What happened to Robinson,
Who used to stagger down Eighth Street,
Dizzy with solitary gin?

And here it is significant that not his achievement or influence but his disappearance stands out.

But he is not unusual in this respect; it is generally true for his generation, even to a great extent of such a giant as John Dewey. Since this generation, which came of age around 1890, is not our immediate predecessor, we do not suffer under the onus of its attitudes and motives as we do under those of the twenties. Thus we can ignore Robinson if we choose, whereas we cannot ignore T. S. Eliot, whose poetry and criticism are inextricably bound up with our deepest sense of the character of our lives. For this reason any consideration of Eliot's work is likely to be an ideological matter first and an aesthetic one only secondly if at all. With Robinson and his generation this immediate emotional, moral involvement is absent, so that we look back upon them with historical detachment.

Though at present vaguely honored and mute in his grave, Robinson is not just another among an infinite number of historical phenomena for us. Despite the obvious incompatibility of his style with that favored by modern poetry, despite his seeming ideological irrelevance, he has a significant relation to the 1960's. It seems a sociological law for recent Western civilization that a given generation quarrel with its immediate predecessor and turn to its twice-removed predecessor for succor and support. This was certainly true for the generation of the twenties, which repudiated the liberalism of the nineties, based on a faith in life and progress, and with almost unqualified enthusiasm revived the generation of the American Renaissance, where it found--especially in the gloomier personalities--a reflection of its own sense of life. Something of the same appears true today: more and more the attitude that the nineties is a blind age between two

periods of profound wisdom is disappearing, and it now looks as though this period may have more to say to us in the 1960's than is of relevance to our human condition than do the twenties of the American Renaissance, at least as it was interpreted and evaluated by the twenties. In the first place the nineties, the threshold of the twentieth century, are the source of most of our concerns. Secondly, as the Silent Generation's otherworldliness and despair have yielded to a new, "hard" humanism and cautious hope, the humanistic thought and art of the nineties increasingly appears to reflect our own mood and preconceptions.⁵ If the bond between the generations is deep and enduring, and if we can open a dialogue with the period as the twenties did with the American Renaissance, we may with equal success come to know more accurately the nineties' achievement and our own predicament. In the light of this possibility Robinson's being a thing of the past is perhaps an advantage rather than a disadvantage. With the book closed on him--not only in that his last word has been said, but also in that, being irrelevant to our present preoccupations, he is free of the vagaries of contemporary taste and ideologies--the topical falls away from the essential, with the result that an understanding of the permanent and profound aspects of his work becomes more readily attainable.

In this study I want to take advantage of these favorable conditions for a reconsideration of the character and achievement of

⁵ See, for example, Van Wyck Brooks, "The Silent Generation," Writer in America (New York, 1953).

Robinson's poetry. For that purpose I shall confine myself largely to examining it from the point of view of his idea of poetry, as it is revealed in both his practice and theory. Though I shall in passing make some general observations about his historical relevance, here I shall concentrate primarily on what his poetry is and does. But before taking up Robinson's poetry, I want to describe the salient features of the intellectual background against which he lived and wrote, and to trace the impact of those features on poetry.

II

Alfred North Whitehead, probably more responsible than any other single man for our present notions of Western intellectual history and himself a member of Robinson's generation, said of the era under consideration,

Within the period of sixty or seventy years preceding the present time, the progressive civilization of the European races has undergone one of the most profound changes in human history. The whole world has been affected; but the origination of the revolution is seated in the races of Western Europe and Northern America. It is a change of point of view. Scientific thought had developed with a uniform trend for four centuries, namely, throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. In the seventeenth century, Galileo, Descartes, Newton, and Leibniz elaborated a set of concepts, mathematical and physical, within which the whole movement was confined. The culmination may be placed in the decade from 1870 to 1880. At that time Helmholtz, Pasteur, Darwin, and Clerk-Maxwell were developing their discoveries. It was a triumph which produced the death of a period. The change affects every department of thought.⁶

⁶ "Mathematics and the Good," The Philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, 2nd ed. (New York, 1951), p. 667.

In Whitehead's large perspective, the nineties is perforce a time of thorough intellectual reexamination and reconstruction, a genuine revolution in thought in which the concepts of man and the universe, and of the relation between them, were radically revised. More than a palace insurrection amounting to a change of kings while maintaining the old order, the revolution, as A. O. Lovejoy noted, was a battle of the Twentieth Century against the Seventeenth over the fundamental principles on which the kingdom of knowledge was to stand.⁷ For this reason, it is quite appropriate (though usually an overused metaphor) to speak of the nineties as a period of revolt--as a "revolt against dualism" or as a "revolt against formalism,"⁸ for it was literally a period of death and rebirth, a terminating and initiating stage out of which came the modern mind, or twentieth-century man.

A narrower focus than Whitehead's on this revolution, one that concentrates on man in society, is provided by H. Stuart Hughes, who writes, "In this decade [the 1890's] and the one immediately succeeding it, the basic assumptions of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century social thought underwent a critical review from which there emerged new assumptions characteristic of our time."⁹ Hughes specifies the character of this review with the statement,

The main attack . . . was directed primarily against what writers of the nineties chose to call "positivism" [He is speaking here primarily of European thinkers; in

⁷ A. O. Lovejoy, Revolt Against Dualism (Chicago, 1930), p. 1.

⁸ Morton White, Social Thought in America (New York, 1949).

⁹ Consciousness and Society (New York, 1959), p. 33.

America the term was "materialism." . . . They used the word in the looser sense to characterize the whole tendency to discuss human behavior in terms of analogies drawn from the natural sciences. In reacting against it, the innovators of the nineties felt that they were rejecting the most pervasive tenet of their time.¹⁰

The results of the attack were that

They had displaced the axis of social thought from the apparent and objectively verifiable to the only partially conscious area of unexplained motivation. . . . It was no longer what actually existed that seemed most important: it was what men thought existed. . . . since it had apparently been proved impossible to arrive at any sure knowledge of human behavior--if one must rely on flashes of subjective intuition and on the creation of convenient fictions--then the mind had indeed been freed from the bonds of positivist method: it was at liberty to speculate, to imagine, to create.¹¹

Obviously a transformation of such proportions even with this narrower focus on social thought cannot be summed up in a statement or two. But it is necessary for my purposes that the transformation be succinctly characterized, and that can best be done by focusing upon a single concept or term. In discussing European social thought of the time, Hughes performs this task by identifying "consciousness" as a key term in the new thought. That term--or the concept that it represents, in all of its implications as well as its explicit meaning --does bring into focus the changes that occurred in philosophy, aesthetics, political thought, history, art, etc. in Europe. With it Bergson, Whitehead, Unamuno, Croce, to mention only philosophers, are readily linked together as articulators of the emerging "feeling

¹⁰ Consciousness and Society, p. 36.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 66.

toward life" (to use Unamuno's phrase). They all sensed, as Croce put it, that

We no longer believe like the Greeks, in happiness of life on earth; we no longer believe like the Christians, in happiness in an other-worldly life; we no longer believe, like the optimistic philosopher of the last century, in a happy future for the human race. . . . What we have alone retained is consciousness of ourselves, and the need to make that consciousness ever clearer and more evident, a need for whose satisfaction we turn to science and art.¹²

Sometimes employing the term informally, as Croce does here, sometimes employing it--or a synonymous one--to designate a formal philosophical concept, they directed their thought toward determining the nature of the universe and life in a world which left man with nothing but consciousness, or consciousness of himself.

Unfortunately "consciousness" does not serve so well as a focal point for the critical review in American thought during the nineties. Although William James used it in the phrase "stream of consciousness" and it was fairly common in both philosophical and psychological parlance, the term did not have philosophical status; that is, it was not used as a concept defining the essential being of man and thus determining his understanding of himself, his destiny, and his ideals. This undoubtedly happened because James himself disqualified it in his essay "Does 'Consciousness' Exist?" where he argued, in A. O. Lovejoy's words, that "'Consciousness as a kind of impalpable inner flowing,' a 'bare Bewusstheit or Bewusstsein uberhaupt,' evaporates to the 'state of pure disphaneity'; it is, in short, not

¹² Quoted by Hughes, p. 428.

introspectively discoverable, and therefore does not exist."¹³ But James' position is important--and was influential--not because it is merely his or true but because it reflects the differences in European and American habits of mind. Both European and American thinkers were dealing with the same phenomenon of intellectual awareness, yet the European tended toward classical realism, which postulates the reality of universals. For instance, Russell, Whitehead, and Santayana, all scions of the European intellectual tradition, developed Platonistic doctrines. The American, on the other hand, preferred naive realism, which assumes the reality of the external physical world, and favored voluntaristic philosophies such as pragmatism and instrumentalism which make the so-called universals relative to action. Two different concepts of consciousness were held by the Europeans and Americans; the former taking consciousness to be an independent realm of mental entities, the latter taking its content to be replicas, or mirror images, referring to the things of nature. Whereas the Europeans regarded "consciousness as an indubitable datum"¹⁴ given before and independent of experience, the American saw it as a function of the will indistinguishable from what is experienced. A single term for both concepts would be confusing, but, more important, "consciousness" would be inappropriate for American thought, since it implies a reification of mental entities or intellectual awareness that is antithetical to the American view.

¹³ Revolt Against Dualism, p. 7.

¹⁴ "My Mental Development," The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell, ed. Robert E. Egner and Lester E. Denonn (New York, 1961), p. 40.

I had better make it clear before going any further that I am not attempting to include all the movements of thought in this characterization of the critical review that took place in the nineties. I am not, for instance, taking into account idealism in any of its forms, Roycean or Hegelian, but only realism. That is because E. A. Robinson, sometimes mistakenly grouped with the idealists,¹⁵ is closely associated with the realistic movement. Though the association is not deliberate on his part, he nevertheless seeks to accomplish in his poetry what the realist philosophers sought to accomplish in their thought. Incidentally, the fact that idealism has been dead or dormant for some time now testifies that the realistic movement was the main and most vigorous one of the period. Furthermore, I am aware that the nineties are generally regarded in a manner different from my portrayal of them here. "The period from 1870 to 1914," William Barrett has written, "has aptly been described by one historian as the generation of materialism."¹⁶ This is quite true if one is thinking of the majority point of view, but I am concerned here with the critics of the majority point of view, those advanced thinkers who comprised a counter-current to it and now stand out as the giants of their time. I should also point out that the dates given by Barrett cover the full range of the period that I am designating as the nineties.

No terms that I know of had the kind of status in America that Hughes attributes to "consciousness" in Europe. However, James, the

¹⁵ This is the thesis, for instance, of Estelle Kaplan's study, Philosophy in the Poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York, 1940).

¹⁶ Irrational Man (Garden City, N.Y., 1958), p. 29.

most articulate spokesman of the time in America, thinking about the same general phenomenon as the Europeans, confronting the same problems, did have a roughly commensurate term for the one he disqualified. That term is "radical empiricism." Because radical empiricism was James' special doctrine, it would be inaccurate to claim that the term was central for the critical review that took place in America in the nineties. Yet James' term, if allowed to be loosely representative of a climate of feeling, can bring the character of the thought emerging in America at this time into fairly sharp focus. In fact, James, aware that philosophy was "on the eve of a considerable rearrangement" (" . . . many minds are, in point of fact, now turning in a direction that points toward radical empiricism,"¹⁷ he wrote) offered the term for such a use.

Underlying James' term was a plain and thorough commitment to empiricism, of which radical empiricism was a particular doctrine. Again, little attention was given by American thinkers to empiricism as a formal philosophical position, and in fact many of them, unsympathetic with British empiricism, shied away from the term because of the traditional associations attached to it. Though he was as opposed as any of them to British empiricism, James did not avoid the word; he simply used it in a broader sense. He meant by empiricism the surrendering of "the doctrine of objective certitude," and surrendering that doctrine meant "we must go on experiencing and

¹⁷ "The World of Pure Experience," Essays in Radical Empiricism (New York, 1922), pp. 40 and 91.

thinking over our experience, for only thus can our opinions grow more true."¹⁸ For James, thought, always something less than experience, could achieve only approximate truth; being contained within experience, whose bounds extended far beyond its own, thought could never see life whole and see it clearly, that is, could never metaphysically encompass or exhaust it. Unamuno aptly stated the basis of this predicament in his remark,

Philosophy answers to our need of forming a complete and unitary conception of the world and of life, and as a result of this conception, a feeling which gives birth to an inward attitude and even to outward action. But the fact is that this feeling, instead of being a consequence of this conception, is the cause of it. Our philosophy--that is our mode of understanding or not understanding the world and life--springs from our feeling towards life itself. And life, like everything affective, has roots in subconsciousness, perhaps in unconsciousness.¹⁹

In short, James' empiricism is designed to overcome the bifurcation of mind and nature, thought and experience, by subsuming the former within the latter.

Obviously James' definition of empiricism--and its difference from that of the British school--rests upon what he means by experience. A clue to his definition is provided by Ralph Barton Perry in a statement he made about some of James' papers:

The manila envelope contained a manuscript on "A World of Pure Experience," and headed "Chapter I." The book of which this was to form the first chapter was to be called "Radical Empiricism"--signifying the "refusal to go beyond concrete experience," and the "insistence

¹⁸ The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy (New York, 1919), p. 14.

¹⁹ Tragic Sense of Life (New York, 1954), p. 2.

that conjunctive and disjunctive relations are, when experienced, equally real."²⁰

In these notes James qualifies "experience" with "pure" and "concrete," and in "Does 'Consciousness' Exist?" he defined this concept of experience as "the instant field of the present."²¹ Then he described the attitude that must be taken towards that experience, and thereby defined radical empiricism as a methodology, by saying,

To be radical, an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced. For such a philosophy, the relations that connect experiences must themselves be experienced relations, and any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as "real" as anything else in the system.²²

An involved philosophical analysis of James' ideas is not necessary here; two descriptive historical accounts can make the meaning of these remarks sufficiently clear for present purposes, and they can also stand as further evidence for the widespread existence of the phenomenon being defined. The first is by William Barrett, who is describing the development of Existentialism:

Over the last 100 years philosophy has shown a remarkable enlargement of content, a progressive orientation toward the immediate and qualitative, the existent and actual, toward "concreteness and adequacy" . . . Philosophers can no longer attempt, as the British empiricists Locke and Hume attempted, to construct human experience out of simple ideas and elementary sensations. The psychic life of man is not a mosaic of such mental atoms, and philosophers were able to cling to this belief so long only because

²⁰ The Thought and Character of William James, Briefer Version (New York, 1954), p. 277.

²¹ Essays in Radical Empiricism, p. 23.

²² "The World of Pure Experience," p. 42.

they had put abstractions in place of concrete experience.²³

The second is by Hans Meyerhof, who also is describing developments in twentieth-century philosophy:

Nor is this discovery of the immediate field of human experience confined to the continental philosophers. . . . It is a characteristic feature of Whitehead's thought; and Husserl's phenomenological description of the *Lebenswelt* (even Heidegger's *Dasein*) corresponds at times literally, to what Dewey called experience on a pre-reflective or pre-analytic level. This is "ordinary life-experience" in its "primary integrity" and "unanalyzed totality," in which we do not recognize the "division between act and material, subject and object." It is "experience in the large, in its coarse and conspicuous features," including all the qualities, objects, activities, emotions, and thoughts that are immediately present in everyday life and "that figure in poetical discourse." It is "something had and enjoyed"; and it is had before it is known. "The world is not what I think, but what I live," was said by Merleau-Ponty; it might have been said by William James. In the same vein, Dewey constantly re-asserted "the primacy and ultimacy" of the world as it is lived and experienced against the derivative world of intellectual abstractions and theoretical concepts employed in scientific discourse. Philosophy cannot dispense with scientific techniques, but they must always be "guides back to the subject-matter of everyday experience" and the possibilities of "direct enjoyment" in this ordinary world around us. "If what is written in these pages," Dewey said in Experience and Nature, "has no other result than creating and promoting a respect for concrete human experience and its possibilities, I shall be content." This is the philosophical variant of the cult of experience for its own sake in American literature.²⁴

The position to which the reflective experience of the nineties legitimately leads²⁵ is a new sense of the content and authority of

²³ Irrational Man, p. 16.

²⁴ "The Return to the Concrete," Chicago Review, XIII (Summer, 1959), 32.

²⁵ Lovejoy, p. 151. This is Lovejoy's phrase and it reveals that the historicism of the nineties, the sense of how ideas are related to temporal experience, affected even his vigorously abstract, logical mind.

experience, in which conjunctive relations are as much given in experience as disjunctive relations and the pre-reflective has priority over the conceptual. When James said, "I am . . . a complete empiricist as far as my theory of human knowledge goes,"²⁶ he embraced the principle that all knowledge comes through the senses but he was not aligning himself with British atomistic empiricism. "They weren't empirical enough"²⁷ for him; he was taking the position of a complete or radical empiricism in which all of the senses, the internal as well as the external--or the full range of consciousness--provided the data to be taken into account in explaining the external world as well as man's inner life. A. O. Lovejoy more formally stated this position when he summarized the basic argument proffered by the first phase of the revolt against dualism, in which James participated; "since," he wrote,

indirect or representative knowledge was assumed to be inconceivable, it must be held that the immediate content of an experience is always identical with the reality cognized in that experience. . . . Thus everything which is ever "before the mind" at all must be regarded as "objective." We must, it was proclaimed by the authors of the celebrated revolutionary manifesto, return to a metaphysical state of nature, to that "naive or natural realism" which "makes no distinction between seeming and being," but believes that "things are just what they seem."²⁸

This epistemological principle, though stated here so as to apply only to nature, actually opens the door to many other seemingly unnatural

²⁶ Will to Believe, p. 14.

²⁷ This is Morton White's phrase (Social Thought in America, p. 24) for describing the reaction of Holmes, Dewey, and Veblen to nineteenth-century British empiricism. They, too, favored a radical empiricism.

²⁸ Revolt Against Dualism, p. 55.

matters--to such things as belief, options or values, and religious experience. It allows James to investigate the varieties of religious experience rather than religious truths and to experiment with abnormal psychological states induced by drugs. These are or produce contents of consciousness as much "before the mind" as natural objects.

Not only is James' empiricism to be distinguished from the British variety; it is also to be distinguished from scientific empiricism, which developed parallel to his but differs in granting a portfolio to only one of the senses--namely, vision--and limits its purview to natural objects. Most famously represented by logical positivism and behaviorism, scientific empiricism is anti-metaphysical and anti-humanistic. For this point of view speculative philosophical generalizations and matters of the heart or spirit are nonsense, not before the mind but emanations of its ego-centered desires that obscure the tough reality of substantial objects. It is a realism which fastens its attention on the thereness of the external world of objects for the purpose of dissection, measurement, and causal analysis. James' empiricism is as methodologically objective, but its subject is pure and concrete experience, which means that the human is directly involved in nature. It turns its empirical gaze upon experience, with the objective of knowing the content and structure of consciousness, which is equated with the content and structure of the world. Because these two are equated, James' empiricism tolerates metaphysics; in fact, as James intended eventually to use the term, radical empiricism is a name for a metaphysical doctrine, though he never completely formulated it. And James was not alone in his meta-

physical tendencies; Whitehead, Russell, Santayana, Mead, Dewey--all the towering figures of his generation in philosophy were metaphysicians who sought a general interpretation of the world on the basis of the new content and authority ascribed to experience.

In summary, radical empiricism, as I am defining it, assumes that all knowledge derives from the senses; that experience is synonymous with reality (and by experience is meant the pure, concrete content and the pre-reflective continuity and coherence of consciousness); and that objective intellectual analysis of experience can lead to a philosophical comprehension of life. Though it is James' personal term, radical empiricism can be used to designate this return to the concrete and thereby bring to focus from the perspective of realism the critical review that occurred during the nineties in America.

III

The change in thought, Whitehead noted, affects every department of mental activity, and that includes literature as well as the other arts, for it could not escape the form and pressure of the times. In fact, true to Hamlet's definition, it was the mirror of that form and pressure, revealing the extent to which empiricism was abroad in the land. With characteristic insight and style, Emerson early in the century had metaphorically defined man as an eyeball.²⁹ And F. O. Matthiessen, surveying a later period in the age, expanded Emerson's

²⁹ Emerson's actual phrase, of course, in "Nature," was "transparent eyeball," which was his way of yoking transcendentalism with empiricism, and making the eye the window of the soul on nature and thus its means to self-discovery.

insight by stating:

Concern with the external world came to mark every phase of the century's increasing closeness of observation, whether in such scientific achievements as the lense for the telescope and the microscope, or in the painters' new experiments with light, or in the determination of the photographers and realistic novelists to record every detail, [and suggesting that] an interesting chapter in cultural history could be written about the nineteenth century's stress on sight.³⁰

Actually, a great deal of the chapter has been written since Matthiessen made his suggestion. Studies of the novel, of the short story, of painting--in short, of the aesthetics and works of realism--and intellectual histories have traced the influence of the stress on sight on art, in both form and content, at this time.

Certainly modern poetry has not escaped the stress on sight, and that it has not is vividly illustrated by Imagism. Amy Lowell recorded its impact when she proclaimed: "Externality, the Imagist and modern attitude, cuts the poet away from introspection and focuses his attention on the object as interesting in itself."³¹ And Ezra Pound, with a different emphasis, also recorded that impact when he listed as his first principle, "To paint the thing as I see it."³² Though a complex phenomenon, Imagism derived most of its impetus from the desire of poets to emulate science. Pound's call to "make it new" was, among other things, an insistence that poetry catch up with the facts of

³⁰ Henry James, The Major Phase (New York, 1944), p. 32.

³¹ Quoted by Stanley K. Coffman, Jr. in Imagism: A Chapter for the History of Modern Poetry (University of Oklahoma, 1951), p. 90.

³² Quoted by Coffman, p. 126.

twentieth-century reality, or, in other words, base itself upon the assumptions and ideals of science. To be sure, Imagism represents an extreme form of the influence of empiricism on poetry, but what influenced it, regarded more broadly, is what has in substance governed the main stream of modern poetry since the nineties. Realistic fiction, the consequence of the stress on sight in prose, is devoted to recording every detail; poetry under the same influence is concerned with "sensate experience, with sight and sound, the immediate feel of things."³³ If taken literally and strictly, not just as the commonplace that art works its effects through the senses, this concern leads to a poetry that "dissolves thought and structure in feeling and sensory perception."³⁴ Actually, Yvor Winters, a defender of "reason" and an unrelenting critic of empiricism in poetry, used this phrase to condemn Eliot and Pound, and through them all of modern poetry that is related to theirs by common preconceptions. One may not agree with his judgment, but the accuracy of his perception is unquestionable. But Winters, it must be noted, speaks of sensory perception and feeling, not simply of sight. The role attributed to sight in the nineteenth century by Matthiessen can be misleading if empiricism is conceived too narrowly; it must be understood in literature as well as in philosophy as a return to the concrete embracing both scientific and radical empiricism, as including both sense and sensibility. When empiricism is understood in this sense, the Imagists' type of poetry and T. S.

³³ Coffman, p. 12.

³⁴ Winters, p. 144.

Eliot's type have a common base: both agree that man's knowledge derives from immediate experience. However, Imagism, following scientific empiricism, emphasizes externality, ruling out human passion and will in the description of immediate experience; whereas Eliot's poetry, which might be called Symbolistic, makes these an integral part of what it describes. The former, that is, describes natural objects, that which is supposedly separate from and independent of man's consciousness;³⁵ the latter describes or more exactly, reveals, inner being. Nevertheless the poetry based on either of these forms of empiricism derives its form and content from the stress on direct experience, and is therefore an empirical poetry.

Beginning with the Imagists, and paralleling the emergence of the dichotomy of naturalism and subjectivism in modern literature, modern poetry split into two distinct types along the lines defined by scientific and radical empiricism. But the split comes after the

³⁵ Stanley Coffman quotes the following poem by H. D.:

Whirl up, sea--
Whirl your pointed pines,
Splash your great pines
On our rocks
Hurl your green over us,
Cover us with your pools of fir.

And comments, "The principal material of her early poems is an intensely concentrated reaction to some natural object, a reaction that is always evoked by the object as a physical thing" (Imagism, p. 147). Of course, the reaction is a human emotional response, but what makes this an Imagistic poem, and a good one, is that though the object as physical thing, intensely seen, becomes symbolic of the human condition, the superhuman proportions of the sea, the metaphor of the rock, and the plural pronoun leave man a victim of overwhelming natural forces acting upon adamant substance. In such a world "we" long to be bathed by or dissolved in the cool tranquillity of death, that being the only escape of the spirit from materiality or objectivity.

nineties, or at least only then does it clearly separate into two styles, so that Imagism and Symbolistic poetry are later stages in the development of a seed planted in the nineties. The plant is more easily identified in its later stages of growth but it is not quite the same entity as the seed. For in the nineties the two forms of empiricism existed in conjunction with one another, not compatibly, but nevertheless inseparably. Robinson and Frost, who criticized Imagism as an attempt to write poetry according to a program derived from scientific empiricism, insisted that poetry's province was man's total response to life.³⁶ Yet at the same time both agreed with Imagism regarding the basic empirical perspective of the poet. Robinson repeatedly referred to man's knowledge as being limited to what appears to be, a limitation which meant for him, as a poet, that his immediate poetic material was phenomena. The same limitation was accepted by Frost for whom poetry "begins in delight and ends in wisdom."³⁷ If delight is equated with perception, many of Frost's poems--for example "Desert Places"--are dramas of consciousness which begin with a fixing of the eyes on a particular place or object--an open field, a

³⁶ Robinson wrote to Amy Lowell, "what seems to me to be the very best of your vers libre is almost exclusively 'human' in its subject matter, and therefore substantially old fashioned. . . . 'Imagiste' work, per se, taken as a theory apart from one special form, seems to me to be rather too self-conscious and exclusive to stand the test of time" (SL, p. 93). And Frost, opening with the remark, "Science put it into our heads that there were new ways to be new," attacks "experimental" poetry for narrowly concentrating upon some stylistic device as the essence of poetry--"Introduction," King Jasper (New York, 1935).

³⁷ "The Figure a Poem Makes," Complete Poems of Robert Frost (New York, 1949), p. vi.

woods, a woodpile--and conclude by deriving from this empirical encounter an enhanced awareness of man's being. Such a poem has its source in phenomena, and though nature offers many analogues for self-discovery, it does not reveal any metaphysical truths. This is Frost's adaptation of Emerson's notion that man is an analogist, without its transcendental implications.³⁸ The difference between these poets of the nineties and Imagism can be brought out most clearly by means of a remark made about T. E. Hulme, one of the major spokesmen for the movement. "Convinced of man's ineffectiveness as a seer who can reveal the mystery of the universe," Stanley K. Coffman has written, "Hulme insisted that he turn his eyes from searching the horizon to examining a limited area around his feet."³⁹ Where Robinson and Frost differ from Hulme is in their refusal to stop searching the horizon for

³⁸ A good example here is "Tree at My Window," Complete Poems, p. 318.

Tree at my window, window tree,
My sash is lowered when night comes on;
But let there never be curtain drawn
Between you and me.

Vague dream-head lifted out of the ground,
And thing next most diffuse to cloud,
Not all your light tongues talking aloud
Could be profound.

But, tree, I have seen you taken and tossed,
And if you have seen me when I slept,
You have seen me when I was taken and swept
And all but lost.

That day she put our heads together,
Fate had her imagination about her,
Your head so much concerned with outer,
Mine with inner, weather.

³⁹ Imagism, p. 63.

ultimate meanings. They do not reveal the mystery of the universe, but they do honor it as the poet's essential subject, asserting thereby man's deepest claim on life. In effect, by refusing to confine themselves to examining a limited area about their feet, by refusing to substitute objects for the soul, they affirm man's total experience, his total being, while still accepting his limitation to what appears to be. As a consequence these men write a poetry that stresses sight but at the same time stresses experience. They write a poetry, in Robinson's phrase, of both "observation and experience," or a poetry of radical empiricism. Finding themselves as poets in the same situation James was as a philosopher, they took as their subject consciousness and approached it empirically.

Thus empiricism determined the conditions under which the poetry of the nineties was written. Its most obvious effect on poetry was to require decisive innovations in style and technique. Imagism, with its free verse and images, Eliot, with his image associationism, allusions, symbols, and myth, are again the most vivid examples. Though more extreme and clear-cut in later poetry, the innovations already begin to appear in the poetry of the nineties. Robinson and Frost, for example, used colloquial diction, local characters and color, and realistic motifs, returning to everyday, concrete language, to actual people of an actual time and place, and to contemporary social events and issues. But the most significant effect of empiricism on poetry was to change thoroughly the poet's sense of his predicament and the nature of poetry. This was as true for scientific empiricism as for radical empiricism, but only the change wrought by the latter is relevant here.

The best way to understand the change is to examine the relation between poetry and science in the nineties. Since positivism, materialism, and empiricism are closely linked with science, the intellectual-moral conflict of the nineties described by Hughes might appear to be a conflict between the humanistic and the scientific. But it is not, for science itself at that time was doing more to destroy the assumptions of positivism and materialism and to provide a basis for radical empiricism than any other area of knowledge. This was the time when symbolic logic, non-Euclidean geometry, relativity and nuclear physics, the theory of creative evolution, etc., collectively altered the foundations of science. Scientific assumptions that had stood firm for two hundred to two thousand years were suddenly untenable or true only within certain contexts. Thus the intellectual revolution, of even vaster proportions than the Copernican, dissolved the rock upon which not only the humanities but science as well stood. Consequently, old credentials no longer were valid, old justifications no longer rang true in any area of knowledge--either for science, the humanities, or the arts. Still, the primary responsibility for the revolution lay with science, for had science not abandoned its positivistic assumptions, the efforts of the humanities and the arts would have struck impotently against the rock of materialism, as they had for the Romantics and the Victorians. With repeated revelations of reason's limits in mathematics and physics, science released the mind to speculate, to imagine, to create by destroying the grounds for belief in the commensurability of reason with reality. Thus it laid the authoritative grounds for the triumph of empiricism over rationalism.

From abandonment by science of its posture of complete and final certainty issued pragmatism and instrumentalism; the subordination of intellect to will, or the yielding of intellectualism to voluntarism; the emergence of the concepts of field, pattern, process, the act; a new emphasis on time and flux. Moreover, by undercutting its own authority it prepared the way for "irrational man," for such twentieth-century developments as Existentialism.

Another consequence of the decline in the authority of reason was that modes of knowledge and knowing other than reason were free to assert their claims to validity. Of especial importance for the arts was the progress of matters aesthetic from a peripheral to a central place in the scheme of things. When the bounds of experience exceed the reach of reason, the coherence of experience is obviously based on pre- or trans-rational principles. Confronted with the task of interpreting an "irrational" world, Bergson and Whitehead, for instance, gave epistemological and metaphysical primacy to the aesthetic, and in doing so they implied thereby that art was a more inclusive and incisive mode of knowing, was a closer analogue to reality, than logic. Both, originally scientists, gave aesthetics its central position in the scheme of things in the course of trying to explain the reality that biology and physics revealed to them. For their purposes they assumed, as F. S. C. Northrop put it, that "the theoretic component presupposes the aesthetic component of experience in its own verification . . . the aesthetic factor [being] as primary and hence as justified a criterion of trustworthy knowledge and of the

good and divine in culture as is the theoretical component."⁴⁰ In other words, they assumed the world of radical empiricism and used the concept of aesthetic structure or coherence to define the fundamental reality of that world, the world of pure and concrete experience. Consequently, between radical empiricism and the notion of the world as an aesthetic phenomenon there is a close bond; indeed, they are two aspects of the same idea.

Now it is sometimes argued that poetry, whose domain is values, and science, whose domain is fact, are mortal enemies. Erich Heller has gone so far as to make science responsible for all that ails modern poetry, the hazard of modern poetry beginning, as he sees it, when science led men to disvalue the impulse and reality poetry is rooted in and affirms.⁴¹ The conceptions of scientific reality and aesthetic reality, if Heller is right, have been diametrically opposed in the modern world. However valid such a notion may be for other times and places or as a historical generalization, it was not generally regarded as so during the nineties, in America or Europe. And it is doubtful whether it has been so since, for what Abraham Cowley praised in his poetic preface to the History of the Royal Society,⁴² Heller's beginning point for defining the hazard of modern poetry, science itself has repudiated for the last seventy-five years.

⁴⁰ The Meeting of East and West (New York, 1946), p. 311.

⁴¹ "The Hazard of Modern Poetry," The Disinherited Mind (New York, 1957), pp. 259-296.

⁴² Quoted in part by Heller, pp. 260-261.

As the thought of Whitehead and Bergson indicates, science and art tended to complement and to work in conjunction with one another in the exploration of the world of radical empiricism. These philosophers did not abandon science when they turned to aesthetics; rather, they used aesthetic assumptions to explain and advance scientific discoveries.⁴³ Likewise, William James, also a scientist (a psychologist), though he argued passionately against materialism in defending the will to believe, never wavered in his allegiance to the authority of science. His argument for the will to believe quite explicitly gave the will a freedom of belief only where science was incapable of certainty. Thus he saw no necessary contradiction between science and radical empiricism; between them they encompassed the disjunctive and conjunctive elements in experience, science taking as its province the former, aesthetics, the latter; the one analytical, the other synthetic.

All three of these scientist-philosophers spoke for the vital and human and none of them regarded science as hostile to these values. Nor did any of the major artists of the time regard science as hostile to them. Realism in all the arts was closely associated with science,

⁴³ F. S. C. Northrop, working with this idea at a time when it had become well established, said of science and art: "The true relation between intuitive, aesthetic, and religious feeling and scientific doctrine is one of mutual supplementation. For we have a conception of the meaning of man and the universe which it is trustworthy for art and religion to convey only by the aid of scientific knowledge pursued to its basic theoretical assumptions, and thus developed to its philosophical and theological consequences. And conversely, we can attain verified scientific knowledge only by observing what is immediately apprehended, and this is always aesthetically vivid and emotionally moving" (The Meeting of East and West, p. 63).

of course; sometimes, however, an artist took science for granted, saying little or nothing about it--Henry James, for instance, with customary indirectness and subtlety, revealed his affinities with it by emphasizing vision and feeling; and sometimes, an artist would overtly embrace science, as Shaw did. When Henry Higgins, of Pygmalion, describes the alternative ways of life available to Liza Doolittle, he places science with literature, classical music, philosophy, and art among the laudable vocations. Himself a scientist, Henry Higgins is a maker of life, a servant of the creative life force who, in addition to awakening young ladies, advances the reach of consciousness in its upward aspiration.

Robinson is himself a good example of the relation of the scientific and aesthetic in the nineties. He had no quarrel with science as such, only with scientism or specific scientific doctrines.⁴⁴ "The Christian theology," he once remarked, "has so thoroughly crumbled that I do not think of any non-Roman acquaintance to whom it means anything . . . There's a non-theological religion on the way, probably

⁴⁴ Robinson, to be honest, has some derogatory things to say about science. For instance, the following passage occurs in Matthias at the Door:

There's more of you for you to find, Matthias,
Than science has found yet, or may find soon.
Science that blinds its eyes incessantly
With a new light that fades and leaves them aching,
Whatever it sees, will be a long time showing
To you, Matthias, what you have striven so hard
To see in the dark.

Science is criticized for its limitations and errors here but Robinson does not reject science, only certain scientific ideas--mainly materialism, but evolution to some extent, also.

to be revealed by science when science comes definitely to the jumping-off place. It is really there now, but isn't quite ready to say so."⁴⁵ Fairly late in his career, according to Emery Neff, Robinson read Eddington with sympathy if not agreement.⁴⁶ Since this reading came after he had written the bulk of his poetry, Robinson could not have got his ideas from Eddington. The truth is that he, from his own perspective, was exploring and defining poetically the same world Eddington was scientifically. Poets and scientists faced the same task within the same conditions, that of discovering or creating meaning within the world of radical empiricism, and they worked side by side, sometimes depending upon one another, in carrying out that task.

There are some real differences between science and poetry, of course, and they must not be forgotten, but it is a serious mistake not to recognize that science is a form which defines and organizes experience as well as a body of specific assumptions and knowledge about nature. When this function of science is recognized, as it was in the nineties, the hostility between them disappears, for poetry and science are in agreement in their fundamental sense of man's relation to his world and to himself. The essential facts of the universe, largely the results of scientific enquiry, define the world commonly

⁴⁵ Selected Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson, ed. Ridgely Torrence (New York, 1940), p. 169--hereafter cited as SL.

⁴⁶ Emery Neff, Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York, 1948), p. 256. Eddington, of course, was one of the first to speculate on the philosophical implications of the new physics. He described a world in which structure, patterns, form, and process replaced substance, essences, and identity.

inhabited by both and determine man's relation to that world. This fact is illustrated by some recent literary history. John Holloway has pointed out that certain Victorian prose writers, in order to communicate what might be called human-moral meanings, evolved a novel use of prose, a use in which "exposition . . . actually becomes proof,"⁴⁷ a way of directly seeing, experiencing, and knowing. This use of prose is not in opposition to science but concurs with it insofar as it accepts, as does science, the fundamental criterion that all valid knowledge depends upon direct experience. This is also true of Emerson's prose, which as Roland Lee has shown,⁴⁸ is intended to communicate human-moral meaning through immediate, intuitive perception. A more recent example of the concurrence of humanistic thought and science on this fundamental assumption is present-day theology. Whereas theology used to rest its case in the authority of the revealed word or in the rational demand for a first cause, today--in the work of Tillich, Niebuhr, Buber, etc.--theological claims are grounded in specific existential elements in experience. Whether it be nineteenth-century prose writers or twentieth-century theologians, or the philosophy of both centuries, or indeed any phase of thought and art--like science, they have taken their shape from the conditions imposed by empiricism.

Now, in the nineteenth century in England and Europe empiricism did work to the disadvantage of poetry, but that was because the pre-

⁴⁷ The Victorian Sage: Studies in Argument (London, 1953), p. 8.

⁴⁸ "Emerson Through Kierkegaard: Toward a Definition of Emerson's Theory of Communication," ELH, XXIV (Sept., 1957), 229-248.

vailing doctrines of positivism and materialism, neither of which necessarily follow from empiricism, denied the spirit for which poetry speaks its right to exist. So it became necessary for Carlyle, Arnold, and others to defend poetry and the spirit by disengaging them from science. As Wylie Sypher has written of the period,

During the nineteenth century, art and science became alienated as they had not been alienated in the enlightenment; thus the intellectual roots of art were cut. Experiments such as impressionism and the naturalistic novel adapted certain methods from science; yet on the whole art and science seemed to be two incompatible kinds of experience or knowledge, and scientific theory and aesthetic theory seemed contrary.⁴⁹

This was not true in America, however. Emerson and Thoreau, for instance, had no complaint against good science and, in fact, put it to good use in their thought. In any event, by the nineties, in both Europe and America, science and art had reunited. Characteristic of the new attitude is Naum Gabo's statement.

Whatever exists in nature, exists in us in the form of our awareness of its existence. All creative activities of Mankind consist in the search for an expression of that awareness . . . The artist of today cannot possibly escape the impact science is making on the whole mentality of the human race. . . . The artist's task is not so pragmatic and straightforward as the scientist's; nevertheless, both the artist and the scientist are prompted by the same creative urge to find a perceptible image of the hidden forces in nature of which they are both aware. . . . I do not know of any idea in the history of man's culture that developed in a separate and independent compartment of the human mind. . . . To my mind it is a fallacy to assume that the aspects of life and nature which contemporary science is unfolding are only communicable through science itself . . .⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Rococo to Cubism in Art and Literature (New York, 1960), p. 258.

⁵⁰ Quoted by Sypher, p. 265.

When this is so, it follows that poetry--art in general--has a new status in the scheme of things, and so what it speaks for has a new status. Man's relation to the world is still empirical, but poetry is now regarded as free to take all the world as its province.

The rapprochement of science and art was prepared for by the abandonment by science of its claim to complete and final knowledge. However, the surrender was but the first step, an opening of the door, in a radical transformation from a closed to an open universe. Under the aegis of the new empiricism, facts, laws, static order--the pillars of a world of essences and fixed relations--gave way to freedom, possibility, and power. Evolution, purpose, activity, emerged with new meaning and new vitality in a world affording them scope. Not only was mind free to speculate, to imagine, to create, as Hughes said, but life--action, that is, as well as thought--was, too. Reality was not something that rested solidly at the bottom of things, nor was it an unyielding frame holding everything in bounds; it was a restless, aspiring energy pressing relentlessly forward. James, Bergson, Whitehead argued for pluralism, creativity, and adventure, for the irrepressible demands of that energy. Gloomy, despairing Henry Adams, bitter opponent of the predominant tone of the period acknowledged that power or force was the salient characteristic of reality, and aptly found a symbol for it, and for the period, in the dynamo. In seeking to replace the dynamo with the Virgin as a symbol of the primal energy, he was not repudiating power; he was substituting spiritual power, a greater force, he hoped, for electrical power.

Such a reality, needless to say, is a haven for art: everything that art is, everything that it can do, is tolerated,

encouraged, and valued. Reality--particularly that part of it which is life--is itself an artist, a persistent urge to create greater and higher forms of order, realization, and significance. A human artist is merely an emanation of this capacity. But science is at home in this world also, if it is regarded not as a dogmatic authority but as an expression of the human spirit. In The Life of Reason, for example, Santayana argued for the value of all the agencies of the human spirit--all the forms of reason: science, philosophy, art, and morality--in man's struggle to create order and meaning out of spiritually formless nature. As he saw it, reason in all its capacities is creative.

In the world of radical empiricism, the rapprochement of science and art is more than a matter of epistemological necessity; it is a metaphysical fact. The power that drives the world, life, and man drives art; hence they are all united in a fundamental identity. On all levels of existence a creative force surges forward; in man that force, manifesting itself in his aesthetic capacity, his freedom, and his will, presses him to move onward and upward in an open universe of freedom and possibility. Perhaps socially the nineties were an anti-poetic era, for then, as now and always in America, practical values prevailed; but intellectually, philosophically, spiritually, they were not. For the profoundest thinkers and artists of the time the nature of things was preëminently poetic. Art, consequently, was a science, a means to knowledge of reality; and science was an art, an assertion of man's creative power and aspiration for a higher state of existence.

It is in the rapprochement of science and art, in the way, as Crocé implied, these two work together in the advancement of consciousness, in the simultaneous validity of the aesthetic and theoretical component, that the heart of the poet's existence in the nineties lies. The profoundest implication of radical empiricism for the poet was that he was left standing alone before the booming, buzzing confusion of the world without a ready-made theological, philosophical, or scientific picture of the world with a niche in it for him. In a world viewed as an aesthetic phenomenon, the question of the nature and meaning of things is the question of the nature and meaning of art. To know himself and his world, without outside help, with only his experience as a poet--or as a man, for under such circumstances man is a poet--the poet had to know the nature of poetry or his own being as poet. For the serious poet, his subject necessarily was himself and poetry. Thus, to deal adequately with a modern poet, one must examine his conception of poetry, for he has perforce addressed himself to the question of its nature and employed that question as a fundamental theme in his work. The poet's hazard in the nineties is precisely his precarious, problematic existence in a strange new world--not in an anti-poetic, exclusively scientific world, but in the unexplored and undefined world of radical empiricism.

IV

These, then, were the salient features of the intellectual background against which Robinson lived and wrote: a new sense of the content and authority of experience, and a concomitant assumption that the structure of that experience (and thus of the creature experiencing

and of the world being experienced) is aesthetic. And it is within the context of these features that the poet of the nineties has to be viewed if his deepest struggles and achievements are to be adequately understood. This is especially true for E. A. Robinson, who was very much aware of his situation as a poet and set out to write a poetry expressive of the human condition in which he found himself. Though his ostensible subject was the nature of life, because he inhabited a world of radical empiricism, his poetry was simultaneously and ultimately a definition of itself, or of the nature of poetry.

When I say that Robinson's poetry is a definition of itself, I do not mean that he deliberately worked toward or consciously held a systematic theory of poetry. He did not, and he vigorously insisted he did not, as when he wrote to Amy Lowell, "I have absolutely no theories. I don't care a pin-feather what form a poem is written in so long as it makes me sit up. 'Imagist' work, per se, taken as a theory apart from one special form, seems to be rather too self-conscious and exclusive to stand the test of time."⁵¹ He was on all matters, as will be shown in Chapter II, an anti-theorist. Thus he did not think through the problem of the nature of poetry; instead, he lived it through. The most vivid fact in his outwardly colorless life is the length to which he went to be a poet, fighting his town, his culture, and his conscience, and for many years suffering from poverty, guilt, neglect, and estrangement. To write his kind of poetry under the conditions he needed to be able to write it, he turned down jobs or

⁵¹ SL, p. 93.

quit them after short periods, and refused to do hack work or to alter a poem to suit an editor. Knowing painfully the cost of being a poet, he jokingly advised a friend not to let his child grow up to be one;⁵² but when he was serious he would say, as he did to Edith Isaacs, who proposed doing a biography of him, "Make clear to those people who say that I gave up great things to write poetry, that there was only one thing in all the world I could give up, and that was all that meant anything to me."⁵³ To him, poetry--to paraphrase Santayana--was a way of living, and the most vital way. Because he pursued his vocation so completely, he candidly explored its deepest reaches, which were also the deepest reaches of human existence in his time. In the truth he discovered resides his strongest link with modern poetry and the modern world, and also his relevance to the 1960's.

⁵² SL, p. 112.

⁵³ Hermann Hagedorn, Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York, 1938), p. 311.

CHAPTER II

"A SPIRITUAL REALIZATION OF THINGS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE"

Indeed the truth is a great cathartic and wonderfully
relieves the vital distress of existence.

Santayana

It is impossible to meditate on time and the mystery of
the creative passage of nature without an overwhelming
emotion at the limitations of human intelligence.

A. N. Whitehead

Time and space are but physiological colors which the
eyes make, but the soul is light.

Emerson

I

E. A. Robinson once replied to a graduate student's inquiry
about his philosophy by saying, "I wish you were writing about my
poetry--of which my so-called philosophy is only a small part, and
probably the least important."¹ He might well have addressed this
remark to most of those who have written about his work, for they, like
the graduate student, have been primarily interested in his "so-called
philosophy." They have sought to analyze his "vision," "the career
of his mind," and "aspects of his thought,"² to identify him with such
philosophical positions as idealism, skepticism, and transcendentalism;

¹ SL, p. 166.

² These phrases come, respectively, from Mark Van Doren, Edwin
Arlington Robinson (New York, 1927), p. 30; Kaplan, op. cit., p. 3; and
Winters, op. cit., p. 29.

and to explain his views on such matters as science, evolution, freedom, and fate. Although few of them would commit themselves as enthusiastically as did Henry Steele Commager when he called Robinson "the most profound of American poets of the twentieth century,"³ they would substantially agree with the characterization of Robinson's work implied in this phrase, that the most interesting and valuable aspect of his poetry is the thought it contains.

It is probably a mistake in any case to assume that a poet's objective is the formulation of ideas or a logical system of belief--to assume that these are the essential being of poetry. In Robinson's case, this is an unusually naive assumption, for he made it quite clear how he felt when, irritated by the tendency to read his poetry for his "so-called philosophy," he bluntly asserted, "I am not a philosopher. I don't intend to be one."⁴ And when he said this he was not trying to draw attention away from the content of his poetry to his technical virtuosity, nor was he merely making the obvious point that he wrote poems instead of philosophical tracts. For him, a clear-cut disjunction existed between philosophy, a rational mode of apprehension, and poetry, an aesthetic mode of apprehension; and he was insisting that he had nothing to do with the former. By the middle of his career, for example, he was fully aware of the tendency to regard his poetry as intellectual and philosophical, and in self-defense proclaimed that

³ The American Mind (New Haven, 1952), p. 160.

⁴ Karl Schriftgiesser, "An American Poet Speaks His Mind," Boston Evening Transcript, Nov. 4, 1933, Book Section, p. 1.

"anything like a proper comprehension of his product was, and is--so far as it is at all--a matter of feeling, not of cerebration."⁵ And to remove all doubt about his attitude toward poetry as a vehicle for ideas or philosophy, he defined poetry as "a language that tells us, through more or less emotional reaction, what cannot be said."⁶ Thus he emphatically opposed an assumption which, in effect, denies his poetry its existence and authority as art by identifying it with or subordinating it to discursive thought. To attempt to translate his poetry into philosophical terms was, in his eyes, to miss the point of it entirely; it was, in fact, to reduce it to the very thing it was intended to repudiate.

Despite Robinson's protestations, however, those who have approached him as a profound thinker have not been mistaken in their sense of the fundamental motive and character of his poetry. They have correctly detected his deepest and abiding concern, a concern which he revealed when he wrote, in a letter to Harry de Forest Smith, "If anything is worthy of a man's best and hardest effort, that effort is the utterance of what he believes to be the truth."⁷ And again to Smith on the same matter but with a different emphasis, he confirmed his devotion to truth when he wrote, "No man can have a very good time--of the right sort, at any rate--until he understands things."⁸ If the

⁵ SL, p. 111.

⁶ SL, p. 95.

⁷ US, p. 289.

⁸ US, p. 278.

philosopher seeks to know and utter the truth, and if philosophy, as Unamuno said, "answers to our need of forming a complete and unitary concept of life,"⁹ Robinson and the philosopher are dedicated to the same task. What those who have approached Robinson as a philosopher have done is to recognize his philosophical motive and then assume that his methods and results were also philosophical. But with some of his contemporaries, Robinson assumed that "poetry as verbal alchemy is a way of experiencing, never the expression or illustration of a 'philosophy.' It never begins with ideas nor ends with them. Its magic consists in getting along without the guidance of generalizations." Harold Rosenberg, the author of this statement, goes on to say that "Valéry denied he was a 'philosophical poet,' since philosophy and poetry, each consisting of its own 'apparatus,' cannot be reconciled."¹⁰ As we have seen, Robinson made the same denial; so if he is a philosophical poet at all, it is only in the sense that he turns his "imagination on the order of all things, or on anything in the light of the whole"¹¹ to contemplate the fundamental problems of life. He does indeed do that, though the problems as well as his solution are formulated in aesthetic terms. Moreover, one of the most important facts in the order of things he contemplates is the irreconcilability of poetry and philosophy. This distinction, in other words, is a

⁹ Quoted above, p. 12.

¹⁰ "French Silence and American Poetry," The Tradition of the New (New York, 1959), p. 88.

¹¹ George Santayana, "Three Philosophical Poets," The Works of George Santayana, (New York, 1936-40), VI, 10. This is Santayana's definition of philosophical poetry.

crucial truth about life as he understands it. Because they have not taken seriously his absolute dichotomy between poetry and philosophy, those who have approached Robinson as a philosopher, those who have sought his "so-called philosophy," have failed to recognize how he used poetry as a point of view and a means for "thinking through" the fundamental problems. Missing this, they have also missed his solutions to them.

II

Though informal, Robinson's remarks to Harry de Forest Smith were not accidental: the desire to understand things and to utter the truth, as his poetry, letters and prose abundantly testify, were his obsessions as a man and as a poet. For him, the aim and supreme value of life is truth.

When it came to judging a man, for instance, he looked mainly at his courage and integrity, or his truthfulness, in the face of an uncomfortable world. Of his friend Thomas Sergeant Perry, whose letters he edited posthumously, one of the most praiseworthy things he could say was, "He regarded life so frankly, and without complaint or criticism, as a mystery so tragic and bewildering as to be beyond all human comprehension or conjecture."¹² Although disagreeing with Perry's interpretation of the mystery as tragic, Robinson nevertheless admired greatly Perry's frank confrontation of an intransigent world. The value he assigned to this attitude was most forcefully revealed in

¹² "Introduction," Selections from the Letters of Thomas Sergeant Perry (New York, 1929), pp. 3-4.

his remark to Richard Watson Gilder, "I admire your willingness to look life in the face without resorting to the nauseating evasions of the 'uncompromising' optimist. The predominance of this willingness to be honest, with never a suggestion of surrender--or ever of weariness--is the most admirable thing in life or in art . . ."¹³ And that he did demand this kind of intellectual honesty of art is evident from his attitude toward Browning's "Rabbi Ben Ezra," of which he said, "I dislike it so much I haven't read it in thirty years. Its easy optimism is a reflection of temperament rather than of observation and experience."¹⁴ The interference of hope or wishful thinking with clear perception of the facts of life he would not condone, nor an interest in the lighter, more pleasant side of life. To his friend and fellow poet William Vaughn Moody, he said, "Perhaps there is too much color and not enough light in your work thus far,"¹⁵ and meant that Moody was too much distracted by appearances and surface delights and not sufficiently given to the less congenial reality behind them. The truthfulness he demanded in a man and in art, and that was for him lacking in Browning and Moody, he found in George Crabbe, whom he praised by saying, "His hard human pulse is throbbing still / With the sure strength that fearless truth endows."¹⁶

¹³ SL, p. 64.

¹⁴ SL, p. 160.

¹⁵ SL, p. 49.

¹⁶ The Collected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York, 1937, p. 44--all quotations from Robinson's poetry are taken from this volume and hereafter only the page number will be cited, and that will be given in the text immediately after the quotation.

Obviously truthfulness is praiseworthy because it is a pre-requisite to "the most admirable thing in life and art" for Robinson--to seeing things for what they actually are. Certainly he sought that kind of tough vision himself. According to Elizabeth Bates, he remarked to her, apropos of his sonnet "Many are Called," that "some of his other sonnets were written for their idea, or because they held up some fragment of humanity for a moment's contemplation, or because they turned a light on some aspect of life. . . . [they] did not have the poetic beauty of the lines, 'The Lord Appollo, who has never died, / Still holds alone his immortal reign.'"¹⁷ Much of the beauty of these lines resides in their subject, in the image of the immortal, solitary majesty of a Greek god triumphant in a timeless realm, which is a vision of the ideal existence of the human spirit freed of all the ills that flesh is heir to. This idealized existence, the realm of beauty, was not Robinson's subject; humanity and life in the here and now--these were his subjects. John Donne, he said, "is dogmatic and ancient, and hardly to be considered as apart from his period--which is, to my mind, sufficient damnation for any writer--particularly a poet, who must be, if he is to be anything, an interpreter of life."¹⁸ To interpret life, that is the poet's task, and so Robinson did not strive for beauty, either of vision or experience, but instead sought the truth of man and life. And because he could have no recourse to the ideal or transcendental or hereafter, he asked of himself the question

¹⁷ E. A. R. and His Manuscripts, p. 22.

¹⁸ SL, p. 15.

he put in the mouth of Cassandra, "Are you never to have eyes / To see the world for what it is?" (12). And he made it his business to acquire those eyes.

The main evidence that Robinson was obsessed with truth is of course his poetry, the end product of his sense of what a poet or a poem must be. If truth was a kelson of human existence for Robinson, then it will pervade every aspect of his poetry, and the frequency with which the word "truth" and related terms and symbols, especially "the Light," occur, are adequate evidence that it does. But more substantial and convenient testimony is provided by "Flammonde" and King Jasper, the framing poems, so to speak, of the Collected Poems (1937). Put first in the original Collected Poems (1921) by Robinson himself, and thus, along with the volume of which it is a part, The Man Against the Sky, representative of his poetry's direction and achievement, "Flammonde" is a reflective monologue in which the speaker ponders the question, Who was the man Flammonde? Heavy emphasis on the qualifying phrase "the man" makes it clear that in trying to know who Flammonde was, the speaker is trying to understand the nature of man, himself included. The important point here is that the dramatic impetus of the poem derives from an explicitly raised question and the quest for an answer to it, although the quest, to be sure, is abortive. In other words, the poem dramatizes an act of the mind in an attempt to know. King Jasper, a poem for which Robinson was reading proof on his death bed and the final poem of the Collected Poems by accident (or logic) of time, is the tale of a man at the pinnacle of worldly power and success who is destroyed by the truth brought to him by a young girl named Zoë.

The poem, Robinson said, is an allegory, and to one interpretation of the allegory, he retorted, "Zoë isn't intended to symbolize Life. Zoë is knowledge, and the child of King Jasper, who is ignorance."¹⁹ Thus, in the poem Robinson put at the beginning of the Collected Poems and in the one that is his last and most abstract statement of his view of life, truth is the major theme. "Flammonde" emphasizes the quest for truth, and King Jasper emphasizes the agony of being caught in its inescapable grasp; but both assert that man's most crucial experience begins and ends in truth, in the need for it or in the encounter with it. In other words, the poems present an action whose motivation, development, and climax brings the central character to what might be called the moment of truth, a candid understanding of how things are with him.

There can be no doubt that for Robinson the aim of life is truth, but truth wears many guises, in his poetry as well as in epistemology, so that that aim cannot be clear unless what he meant by truth is carefully defined. We have already seen that one of the ways he uses the term is to mean truthfulness, an attitude of fearless perception and acceptance of the facts of life; and furthermore that this use implies a second conception of truth, namely, correspondence to reality. The latter kind of truth entails a faithful report of an objective state of affairs, and for a poet governed by this aim whose subject is life here and now, that means in its simplest sense an accurate representation of the external world--or, more precisely, human existence. To

¹⁹ Hagedorn, p. 370.

seek such truth means "to turn a light on some aspect of life." But there is a more important application, or subject, for this kind of truth: life as a whole. When Robinson wanted to refer to or speak about the meaning of life or about what he or one of his characters believed, he usually relied upon the Light as a symbol to suggest what he had in mind. To be sure, the symbol varies in meaning with the context but its basic meaning is that given to it by Robinson in his statement, "Gawaine's 'light' is simply the light of the Grail, interpreted universally as a spiritual realization of things and their significance. I don't see," he added, "how this can be made any more concrete, for it is not the same to any two individuals."²⁰ If one sets out to attain truth in the sense of formulating a statement or poem that corresponds to external reality, he actually has the choice of two truths, one derivable from a finite point of view and the other derivable from the eye of eternity, one the truth about the world, the other the Truth of the spirit. The first can be said to concentrate on what the world or some part of it is, the second on what life means.²¹

²⁰ SL, p. 113.

²¹ Cf. William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience (New York, 1923), p. 4. "In recent books of logic, distinction is made between two orders of inquiry concerning anything. First, what is the nature of it? How did it come about? What is its constitution, origin, and history? And second, what is its importance, meaning, or significance, now that it is once here? The answer to the one question is given in an existential judgment or proposition. The answer to the other is a proposition of value, what the Germans call a Werthurtheil, or what we may, if we like, denominate a spiritual judgment. Neither judgment can be deduced immediately from the other." This distinction, as James indicates, emerged in the nineties; it reflects the period's sense of a schism between the objective and subjective, reality and emotion, nature and values, etc. James' philosophy and Robinson's poetry are attempts to interpret life in the light of this schism. I shall have a good deal more to say about this matter later on.

Needless to say, Robinson tells both truths simultaneously. Indeed, his poetry, like all poetry, dwells at the crossways of the two, in that it cannot tell one without directly or indirectly telling the other. Inescapably caught in the dialogue between them, a poet must define the relation of the spirit to the world. Robinson was well aware of this and explicitly dealt with the dialogue in "Maya," which reads,

Through the ascending emptiness of night,
 Leaving the flesh and the complacent mind
 Together in their sufficiency behind,
 The soul of man went up to a far height;
 And where those others would have no sight
 Or sense of else than terror for the blind,
 Soul met the Will, and again consigned
 To the supreme illusion which is right.

"And what goes on up there," The Mind inquired
 "That I know not already to be true?"
 "More than enough, but not enough for you,"
 Said the descending Soul. "Here in the dark,
 Where you are least revealed when most admired,
 You may still be the bellows and the spark." (871)

Here the Mind, desirous of ultimate knowledge, is mockingly taunted for its vanity and limitations by the enlightened Soul. Although the point of view in Robinson's poetry is usually that of the Mind rather than the Soul, nevertheless this poem characteristically takes the dichotomy between them as an essential part of the human condition. But in treating that dialogue the poem defines the nature of the opposing elements as well as the relation between them, though, to be sure, rather generally. Consequently, like T. S. Eliot, who lays bare the waste land of the modern world, Robinson exposes the "black and awful chaos of the night" (94) enshrouding it, but also like Eliot, he does so to reveal the insufficiency of what the mind can

know in order to affirm a higher spiritual truth. The emphasis in his poetry, of necessity, falls upon the Truth of the spirit; the understanding Robinson primarily seeks, therefore, is a spiritual realization of things and their significance, and it is this above all that he wants to record. To interpret life is to determine its meaning, not dissect it or fasten upon a limited area of it. Only when life is so understood can a man have a "good time"; only then can the vital distress of existence be relieved.

But none of Robinson's poems ever discursively state the Truth. He never achieves an objective understanding of life; he never learns what life means in the sense of reflectively comprehending the nature and destiny of human existence. In fact, one of the major finite truths in his poetry is that the mind--that is, abstract, conceptual thought--is incapable of comprehending Truth, or the meaning of life. His conviction on this point is most fully illustrated by the progress of his poetry from the early through the middle to the final period of his career.

These three periods, I might point out, have been identified before, but their relation to each other has not yet been adequately explained. Though such an explanation is not my principal objective, the continuity of Robinson's purpose and the evolution of his thought and style are evidence of the first order for my argument, which is based on the premise that Robinson's poetry can be defined only by what it ultimately becomes. This means that the final period is the most important for my purposes, but obviously the preceding periods must be taken into account in order to understand it; so I shall be depending

heavily upon Robinson's progress through the three periods in this study. Incidentally, as I shall show toward the end of this chapter, my premise is Robinson's own idea of the way in which human beings discover what they are.

"Credo," from The Children of the Night (1897), and of his first period, speaks for his earliest expectations:

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

No, there is not a glimmer, nor a call,
For one that welcomes, welcomes when he fears,
The black and awful chaos of the night;
For through it all--above, beyond it all--
I know the far-sent message of the years,
I feel the coming glory of the Light. (94)

Lost in "the black and awful chaos of the night," the speaker of the poem hopefully awaits the Light to show him his way. The immediate characteristic of man's vision is blindness, the world providing no clue to the meaning of its own or of man's existence: things as they appear are meaningless. Unable to find his way, to act or to be himself because he does not understand things, the speaker can only passively give utterance to his plight and to his hope. During the same year "Credo" was published, Robinson wrote to Harry de Forest Smith,

. . . how the devil is a man to understand things in an age like this, when the whole trend of popular thought is in the wrong direction--not only that, but proud of the way it is taking. The age is all right, material progress is all right, Herbert Spencer is all right, hell is all right. These things are temporal necessities, but they are damned uninteresting to one who has caught a glimpse of the real light through the

clouds of time. It is that glimpse that makes me wish to live and see it out.²²

Here, though he is more specific about the nature of the darkness and the light, he still has had only a glimpse of the latter and still lives mainly on hope.

"Credo" and the letter imply the necessity and the possibility of seeing life whole, of comprehending man's destiny from an objective vantage point, for only with such comprehension can things be understood and man's way be clear. By the time of The Man Against the Sky, the first published volume of his second period, Robinson no longer felt that it was possible to see life whole. Whereas in "Credo" the mind describes its predicament and states what will suffice, the title poem of The Man Against the Sky dramatizes the abortive attempt of the mind to arrive at ultimate meanings. In the poem the speaker, watching the silhouette of a man disappearing over a hill against the flaming sky of sunset, questions the meaning of life, then speculates on the possible answers. As in "Flammonde," the effort at intellectual comprehension of man's destiny fails: "Where was he going, this man against the sky?" the speaker asks near the end, and concludes, "You know not, nor do I" (66). This is the poem that Robinson said "came as near as anything to representing my poetic vision."²³ The point of view of "The Man Against the Sky" is, as in "Credo," the mind, but the poem emphasizes the mind's quest to know rather than its statement of

²² SL, p. 278.

²³ Charles Beecher Hogan, "Letter to Edna Davis Romig," A Bibliography of Edwin Arlington Robinson (New Haven, 1936), p. 185.

what will suffice. As a statement of the truth, "The Man Against the Sky" is no different from "Credo"; neither proclaims the truth; both merely present the effort to attain it. However, a significant change has taken place. In "The Man Against the Sky" the mind acknowledges its own impotence, recognizes that it is so implicated in life that it can never see the beginning and end of life, can never stand outside life and see its totality and thus its meaning--the Light, in other words, cannot come. If this poem represents Robinson's poetic vision, that vision involves the inability of man ever to achieve an understanding of things and, consequently, to utter the Truth. This point is also made in Merlin (1917), where the following passage is spoken by the title character:

I saw too much when I saw Camelot;
And I saw farther backward into Time,
And forward, than a man may see and live,
When I made Arthur king. I saw too far,
But not so far as this. Fate played with me
As I have played with Time; and Time, like me,
Being less than Fate, will have on me his vengeance.
On Fate there is no vengeance, even for God. (297)

To be Merlin is to have the power of a seer to know; but to know, finally and completely, is to understand that one is not outside of but inextricably involved in what is. The seer sees only what fate permits him to see and is just another instrument in the unfathomable progression and reach of events. Merlin, who felt he stood outside of the whole and surveyed it, in the end realizes he has been caught in the web from the very beginning, has been fate and time's fool, a tool of reality.

The late long poems, beginning with Roman Bartholow (1923) and constituting Robinson's final period, are not statements of the mind's

plight and hope, as is "Credo," nor are they dramatizations of the mind's quest for understanding, as is "The Man Against the Sky"; rather, they are dramas of enlightenment in which a man is freed or destroyed by his discovery of his engagement in life. For example, Matthias, in Matthias at the Door, goes to the door of death after the collapse of his seemingly secure but actually rotten world to annihilate what little remains of his worthless life. Truth progressively eats away all the illusions he has built his life upon until finally nothing remains but the wish to die. But at the door of death, through which all his acquaintances have easily passed, he is repulsed and told to live and build again. He seeks an explanation, a justification, for his return to life, asking, "Where may the soul begin?" and is told, "If you could know, Matthias, you would be free. / But you are far from knowing, and are not free" (1151). Like the speaker of "The Man Against the Sky," Matthias is finally certain only of his ignorance and is sustained by a distant ineffable Light, which dimly illuminates his dark way. Matthias cannot know the beginning and end of life, cannot see whence man comes or whither he goes; he can only accept and act upon an inexplicable command to life. Obviously, Matthias does not see life from a vantage point beyond it; he sees what is visible or relevant from within a particular line of action or a particular consciousness.

In the development from the early to the final period of his career Robinson progressively surrenders his expectations of an overall, objective understanding of Truth, until he completely repudiates the possibility of determining the meaning of life. Life cannot be

objectively seen or conceived as a whole; so, though truths of the world are attainable, the Truth of the spirit is beyond the reach of the mind. Robinson, in other words, eventually abandons the quest for truth in the sense of correspondence to reality, life not being interpretable, reality not being comprehensible, by that means.

III

The abandonment of the concept of truth as correspondence to reality entails the repudiation of philosophy--as traditionally conceived--for philosophy, unlike science, which is analytical, is committed to an intellectual apprehension of the meaning of life. If in the dialogue of Mind and Soul the Mind cannot know the Will, then the Mind cannot attain a spiritual realization of things and their significance. It follows that philosophy is useless for determining Truth. In a letter to Will Durant, written in 1931, and therefore an expression of his mature opinion, Robinson vigorously asserts that this is the case. He wrote:

It is true that we have acquired a great deal of material knowledge in recent years, but so far as knowledge of the truth itself is concerned, I cannot see that we are any nearer to it now than our less imaginative ancestors were when they cracked each others skulls with stone hatchets, or that we know any more than they knew of what happened to the soul that escaped in the process. It is easy, and just now rather fashionable, to say that there is no soul, but we do not know whether there is a soul or not. If a man is a materialist, or a mechanist . . . I can see for him no escape from belief in a futility so prolonged and complicated and diabolical and preposterous as to be worse than absurd; and as I do not know that such a tragic absurdity is not a fact, I can only know my native inability to believe that it is one . . . if life is only what it appears to be, no amount of improvement or enlightenment will ever compensate or atone for what it has inflicted and endured for ages past, or for what it

is inflicting and enduring today. . . . Our teleological endowment spares most of us from worrying over such matters to any great extent, or from disturbing ourselves unduly over the freedom of the will. There is apparently not much that anyone can do about it except to follow his own light--which may or may not be an ignis fatuus in a swamp . . . the modern "mechanist" [is] not entirely unlike . . . an intrepid explorer standing on a promontory in a fog, looking through the newest thing in the way of glasses for an ocean that he cannot see, and shouting to his mechanistic friends behind him that he has found the end of the world.

These remarks . . . are more the result of observation and reflection than of personal discomfort and dissatisfaction. As lives go, my own life would be called, and properly, a rather fortunate one.²⁴

The most remarkable feature of this letter is how much it denies and how little it asserts. Besides admitting that his own life provides no grounds for complaint, Robinson is certain only of his native inability to believe that life is a tragic absurdity. He suggests that all one can do to counter the possibility that it may be is to follow his own light; but since the truth or falsity of that light is indeterminable, his trust in it is a matter of faith, not of intellectual certainty. The rest of the letter is outright and complete denial--knowledge of the Truth (the meaning of life) has not progressed an inch since the origin of man: we know nothing at all about final matters; materialists are myopic fools who mistakenly regard their ignorance as reality; life as it appears to be, which is all the mind can know, is brutal and meaningless. A letter deliberately designed to provoke a statement and defense of his philosophical position evokes from Robinson a repudiation of philosophy and the thin positive claim that man can only know for certain his own feelings.

²⁴ SL, p. 163.

His poetry over and over again expresses this attitude, which is at its most explicit in the late poem, "Ponce de Leon." De Leon, on his death bed, asks of the doctor attending him, "Tell me something, / Tell me--what does [life] mean?"

"Some of it means,
My Lord," the old man answered, easily,
"That hidden voices are in some of us,
And when we least would hear them, whisper to us
That we had better go the other way.
And other voices are in some of us,
Telling us to go as we are going--
So long as we go sensibly and fairly,
And with a vigilance. There are voices also,
Saying that if this world is only this,
We are remarkable animate accidents,
And are all generated for a most
Remorseless and extravagant sacrifice
To an insatiate God of nothing at all--
Who is not mine or yours. And there are voices
Coming so far to find us that I doubt
If you, my lord, have yet an ear to seize them.
They may be near you now, unrecognized,
If not unwelcome, and like unseen strangers
In a dark vestibule saying in vain
That they are always there. You cannot listen
To more than you can hear; you cannot measure
More than is yours to comprehend." (1197)

After an exchange of words that are personal and not to the point, De Leon replies:

"There are voices,
Doctor, which I am glad you do not hear.
And I am glad your eyes are watching me.
They say more than you told me. Without them,
Your words might have crumbled, or been lost
In that long sound down there of broken water,
Where you found hope. I can see more in them
Than I can see in all the sixty years
That I have lived. I don't say what it is;
I don't know what it is; and shall not ask--
So long as it is there. It may be voices." (1198)

Obviously this passage is not much more than a poetic or dramatic statement of what Robinson said in his letter to Will Durant. Each man is

bound by his readiness to perceive, by his own light or voice, and the doctor and De Leon know only that they cannot disbelieve. The point to be made about the poem, despite the meager novelty it introduces, is that it dramatizes two men pondering the ultimate question at a moment of crisis, and they can derive from their reflections only a realization of man's ignorance and a hope that a dim feeling will ultimately redeem them. What they know, if they can be said to know anything, is something they feel, not something they can conceive or articulate.

The general anti-intellectualism of "Ponce de Leon" gets directly turned upon philosophy in the "The Burning Book: or The Contented Metaphysician ":

To the lore of no manner of men
 Would his vision have yielded
 When he found what will never again
 From his vision be shielded,--
 Though he paid with as much of his life
 As a nun could have given,
 And to-night would have been as a knife,
 Devil drawn, devil driven.

For to-night, with his flame-weary eyes
 On the work he is doing,
 He considers the tinder that flies
 And the quick flame pursuing.
 In the leaves that are crinkled and curled
 Are his ashes of glory
 And what once were an end of the world
 Is an end of a story.

But he smiles, for no more shall his days
 Be a toil and a calling
 For a way to make others to gaze
 On God's face without falling
 He has come to the end of his words
 And alone he rejoices
 In the choiring that silence affords
 Of ineffable voices.

To a realm that his words may not reach
 He may lead none to find him;
 An adept, and with nothing to teach,

He leaves nothing behind him
 For the rest, he will have his release,
 And his embers, attended
 By the large and unclamoring peace
 Of a dream that is ended. (47)

The theme and action of the poem are obvious enough; they are the same as those in "Maya," though, of course, in this poem they occur in a more concrete form. The philosopher discovers the impotence and folly of his aspiration to know reality via reason, his enlightenment being not the fulfillment of reason, but the transcendence of it into the realm of ineffable voices.

This attitude toward philosophy assumes a radical difference between thought and reality or ideas and being. Here Robinson adapts to his own purposes the traditional distinction between reason and faith, the head and the heart, Reason and Understanding (Emerson), the intellectual and the aesthetic, or discursive and nondiscursive reasoning, etc. The world divides into the two antithetical elements of phenomena and an underlying or transcendent reality, and man's awareness divides correspondingly into conceptual and intuitive apprehension. "All we know about the world for certain," Robinson had Fernando Nash say in The Man Who Died Twice, "is what appears to be" (954); this is the domain of Mind, nature empirically apprehended, where certainty is possible because, by definition, empirical data provides the valid material for reflection. Yet at the same time "man is conscious of a universal soul within or behind his individual life"; although this is Emerson's phrase,²⁵ it is appropriate for Robinson,

²⁵ The Complete Works, I, 27.

since if soul is not present in natural objects, it must be in the subject, or a condition of the perceiver. However defined, the fact is that two contrary faculties in man battle for hegemony in the arbitration of truth, and at stake is not just their right to be heard but their survival, especially the right of the Soul to be. A dualistic creature in which Mind opposes Soul, man looks two ways, toward the world beyond him and into his inner being, and apprehends in two ways, conceptually and intuitively. Inevitably he must choose between the alternatives. Being a poet, Robinson perforce favored the Soul; and though he originally felt he could know it conceptually, eventually he favored intuition, the Soul's immediate knowledge of itself and the Will.

Clearly, when Robinson became exasperated by attempts to find a philosophy in his poetry, and denied that he was a philosopher, he was expressing a deeply felt and carefully considered opinion about the relation of philosophy and poetry. His poetry contains no philosophy or ideas in the sense that he understood these terms; as he said, "There is no 'philosophy' in my poetry beyond an implication of an ordered universe and a sort of negation of the general futility that appears to be the basis of rational thought."²⁶ Although the syntax for some unexplainable reason goes awry, his point is unmistakable: rational thought, the Mind, so far as he can see, is incapable of determining the order of the universe and therefore the nature of man's being and destiny. Thus he strongly concurred with a remark made by

²⁶ SL, p. 160.

his friend Thomas Sergeant Perry, which he remembered and obviously liked: "Philosophy is at best and highest the attempt of someone to tell me what he doesn't know."²⁷ And, incidentally, that is just what the Mind tells in Robinson's poetry--what it doesn't know about the spiritual significance of things.

IV

It is clear by now, I think, that Truth was an obsession for Robinson, not because he possessed it and was set on proclaiming it, but because it was a vital need and, as the philosopher would say, problematic. For this reason Robinson's attempt to determine the meaning of life was as much a search for the right concept of truth as it was for Truth itself. Consequently, he did not abandon his hope for Truth when he repudiated the possibility of an objective interpretation of life, but adopted another concept--this time truth in the sense of realization of inner being or potential. In the early poem "Dear Friends" he spoke of poems as "good glasses to read the spirit through" (83), as though he were a biologist with the soul a specimen for him to examine. By the time of "Captain Craig" (1898) he spoke of "the truth / to which we all are tending" (152), which is somewhat ambiguous, since truth could be either an inherent inclination or an objective goal. In Roman Bartholow (1923) the ambiguity is dispelled:

The seed of truth
Is rooted in you, and the fruit is yours
For you to eat alone. (825)

According to this conception, since truth is inherent in the knower,

²⁷ Letters of Thomas Sergeant Perry, p. 4.

to know himself man must return to his essential being. The Light comes not from the outside but from within, being released from there when the knowledge of the mind bows before the knowledge of the heart, the soul's immediate experience of itself. The quest for truth at this point becomes the quest for self.

For this task poetry was not much better qualified than philosophy; as Robinson's expectations of an objective understanding of things diminished, the power of poetry was also curtailed. In the early portion of his career, he was inclined to make general and grand claims for the power of poetry. This was the period of "Credo," when he still had hopes for the coming of the Light. "Captain Craig," also of this period, is loaded with reflections on poetry, and, in fact, the entire poem is a kind of celebration and defense of poetry. Captain Craig remarks at one point,

"But with the few good glimpses I have had
Of heaven through the little holes in hell,
I can understand what price it is
The poet pays, at one time and another,
For those indemnifying interludes
That are to be the kernel in what lives
To shrine him when the new-born men come singing."
(133-134)

The poet is an exceptional man with a special gift for higher truth who, though he now is ostracized for his gift, will one day be a hero for a wise society. And in his most extreme statement on the power of poetry, Robinson has Captain Craig extend this claim for poetry by saying,

"The man of Galilee (or, if you choose,
The men who made the sayings of the man)
Like Buddha, and the others who have seen,
Was to men's loss the Poet--though it be
The Poet we remember. We have put

The prose of him so far away from us,
 The fear of him so crudely over us,
 That I have wondered--wondered." (147)

Though Captain Craig voices some doubts about the beneficial effects of these particular poets because they have been deified, in doing so, in referring to the great religious figures as Poets, he makes the poet a sage, one who sees beyond the black and awful chaos of the night and functions as a messenger of the Light. Later in his career Robinson dropped his grand claims for poetry. He does not, for instance, argue for poetry as the source of universal enlightenment in his letter to Will Durant. Nor does he make such claims for it in his later poems. Captain Craig's wondering leads, finally, from the identification of Christ and Buddha as poets, to the cautious claim that

Though he fail, or die,
 The poet somehow gets the best of us;
 He has a gage for us that we have not. (1388)

Van Zorn, originally titled "Ferguson's Ivory Tower" and devoted explicitly to examining the artist's role, reveals what is behind Robinson's change of attitude toward the power of poetry. In it Farnsworth, a painter, is told by Van Zorn, a sage figure, "It is your age, Farnsworth, and you had better not play with it. If I were you I should try to meet it half way."²⁸ No longer can the artist stand outside the community, superior to it in wisdom, waiting for it to come around to acknowledging him and his vision. He must enter into the community's life, into life here and now, and view things in part from its perspective and serve it directly. This does not mean that

²⁸ New York, 1914, p. 164.

art must become popular; it means that it is caught in history and can only be genuine art when the artist is engaged--which he inescapably is anyway. Furthermore, beginning with Farnsworth, the artist figure is treated unsympathetically. The one possible exception is Fernando Nash, of The Man Who Died Twice, a musician who has a mystical experience, but his experience has a bad effect on his art, for he destroys what he has composed and composes nothing new. Umfraville, in Roman Bartholow, makes the statement, "If a true artist must go to the devil, / What's left of truth in him should keep the devil out of his art" (836). Nash had been many kinds of artist and none of them had saved him; and in Amaranth, a number of artists in addition to the main character, Fargo, have the vanity and the limitations of their self-exaltation exposed. In other words, from Van Zorn on the artist's weaknesses rather than his powers are most conspicuous. He can't keep the devil out of his art, for the simple reason that being engaged in life, his vision is corrupted--what he sees is relative to time, place, and perspective.

Like philosophy, poetry loses its privileges as a special power for apprehending universal spiritual truth. The fact of the matter is that Truth cannot be had by any kind of pursuit of it in an objective or universal form. Robinson makes this point in "The Flying Dutchman":

Unyielding in the pride of his defiance,
 Afloat with none to serve or to command,
 Lord of himself at last, and all by Science,
 He seeks the Vanished Land.

Alone, by the one light of his one thought,
 He steers to find the shore from which we came,
 Fearless of in what coil he might be caught
 On seas that have no name.

Into the night he sails; and after night
 There is a dawning, though there be no sun;
 Wherefore, with nothing but himself in sight,
 Unsighted, he sails on.

At last there is a lifting of the cloud
 Between the flood before him and the sky;
 And then--though he may curse the Power aloud
 That has no power to die--

He steers himself away from what is haunted
 By the old ghost of what has been before,--
 Abandoning, as always, and undaunted,
 One fog-walled island more. (472)

Though he refers specifically to science here, what Robinson says is also true for poetry or the poet: any attempt to discover the land from which we came turns up merely "one fog-walled island more."

As Robinson said in the lines quoted from Roman Bartholow, the truth within a man has to be eaten alone. The letter to Will Durant said that a man can only follow his own light (significantly not capitalized); he cannot generalize from himself to mankind or the universe. Since every man's truth lies in the ineffable center of himself, in the mysterious power and direction of his unique life, no two individuals can know the spiritual significance of things in the same way. Every man attains the truth to which he is tending alone, and being his particular self-truth, it is not "negotiable" (1136). The ultimate spiritual plight of every man, therefore, is the ego-centric predicament. Originally Robinson felt poetry could speak the truth valid for all men, but later all he could claim for it was that it spoke the truth for one man--himself. In living through his vocation, Robinson discovered that the poet, instead of being endowed with charismatic powers, instead of having a privileged point of reference or a special source of higher knowledge, was, like all men, inescapably

engaged in life. Thus, though it never becomes autobiographical--as does Robert Lowell's in Life Studies, which is the logical outcome of Robinson's tendency--Robinson's poetry is eventually governed by the quest to define the center of himself, that incommunicable point at which his personal being unites with being in general.

This point can perhaps best be explained by a couple of remarks made by Hart Crane. Replying to a criticism that his poetry was deficient in intellectual knowledge, Crane wrote:

The tragic quandary (or agon) of the modern world derives from the paradoxes that an inadequate system of rationality forces on the living consciousness. I am not opposing any new synthesis of reasonable laws which might provide a consistent philosophical and moral program for our epoch. Neither am I attempting to delineate any such system. If this "knowledge" were sufficiently organized as to dominate the limitations of my experience, then I would probably find myself writing under the "classic" power and under the circumstance might be philosophically contained.²⁹

Since this knowledge isn't sufficiently organized, it follows that

poetry, in so far as the metaphysics of absolute truth extends, is simply the concrete evidence of the experience of a recognition (knowledge if you like. . . . whereas poetry, without attempting to logically enunciate such a problem as man's relationship to a hypothetical god or its solution, may well give us the real connective experience, the very "sign manifest" on which rests the assumption of a godhead.³⁰

Robinson discovered that his experience, like Crane's, did not yield a knowledge which permitted him to generalize about existence or to formulate a grand scheme, and like any genuine artist he could only be true to his experience and give to his art the shape of his con-

²⁹ The Letters of Hart Crane, 1916-1932, ed. Brom Weber (New York, 1932), p. 328.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

sciousness. Because his consciousness was dominated by empiricism, and eventually by radical empiricism, the ineluctably real for him was the connective experience. This is so because thought and being are regarded as incompatible or incommensurate. William James explained what is involved in this dichotomy in his statement,

The world of our experience consists at all times of two parts, an objective and a subjective part, of which the former may be incalculably more extensive than the latter, and yet the latter can never be omitted or suppressed. The objective part is the sum total of whatsoever at any given time we may be thinking of, the subjective part is the inner "state" in which the thinking comes to pass. What we think of may be enormous--the cosmic times and spaces, for example--whereas the inner state may be the most fugitive and paltry activity of mine. Yet the cosmic objects, so far as the experience yields them, are but ideal pictures of something whose existence we do not inwardly possess but only point at outwardly, while the inner state is our very experience itself; its reality and that of our experience are one. A conscious field plus its object plus the sense of a self to whom the attitude belongs--such a concrete bit of personal experience may be a small bit, but it is a solid bit as long as it lasts; not hollow, not a mere abstract element of experience, such as the "object" is when taken all alone. It is a full fact, even though it be an insignificant fact; it is of the kind to which all realities whatsoever must belong; the motor currents of the world run through the like of it; it is on the line connecting real events with real events. That unsharable feeling which each one of us has of the pinch of his individual destiny as he privately feels it rolling out on fortune's wheel may be disparaged for its egotism, may be sneered at as unscientific, but it is the one thing that fills up the measure of our concrete actuality.³¹

When the mind is not equatable with "the inner state of our very experience itself," it cannot immediately know but can only deny or assent to that experience. When this is the case, the problem of Truth becomes the problem of belief; the seed of truth can produce

³¹ Varieties of Religious Experience, pp. 498-499.

fruit only if the seed germinates, and the mind being sterile, only belief can nourish it. With the estrangement of mind and soul, intellect and feeling, not a belief, but belief itself became the crux of the problem. This is borne out by an exchange of letters between James and John Jay Chapman. Chapman wrote, in regard to James' "The Will to Believe," "But why all this pother--what difference does it make whether a man believes or not? Why is this question important enough to be discussed? I had supposed that the idea of that note--the supposed connection between belief and conduct--was one of the busted ideas of the world, like astrology, or the divining rod?" To which James replied, "I am sorry for your paragraph about the supposed connection between belief and conduct. It is by no means busted; on the contrary, it is one of the most tremendous forces in the world."³² In a time when belief itself was in doubt, James devoted himself, in this letter and in his philosophy, to vindicating it as a power. But as Ralph Barton Perry noted of James, "He was not credulous, but suffered from incredulity. He was deeply concerned with the need of belief and with the right to believe, but made no considerable use of that right."³³

The problem of belief, as James viewed it, was more than a matter of making up one's mind, of arriving at conclusions on practical or ultimate issues. It was a question of the fundamental freedom to exercise vital powers toward an authentic life. The right to believe deeply concerned him because in that right lay the means to a release

³² The Thought and Character of William James, p. 214. The italics are Perry's.

³³ Ibid., p. 209.

and affirmation of the deeper impulses of the human spirit, the life of the soul. For example, James said of philosophy, in "The Sentiment of Rationality," that it "must define the future congruously with our spontaneous powers."³⁴ And throughout his philosophy James argued against materialism, determinism, and intellectualism--all rationalistic, closed views of the world that denied man's spirit freedom and scope--and for pluralism, pragmatism, and mysticism, which opened the world up for the free play of man's deepest and varied impulses. Thus James was arguing for a belief in man, for only if he could believe in himself could man genuinely and fully be himself, could the tremendous force of belief be exercised for good.

For Robinson as well as for James the problem of truth was ultimately the problem of being able to free the human spirit through belief.³⁵ The end of "The Man Against the Sky" puts this point succinctly:

If after all we have lived and thought,
All comes to Nought,--
If there be nothing after Now,
And if we be nothing anyhow,
And we know that,--why live?

³⁴ The Will to Believe, p. 82. The italics are James'.

³⁵ Cf. Robert D. Stevick, "Robinson and William James," The University of Kansas City Review, XXV (1959), 293-301. In this essay Mr. Stevick, while admitting that no external evidence exists, argues for the direct influence of James' ideas on "The Man Against the Sky." It is clear by now, I am sure, that my discussion assumes a pronounced relation between Robinson and James, but whereas Mr. Stevick is concerned with influence (which undoubtedly occurred, and perhaps in both directions, for each knew the works of the other), I am concerned with the way Robinson thought through the problems of life via poetry and defined poetry in doing so. I draw the parallels between Robinson and James to illuminate that matter.

'Twere sure but weaklings' vain distress
 To suffer dungeons where so many doors
 Will open on the cold eternal shores
 That look sheer down
 To the dark tideless floods of Nothingness
 Where all who know may drown. (67-68)

Both men, incidentally, were following in the footsteps of Emerson, who wrote, in "Experience," ". . . in accepting the leading of the sentiments, it is not what we believe concerning the immortality of the soul or the like, but the universal impulse to believe, that is the material circumstance and principal fact in the history of the globe."³⁶ Here belief is not a doctrine but a power, the very energy that propels and sustains life. Robinson repeatedly dramatizes the necessity of belief in his poetry, especially in his long poems, by opposing people who cannot believe in life and therefore commit suicide to those who can and are thereby saved to live. Here, and in general for Robinson, the fundamental problem of life takes the form of the question, Why not commit suicide? Man, because of his nature, is tasked to justify his continuing to live. For Albert Camus, who tackled this problem in The Myth of Sisyphus, the exhilaration of defiance, of self-assertion and thus of self-affirmation, in the face of an indifferent world is justification enough for not committing suicide. After a lengthy analysis of absurd freedom, he concludes that his argument was "a way of thinking. But the point is to live."³⁷ Robinson agrees that the point is to live, but he cannot regard the way of thinking as irrelevant to it. "There is not a man who breathes and believes nothing" (1129),

³⁶ The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, III, 74.

³⁷ The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays (New York, 1959) p. 42.

says Timberlake, in Matthias at the Door. Since life, at least conscious, human life, is purposive, since man must be able to affirm, explain, and give direction to his needs--breathing and believing, life and belief, are inherently necessary to one another. Without belief life is empty and futile, but

If we believe enough
In something--none shall tell another what--
That's ours to do, we are glad to be alive,
As Malory was, to do it. (1012-1013)

Belief, in other words, is simply an expression of the will to live given direction, an affirmation of the impulse to be.

"Everything has stopped for the time being," Robinson wrote to Harry de Forest Smith, in 1898, "and I am chiefly occupied in trying to figure out how long I can hold myself up on a foundation of abstractions."³⁸ He could not for long, as his attitude toward philosophy establishes. Obviously, abstractions could not sustain him, but if to breathe is to believe and Robinson breathed, which of course he did, then he believed in something. And he confessed, "I have always had a light to keep me going."³⁹ The light that kept him going was poetry.

He professed one form of this belief in "L'Envoi":

Now in a thought, now in a shadowed word,
Now in a voice that thrills eternity,
Ever there comes an onward phrase to me
Of some transcendent music I have heard;
No piteous thing by soft hands dulcimered,
No trumpet crash of blood-sick victory,
But a glad strain of some vast harmony
That no brief mortal touch has ever stirred.

³⁸ US, p. 296.

³⁹ SL, p. 172.

There is no music in the world like this,
 No character wherewith to set it down,
 No kind of instrument to make it sing.
 No kind of instrument? Ah, yes, there is;
 And after time and place are overthrown,
 God's touch will keep its one chord quivering. (108)

An early poem, "L'Envoi" attributes great powers to poetry, but though Robinson toned down his claims thereafter, he never abandoned his belief in poetry. He never felt about poetry, as so many modern poets have, that its possibility and justification had to be established. Poetry, or the impulse that begets it, was the one absolutely given, indubitable fact of life for him. That fact was unquestionable; what was questionable was the intellectual interpretation of its significance. And since intellectual interpretation per se was questionable, all that remained for him in the end was the poetic experience. Since the disjunction of thought and being placed the soul beyond the comprehension of the mind, the heart beyond the range of the head, Robinson could not depend upon any reflective knowledge, not even regarding the power of poetry, to support his commitment to his vocation. To believe in poetry meant finally, not to espouse an aesthetic doctrine, but to act, to be a poet, on faith.

While remaining true to the object of his devotion, Robinson became less doctrinaire and more subtle in his belief as he adjusted it to his increased understanding of things. Once the messenger of the Light, poetry became the light illuminating his personal way. But to write poems was to believe in poetry, and it was also to discover the meaning of life in and through poetry, to find, that is, the truth of poetry. As he remarked about King Lear, "There is no sense in writing things like that, for after reading it a fellow sees no sense in his

writing at all."⁴⁰ The poet cannot sensibly create a work which implies that his creativity is without meaning, for in the very act of creating he affirms the power and value of poetry and thus of life. One of the most recurrent scenes in Robinson's poetry is that of a character looking into a fire, and he in effect does so himself. He turned to look into the fire, into the source of his being and creativity, to find Truth. What he found was not an "interpretation of life" but a spiritual realization of the reality inherent in him via an exfoliation of his self. Through making poems, through achieving the truth to which he was tending, he came to know his own being as poet, and therefore as man. The prediction of Alexis de Tocqueville will be remembered:

It may be foreseen that poets living in democratic times will prefer the delineation of passions and ideas to that of persons and achievements. . . . This forces the poet constantly to search below the external surface which is palpable to the senses, in order to read the inner soul, and nothing lends itself more to the delineation of the ideal than the scrutiny of the hidden depths in the immaterial nature of man. . . . The destinies of mankind, man himself taken aloof from his country and his age, and standing in the presence of Nature and of God, with his passions, his doubts, his rare prosperities and inconceivable wretchednesses, will become the chief, if not the sole, theme of poetry.⁴¹

Robinson confirms that prediction, with one qualification: it is not man standing in the presence of Nature and of God, but more exactly, man as poet standing there, that is the chief, if not the sole, theme of his poetry.

⁴⁰ SL, p. 167.

⁴¹ Democracy in America, trans. Henry Reeves (Boston, 1873), II, 92.

CHAPTER III

CONTRA MATERIALISM

They have science; but in science there is nothing but what is the object of sense. The spiritual world, the higher part of man's being is rejected altogether, dismissed with a sort of triumph, even with hatred.

Dostoevski

No mind can engender until divided into two.

W. B. Yeats

I

Robinson's light--his belief, his spiritual realization of things and their significance--I argued in Chapter II, was poetry. There I maintained that his equation of poetry with the light was a solution to the problem of belief created by the dichotomy between thought and reality. This dichotomy, however, is but one aspect of a pervasive dualism which Robinson, along with the rest of his generation, inherited from materialism. Despite efforts at a transcendental synthesis by Emerson and Whitman, by the nineties materialism had split the world in two by rendering man, as a vital and a spiritual being, either an impossibility, an outcast, or divided against himself. Not merely thought and reality were estranged from one another; so were man and nature, self and society, subject and object, intellect and will, and head and heart--to mention only the larger categories in which the dualism was expressed. The primary fact of life with which Robinson had to live, in short, was a split world. From the materialism which

begot this world he derived his sense of life and from it came the conditions under which he worked as an artist. Inevitably, his primary motive as both man and artist also came from it. "I have been slowly getting rid of materialism for the past year or two,"¹ he said early in his career; and toward the end of it, having gotten rid of materialism, he remarked, "My 'philosophy' is mostly a statement of my inability to accept a mechanistic interpretation of the universe and life."² To be rid of materialism, to escape its divisive effects, to free life and the spirit from the choking bonds of a mechanistic interpretation of the universe--that was Robinson's major task, and that is the ultimate reason for his belief in poetry. Viewed in the context of his progress from materialism to its antithesis, his equation of poetry with the light is his way of confronting the dualism to which he was born; it is his way of redeeming life and the spirit from death.

If thought and reality are incommensurate under the dualism, language and reality must necessarily be so, too. But this latter form of the dualism was a more immediate problem for Robinson as a poet, since its effects on the relation of language and poetry to reality determined the material conditions, so to speak, under which he wrote. As a worker in language committed to uttering truth in a poem, Robinson

¹ SL, p. 13.

² SL, p. 165. The letter referred to in the preceding footnote is dated October 28, 1896; this one is dated December 7, 1931. About midway between these dates, on March 2, 1916, he said, regarding "The Man Against the Sky," "My purpose was to cheer people up and incidentally to indicate the futility of materialism as a thing to live by--even assuming the possible monstrous negation of having to die by it" (SL, p. 92).

needed a vehicle appropriate to his subject, and this need directly involved him in the problem of representation. To rid his poetry of materialism he had to solve that problem; an analysis of his manner of getting rid of materialism appropriately begins, therefore, with an examination of the effects of materialism on his medium and with his manner of overcoming those effects.

II

The following passages, his fullest poetic statements on the matter, reveal Robinson's conception of the relation of language to reality. The first is from "The Man Against the Sky" (1915), where the speaker says, as part of his concluding speculations on man's knowledge of his own nature and destiny:

Shall we, because Eternity records
Too vast an answer for the time-born words
We spell, whereof so many are dead that once
In our capricious lexicons
Were so alive and final, hear no more
The Word itself, the living word
That none alive has ever heard
Or ever spelt . . . (68)

The second is from Matthias at the Door (1931), where Garth, as a voice from the dead attempting to dissuade Matthias from committing suicide, says, in the course of his argument that life must be accepted without final knowledge of its meaning:

"Language, Matthias.
With a few finite and unfinished words
That are the chips of brief experience,
You restless and precipitate world-infants
Would build a skiff to circumnavigate
Infinity, and would find it, if you could,
No more sufficient or more commodious
Or comprehensive in its means and habit
Than a confused, confined phenomenon
Prisoned within a skull, with knowledge in it.
There's not much knowledge in it, and less wisdom." (1151)

Although the first passage affirms the Word and the second negates words, both emphatically repudiate the assumption that language can truly represent reality.

The attitude toward language expressed in these passages is, to put it in a word, that of nominalism. Flax, a character in Amaranth, explicitly adopts this view of language:

There is no God [he says]
For me to fear, or none that I may find,
Or feel, except a living one within me,
Who tells me clearly, when I question him,
That he is there. There is no name for him,
For names are only words. There was a time
When I thought words were life . . . (1387)

Flax is unquestionably speaking for Robinson here. Repeatedly in his poetry Robinson comments on the incommensurability of language and reality, and in a letter, where this conviction occurs as a personal rather than a poetic utterance, he comments, "Nothing of an infinite nature can be proven or disproven in finite terms--meaning words."³ (Of course, he begs the question, but his logic is irrelevant; the influence of his assumptions on his poetry, not their logic and truth, is in question.) Words are not life, only labels for what appears to be, and thus they open no doors to the intangible, spiritual reality within man. Between the finite and infinite, between appearance and reality, between words and the Word, lies an unspannable chasm.

Nominalism is usually linked with the skepticism of British empiricism and such recent schools of philosophy as logical positivism and general semantics, all of which maintain that because words are

³ SL, pp. 165-166.

only names man cannot know reality, only its ephemeral appearances, if even that. But nominalism, it must be remembered, was also the philosophy of Duns Scotus, a devout member of the Roman Catholic priesthood. For Scotus the limitations of language are not the limitations of human knowledge. Robinson's nominalism is of the Duns Scotus variety: although he denies the efficacy of language in the quest for knowledge of reality, he does not abandon the assumption that the Word exists and is knowable. Flax, for instance, despite his disbelief in words, finds that the Word is there, living within him, when he seeks it in the right manner. In probably his best known remark--certainly his most vivid one--on the relation of language to reality, Robinson said, "The world is not a 'prison house,' but a kind of kindergarten, where millions of bewildered infants are trying to spell God with the wrong blocks."⁴ Though language fails man in his quest for the Word, the object of the search remains and the search continues; men persevere in their effort to comprehend that something of an infinite nature existing beyond the pales of language. For Robinson, despite the limitations of language, the Word remains as an ineluctable reality that can somehow, to some degree, be known, and his first task as an artist was to find the right blocks to spell it.

It is a curious phenomenon indeed when a poet finds it necessary to distrust and even repudiate his medium; when he finds it necessary to regard as the wrong blocks the very material he must employ to deal with his subject. But that was Robinson's situation. However, it was

⁴ Literature in the Making, p. 266.

not his alone; it has been, and still is, the most common attitude toward language in the twentieth century. Take Henri Bergson, for example. If a philosopher is to philosophize seriously, he has to put his trust in language and reason. But Bergson argued that language and thought are falsifiers of reality, presenting an illusion for the real thing. In carrying out his argument he impaled himself on the dilemma of using language and thought to demonstrate their impotence; to be consistent, the now commonplace criticism of Bergson maintains, he would have had to remain silent, for with his view of language and thought all that he wrote--his philosophy, in a word--is nonsense. There has been a widespread tendency in the twentieth century to regard just about all philosophy as nonsense--or at least to redefine philosophy so that it does not deal with such "nonsensical" problems. To avoid the kind of logical absurdity Bergson was trapped in, most subsequent philosophers have abandoned metaphysics and restricted philosophy to the analysis of practical problems, scientific statements, or everyday language. These philosophers, along with Bergson and his contemporaries, have been confronted with the problems arising out of the view of the universe as potent and fluid which emerged in the nineties. Since language, based upon static categories, is at odds with such a universe, their fundamental concern has of necessity been the problem of meaning or correspondence, the problem of the relation of language and thought to such a reality. The prevailing conviction has been that language and reality are separate and distinct phenomena with at best an accidental or pragmatic correspondence. Thus, because of the dualism of language and reality, philosophers also have distrusted

and in some cases even repudiated their medium. At the most they have allowed that language is an elegant "game."

The modern poet has been confronted with the same predicament and the same basic problem as the modern philosopher, although his problem, since he does not rely primarily on discursive propositions, can be more accurately defined as that of representation. Beginning with the French Symbolists, he has found his medium as much of a hindrance as a help and has employed a wide variety of strategies, including extra-linguistic devices in many cases, to overcome its deficiencies. At times he has even argued that the poet should dispense with language altogether, though he has never quite succeeded in doing so in practice. Elizabeth Sewall, for example, says of Valery, "he curses words in good round terms, calling them impure, incoherent, unreliable, trombones, parrots, idols, but they were none the less his only medium."⁵ But whatever his strategies, the modern poet has almost always adopted the attitude that language cannot represent the reality that is his subject and so the heart of a poem has been located in its non-discursive aesthetic elements. Yeats, to cite an example at random, said:

. . . from this return to imagination, this understanding that the laws of art, which are the hidden laws of the world, can alone bind the imagination, would come a change of style, and one would cast out of serious poetry those energetic rhythms, as of a man running, which are the invention of the will with its eyes always on something to be done or undone; and we would seek out those wavering, meditative, organic rhythms,

⁵ Elizabeth Sewall, Paul Valery, The Mind in the Mirror (New Haven, 1952), p. 24.

which are the embodiment of the imagination, that neither desires nor hates, because it has done with time, and only wishes to gaze upon some reality, some beauty; nor would it be any longer possible for anybody to deny the importance of form, in all its kinds, for although you can expound an opinion, or describe a thing when your words are not quite well chosen, you cannot give a body to something that moves beyond the senses, unless your words are as subtle, as complex, as full of mysterious life, as the body of a flower or of a woman.⁶

What Yeats says is also substantially true of those poets who, unlike him, have not been convinced that the laws of art are the laws of a hidden divine reality. They, too, would agree that art must give body to something that moves beyond the senses, beyond language, though that something, they would maintain, is natural rather than supernatural.

Thus words slip and slide and will not hold for both modern philosophers and modern poets. Both have found language inadequate for grasping reality, whether natural or divine. Moreover, both have largely sustained themselves by making an occupation out of the analysis of their medium. Philosophers have philosophized about philosophizing; poets have written poems on the writing of poetry. Being unable to explore with confidence beyond their vehicle, both have conducted a searching examination of their activity to determine whether philosophy and poetry are at all possible. That examination has become progressively more explicit in both areas since the nineties.

These matters are common knowledge today. I mention them at this point in order to place Robinson in time and in an intellectual

⁶ "The Symbolism of Poetry," Essays and Introductions (New York, 1961), p. 163.

context. The prevailing notion of Robinson's poetry implies that it does not have much relevance to the twentieth century. Robinson, in fact, did not care for the modern world; but who has cared for it? Nevertheless, although he professed a dislike of movies, jazz, and experimental poetry among other modern things, he unflinchingly acknowledged the facts of life--social, moral, scientific, and philosophical--of the modern world and struggled with them as tenaciously as any modern thinker or artist. If he is placed in the proper time and in the proper intellectual context--if he is seen as a contemporary of Santayana, Dewey, Whitehead, George Herbert Mead, Unamuno, Croce, Shaw, Yeats, Valery, Rilke, etc.--much of his handling of the problem of representation that would otherwise require lengthy explanation will be immediately clear. Moreover, the stature as well as the character of his poetic achievement will be more readily perceived and appreciated.

Let us return from this digression to Robinson's view of language. I have said that Robinson persisted in his aspiration to "spell" reality but that he could not rely on language to serve him. Something was obviously wrong with language. As the passage previously quoted from "The Man Against the Sky" claims, it was dead; words that once were so alive and final were no longer capable of recording eternity or Truth. The language Robinson had at his disposal for writing poetry, the language of British and scientific empiricism, which is a strictly denotative language limited to the one function of reference, points to isolated natural objects or events. Such a language is based on an assumption that identifies abstractions of a high degree

as the primary ingredients of experience. Once these abstractions, sifted out of the experience continuum by a conceptual net, are regarded as reality, then the language which refers to them becomes stripped of its moral and religious dimensions of meaning. When that happens, the language is of little or no use for poetry.

F. W. Bateson, in his fine study English Poetry and the English Language,⁷ has shown specifically how this was true for nineteenth-century English poetry, and so it is not necessary to go deeply into the matter here. One point which he makes is, however, of special relevance: since Wordsworth's Preface to the Lyrical Ballads, the language of poetry has been identical with the language of prose. Language in the nineteenth century had neither the natural "poetic" quality it did for the Elizabethans, nor did it contain a special vocabulary of poetic diction such as the neo-classical poets relied upon. There was simply the language of prose, and whether used for scientific or general essays or for fiction, this was the language of realism--the language of scientific materialism, British empiricism, and the British novel. It was the language, in other words, that Francis Bacon and Thomas Hobbes defined as appropriate for the scientific view of the world, and it emerged with science and the art that flourished alongside of it, namely prose fiction. In the nineteenth century, when science established its hegemony over the Western mind, it became the language. Commenting on this fact, W. B. Yeats remarked about William Morris, "His age offered him a speech, ex-

⁷ Oxford, 1934.

hausted from abstraction,"⁸ and once observed of himself, ". . . I began to pray that my imagination might somehow be rescued from abstraction."⁹ Living in the same age Robinson, too, was bothered by abstraction;¹⁰ for though it arrived in America relatively late in the century, the language of realism was a concomitant of materialism and both were equally well entrenched by the time Robinson began to write. Thus Robinson's attempt to get rid of materialism was at the same time an attempt to get rid of--or more exactly, to get around--the "dead" language of realism.

The most obvious effect of materialism on Robinson's medium, then, was to strip language of the dimensions of meaning that make poetry possible. In addition to this effect the language of realism carries with it a complex of attitudes regarding the nature of knowing and knowledge, of mind and reality, which, when applied to aesthetics, determine the objectives and style of art. Now, paradoxical as it may seem, Robinson was himself a realist in aesthetics, and not only early in his career when he is obviously so, but at the end of it as well. In fact, it was because he accepted the aesthetics of realism that language proved to be so hostile to his purposes. For that aesthetics, like the epistemology of realism, assumes a dualism of subject and object in which meaning is defined as correspondence, a one-to-one relation between concept and reality, a faithful reproduction of

⁸ Autobiographies: Reveries Over Childhood and Youth and the Trembling of the Veil (London, 1926), p. 176.

⁹ Ibid., p. 233.

¹⁰ See above, p. 68.

things as they appear to be. The dualism inherent in realism, in other words, automatically raises the question of the relation of thought, language, and art to reality by postulating a separation between them.

That he was a realist early in his career is unquestionable. As a beginning writer he gave a great deal of time to fiction and even planned and wrote a volume of apparently realistic short stories which he intended to publish. Subsequently he changed his mind and destroyed them, but in the meantime he read widely among the British and American realists; spoke highly of Kipling, Thackeray, Hardy, Henry James, and Bret Harte, among others; read the realist critics in the current periodicals; and referred to his own work as well as that of others in such a way as to leave no doubt that "reality" was his primary criterion as thinker and as artist. He was familiar, for instance, with the attitude of his friend Thomas Sergeant Perry, of whom he said, "Novels mostly wearied him. 'If they are true to life,' he would say, 'they are only depressing. If they are not true to life, they are only silly.' . . . He liked best the things he could see and feel and get hold of."¹¹ Robinson would not so readily dismiss a literary form himself, but he employed substantially the same argument when he said, in regard to the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, "A little bit of reality applied would knock these old poets into a cocked hat."¹² Like Perry he, too, used reality as a test. "I have just read Hamlin Garland's little obstetrical story in the Chap-Book," he wrote, in a letter,

¹¹ Letters of Thomas Sergeant Perry, p. 7.

¹² US, p. 4.

"and . . . I rather like [it]. It is strong and true to life, according to my notions . . . I cannot say that I agree with Mr. Garland's idea of realism--what it should be, but the story is good . . ."13 Clearly, Robinson was more than just familiar with realism: he assumed that trueness to life, verisimilitude, attention to Werklichkeit, is a valid criterion for literature, and he even had his own special idea of realism.

Furthermore, he endorsed as an accurate account of his purpose Charles Cestre's book, An Introduction to the Poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson,¹⁴ the first full-length study of his work, in which he is classified as a realist and interpreted accordingly. Cestre says, for instance, "Psychological analysis remains [Robinson's] chief object."¹⁵ This way of regarding poetry makes the poet, like the scientist, an analyst of a natural phenomenon, although his subject is man's emotional life rather than material nature. The poet does not deal with values or a syncretistic view of life; he analyzes man and presents a report that is "true to life": he teaches us what human nature is. Perhaps Robinson's recommendation of Cestre's book was a dodge. He always refused to interpret or explain his own poetry, and Nancy Evans reported of an interview,

¹³ SL, pp. 213-214.

¹⁴ New York, 1930. "In fact," Robinson wrote of Cestre's book, "he says a great deal that I have been waiting for someone to say--not only praise, which in itself doesn't always amount to much, but simple statements of what I have been trying to do" (SL, pp. 161-162).

¹⁵ Introduction, p. 135.

Though he has been called the poet of the submerged self, he says that psychological observation in his poetry is accidental. Nor is he interested in the exploration of pathological extremes; it is true that Fernando Nash, The Man Who Died Twice, may seem a sort of case-history, but it is a poetic case-history and the method is always the poet's method.¹⁶

More important, in the later stages of his career he spoke of his own poetry and of poetry in general in a manner alien to this concept of the poet's task. Nevertheless, early in his career he himself spoke of his poetry in conventional realistic terms. He said, for instance, of a sketch he was working on, "It deals with the selfishness of self-denial--a peculiar but by no means rare flaw of human nature."¹⁷ This statement, at least in its language, implies that the poem is an analysis of man, though, to be sure, it also explicitly makes a value judgment. Moreover, he said of "Supremacy," an early sonnet, "The verses in question must be taken as rather vague generalities; they will not bear, and I did not intend them to bear, definite analysis. To me they suggest a single and quite clear thought."¹⁸ Characteristic for him in the early part of his career, this way of speaking of a poem assumes that reality is apprehended by thought, that a thought can be a poem's subject, and that a poem therefore tells us something that can be said. These assumptions are a long way from his later claim that poetry tells us something that cannot be said. They are, in fact, the Platonic conception of art as an imitation of an imitation,

¹⁶ "Edwin Arlington Robinson," Bookman, LXXXV (November, 1932), 675-681.

¹⁷ US, p. 122.

¹⁸ US, p. 109.

as an aesthetic representation of reality that is first apprehended conceptually or intellectually.

However, the most important evidence of Robinson's espousal of realism, and of the extent of his commitment to it, is his objectivity, one of the more salient features of realism. In endorsing Cestre's study of his poetry Robinson approved of Cestre's main thesis that his poetry is classical, and that his "Classic restraint is too strong . . . to allow him ever to depart from the strict principle of objectivity."¹⁹ But his objectivity went deeper than an aesthetic principle; it was almost an innate part of his being. A perceptive grammar school teacher remembered him as "a highly sensitive child, looking at the world objectively, for the most part, and quick to observe the humor in everything."²⁰ Her perceptiveness is revealed by his remark, in 1894, ". . . the majority of mankind interest me only as studies. They are to me 'a little queer,' like the Quaker's wife. . . . I do a considerable amount of observing . . . it opens one's eyes to the question of happiness and leads him to analyze that mysterious element in human nature from many points of view."²¹ And whereas W. B. Yeats, an explicit subjectivist, could say, commenting on the malady of the modern world, "I am very sad, for comedy, objectivity, has displayed its growing power once more,"²² Robinson could say, of a planned trilogy, "It will

¹⁹ Introduction, p. 22.

²⁰ Laura E. Richards, E.A.R. (Cambridge, Mass., 1936), p. 8.

²¹ US, p. 135.

²² Autobiographies, p. 430.

be comical as the deuce, and, somewhat unlike 'Captain Craig,' almost wholly objective . . . You will find the original ME as far away from the text as you find it now in little John Evereldown."²³ The degree to which objectivity was a self-conscious phenomenon for Robinson and the nineties comes out humorously in a remark of Thomas Sergeant Perry's quoted by Robinson in his introduction to Perry's letters. "An earnest medievalist who deplored the encroachments of time and change, especially the formation of republics [said], 'Perry, there are times when I yearn to be a subject.' 'What's the matter? [replied Perry] Aren't you contented with being an object?'"²⁴ In short, objectivity was in the air Robinson breathed, and so it was almost inevitable that it permeate his poetry, and that what he said of Zola as a novelist be equally true of him as a poet--that he was a "worker in the objective."²⁵

And this is true for his entire career, for although he explored many of the possibilities of form and feeling within the limits of that perspective, he never abandoned it. From the observer-narrator point of view, predominant in such early poems as "John Evereldown," "Richard Cory," and "Isaac and Archibald," he advanced to first-person narrative and reflective monologues--in, for example, "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford" and "Rembrandt to Rembrandt"--during his middle period, and then turned to narrative drama in the long poems of his

²³ SL, p. 50.

²⁴ Op. cit., p. 6.

²⁵ US, p. 282. Robinson's remark was, "Zola is the greatest worker in the objective the world has ever seen."

final period. Though these are only the predominant forms of each period, and though he ranged widely between comic and serious moods, in whatever he wrote he scrupulously observed the limitations of objectivity. One of the outstanding features of modern poetry has been its pronounced subjectivity, which is reflected in the widespread use of the first person point of view and the technique of symbolism. This type is of course not equated with the subjectivity of Romantic poets, which emphasizes direct expression of sentiment, but it does make poetry the vehicle for direct embodiment of the inner being of man. For Robinson, however, subjectivity of all kinds is aesthetically and psychologically unpalatable. Of Yeats, who has been a major influence on modern poetry, he said,

Mr. W. B. Yeats looks as if he might have the afflatus, and pretty badly, too. His picture is not what one has a right to look for in this nineteenth century, and I am too conservative to admire the taste that leads a man to make a "holy show" of himself.²⁶

The kind of poetry that could be written in his time, as he saw it, excluded the direct interjection of sentiment or self.

So in addition to being burdened with the anti-poetic language of realism, or because he was burdened with it, Robinson was also entangled in the epistemology and aesthetics of realism. Now realism in its broadest sense--and this is true of philosophical as well as literary realism--assumes that a world of substantial things or universal laws exists independently of a subject; or put otherwise, it assumes that an ontological order exists beyond human consciousness.

²⁶ US, p. 180.

This assumption implies that knowledge consists of conceptual schemes, categories, or propositions which accurately correspond to objective reality. When thinking correctly the mind adapts its thought to the world beyond it, taking its shape, so to speak, from an external source to which it conforms. For literature this means that the aim of art is truth, not of expression or realization but of accurate representation or mimesis. The artist's task, therefore, is to make an image which truly mirrors life or things as they are. Accepting the language and aesthetics of realism, Robinson found himself confronted with the problem of creating a poetry which could be true to the reality he took to be his subject.

There is a tendency in American literature studies to think of literary realism as the set of attitudes which William Dean Howells spoke for and helped to establish as the basis of modern American fiction. But as Erich Auerbach has shown in Mimesis,²⁷ literary realism is a long-standing tradition of Western thought based on the conception of art as the representation of nature, the objective order of time and space that man inhabits as a creature of this world. Viewed in this context Howells' realism is but one species of the genus, comparable, say, to Homeric realism, Old Testament realism, Rabelaisian realism, etc. Howells' realism, in other words, rests upon a specific conception of the world, one which, following the lead of materialistic-mechanistic science, assumes that a permanent, objective, universal truth--a moral law--informs the universe and is available to all men. Such a concep-

²⁷ Princeton, 1953.

tion, though appropriate for most of Howells' work and that of his contemporaries, cannot validly be applied, for instance, to the work of Virginia Woolf or to Lawrence Durrell's Alexandria Quartet, for these writers work with a different idea of the ontological order that man is inextricably bound up in. They obviously offer a representation of the natural world, but a radically different one from the one Howells offers.

Robinson began as a Howellsian realist: the natural world, including man, was there, had a certain character, and could be known in a certain way. In the course of his career, however, he underwent a change of mind regarding man's relation to and knowledge of his world and himself. Much more philosophically inclined than Howells and the socially oriented fiction Howells spoke for, and being a poet committed to the inner being rather than the outer form, Robinson thought his way through the inadequate conception of the universe and life deriving from materialism and emerged, not an anti-realist but a realist of a more profound kind, with a different notion of the ontological order beyond man. Robinson's later realism, and its effect upon his poetry, can be correctly understood only if the broader conception of realism is kept in mind; if, that is, his poetry is viewed within the context of the Western tradition outlined in Mimesis.

III

In the passages from "The Man Against the Sky" and Matthias at the Door quoted earlier in this chapter, Robinson implied a conception of reality in stating his attitude toward language. That conception was embodied in the terms "the Word" and "infinity," which refer to the

spiritual reality, "the spiritual significance of things," that was the ultimate objective of his quest for truth. But the spiritual was not to be found everywhere in the world. It was decidedly not to be found in nature, for instance. For Emerson, nature spoke to man, educating his soul in matters spiritual, beaming or reflecting a powerful, deeply penetrating light into the depths of his being. Because man could know himself through his identity with nature, man's relation and response to it was an essential subject for Emerson. For Robinson this was not so. "You won't find much in the way of natural description," he said of his poetry. "There is very little tinkling water, and there is not a red-bellied Robin in the whole collection. When it comes to 'nightingales and roses' I am not 'in it' nor have I the smallest desire to be."²⁸ The light that shone so brilliantly in nature for Emerson and that had become a momentary, fleeting gleam in spring for Emily Dickinson²⁹ had completely gone out for Robinson. His repudiation of nature, especially the nature of the transcendentalists and romantics, obviously amounted to more than a change in taste; it was a radically altered sense of the world man inhabits. "I'm afraid, on the whole," he wrote on this point, "that there isn't much comfort in nature as a visible evidence of God's visible love. It appears to be a shambles and a torture-chamber from the insects up--or should we say down?"³⁰ In fact, he accepted the materialistic conception of

²⁸ SL, pp. 12-13.

²⁹ "A Light exists in Spring," The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston, 1960), p. 395.

³⁰ SL, p. 177.

nature, which establishes an absolute separation between man and nature, with the consequence that man is forced to regard himself as "a sort of outside passenger travelling across a fundamentally alien environment."³¹

In a world in which nature is completely antithetical to spirit, man, if he stands upright at all, stands alone; he is the only instance of spirit and therefore the only evidence of its nature and destiny. Instead of attaining self-knowledge through nature, man must turn to himself--to introspection or to an examination of what is "between man and man"--for that purpose. For this reason Robinson's immediate subject is man. Nowhere does he announce this fact in so many words, yet there can be no doubt that it is, his entire poetic work being cogent testimony of it. Judging from his titles alone--for example, "Luke Havergal," "Eben Flood," "Captain Craig," "Merlin," "King Jasper,"--it is clear that individual man is the essential phenomenon for him. But there is other testimony also. There is, for instance, his remark, on Kipling's animal stories, "My taste in this direction corresponds with my indifference to the doings of trained animals. I prefer men and women who live, breathe, fight, make love, or go to the devil after the manner of human beings. Art is only valuable to me when it reflects humanity or at least human emotions."³² There are the lines in "Zola":

Never until we conquer the uncouth
Connivings of our shamed indifference
(We call it Christian faith) are we to scan
The racked and shrieking hideousness of Truth
To find, in hate's polluted self-defense
Throbbing, the pulse, the divine heart of man. (85)

³¹ C. E. M. Joad, The Recovery of Belief (London, 1952), p. 33.

³² US, p. 160.

And on repeated occasions in his letters when judging a work of literature or another man, he is deeply concerned about the quality of their humanity. "I am getting more and more convinced," he once remarked, "that Daudet is the greatest artist in fiction now living--and his art never crowds out his humanity."³³ Humanity, human emotions, the divine heart of man--these terms refer to and identify the distinctive location of the spiritual reality that Robinson sought to know. It is the reality, for example, that the speakers of "Flammonde" and "The Man Against the Sky" seek so strenuously to understand.

Only through knowledge of the spiritual significance of things can man know himself, and conversely, only through self-knowledge can he know the spiritual significance of things. Thus to complete the quest for truth, Robinson had to have access to the inner being of man. However, he found man's inner being highly elusive. "Nothing is there more marvelous than man,"³⁴ he wrote as a translation of a line in Sophocles' Antigone, and he liked it so much that he used it in "Captain Craig." Truly man is marvelous, for he is a spiritual being, but being that he is also unfathomable. He is as vast and as deep as the infinite and eternal spiritual reality which is the source of his being. Of a very early poem, "The Night Before," one of the title pieces of The Torrent and The Night Before, his first volume, Robinson said, "The main purpose of the things is to show that men and women are individuals."³⁵ Included in the volume were such poems as "John

³³ US, p. 212.

³⁴ US, p. 175.

³⁵ US, p. 158.

Evereldown," "Eben Flood," "Minever Cheevy," "Luke Havergal," and "Richard Cory"--all poems with individuals, most of them quite eccentric ones, as their subjects. In showing that men and women were individuals Robinson assumed that the essential being of a man was beyond the reach of intellectual apprehension.

For if each person is defined by his individuality, his identity resides in what he is in himself, not in his relation to anything external or embracing himself and other entities. Each person is thus autonomous and cannot be subsumed under general principles or laws.³⁶ About a dead friend, whom others were judging, he said, "A suicide signifies discouragement or despair either of which is, or should be, too far beyond the scope of our piddling human censure to require of our ignorance anything less than silence."³⁷ And even when he would seem most tempted to speak out against a man who was his antithesis in temperament, taste, and morality, he abided by his principle of the incomprehensibility of an individual. "As for my Lord Byron," he once wrote, "I don't know what to say, considering life as the hopelessly mixed up and imperfect mess that it is. . . . If one knew all the circumstances (which we never do), perhaps there might be found at least a passive or scratchy defense of his action, or lack of it."³⁸ Peculiar as it may seem, Robinson granted the same unencroachable ultimate

³⁶ "There is more in every person's soul than we think," Robinson said in his most general comment on this matter. "Even the happy mortals we term ordinary or commonplace act their own mental tragedies and live a far deeper and wider life than we are inclined to believe possible in the light of our own prejudices" (US, 134).

³⁷ SL, p. 127.

³⁸ SL, p. 139.

privacy to his fictional characters. "Richard Cory" is perhaps the best known example of his respect for the inaccessible recesses of man's inner being, but his most explicit acknowledgment of it is his remark, on "Doctor of Billiards." It "pictures a man," he said, "who seems to be throwing away a life which, for some reason known only to himself, is no longer worth living."³⁹ Individual man turns out to be as impossible to comprehend as the objective meaning of life, for not the essence but only the outer form--the speech, gestures, acts, etc.--of the individual is knowable.

In the realism of the nineties, everything, including man, is seen from a spectator's point of view and becomes an object, an entity separate from mind that is apprehended empirically and conceptually. Accepting this point of view at the beginning of his career Robinson found himself committed to trying to grasp spirit externally. In "Dear Friends," an early poem I have already cited, he spoke of poems as "glasses to read the spirit through,"⁴⁰ and at this time his poetry was an attempt to do just that. It approached man's inner being empirically, as an object, as something separate from the "reader," whether he be the poet or the reader of the poem. This, the most devastating effect of materialism or objectivity, divides man so that he becomes an object to himself, with his mind alienated from his soul, his conscious being from his spiritual being. Not only is the essential being of another man, real or fictional, inaccessible, so also is one's own essential

³⁹ SL, p. 104.

⁴⁰ Quoted above, p. 58.

being unknowable by the mind. Thus Robinson was confronted with a dilemma from the beginning of his career: the human reality which he sought to know and assumed to be spiritual in character he had to approach objectively, from a point of view that made the spiritual inaccessible. Accepting the aesthetics of realism but taking as his subject the "unrealistic" inner life of man, he found himself faced with the problem of accommodating the assumptions and motives of realism to an incompatible reality. This was the form the problem of representation took for him.

In this incompatibility of point of view and subject resides the basis for Robinson's disagreement with Hamlin Garland's (or Howells') idea of realism. Despite all his concern with and praise for objectivity, he ultimately maintained, "Just as deliberate pathos in literature--that is, pathos for 'effect' alone--is almost always a mistake, so, I think, is objectivity . . . at the best unsatisfactory."⁴¹ This unsatisfactoriness is inherent in the difference between poetry and prose, the latter of which Robinson tried but found himself unsuited for. The darling of modern literature, realistic fiction has derived its power and appeal largely from its link to science, from which it has received methodological and moral support.⁴² It takes as its subject, like science, the world as it appears to be, and tends to view man as a social creature, as part of a social fabric whose "soul" is manifested in manners and morals, or as a victim of the overwhelming natural forces

⁴¹ US, p. 289.

⁴² Cf. Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel (London, 1957).

that play on and about him. Intuitively recognizing that his subject was the human spirit, not manners and morals or cause-and-effect behavioral phenomena, Robinson accepted as truly real the intangible spirit lying in the deep recesses of man's being. His disagreement with Garland results in a conflict of what might be called prosaic and poetic realism. The former, emphasizing the fact, can yield itself completely to objectivity; the latter, emphasizing the emotion, finds objectivity--or a certain kind of objectivity--at the best unsatisfactory. This does not mean that Robinson abandoned objectivity as a point of view, but rather that he insisted on certain aspects of human experience being admitted as a valid concern of literature.

Clearly, it would be a bad mistake to think of Robinson's realism as a consistent, unilinear conception of life. On the contrary, as Mark Van Doren put it, 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."⁴³ His poetry, in other words, is a meeting ground for two opposing aspects of life, the realistic and the idealistic, with the latter being viewed from the perspective of the former--that is, objectively. This, I might point out, is equally true of William James' Varieties of Religious Experience, where he seeks to make a contribution to the science of religion by empirically analyzing what he himself refers to as the idealistic aspects of experience.

⁴³ Edwin Arlington Robinson, p. 30.

More than an aesthetic problem was involved in this double perspective; in fact, that problem is simply a manifestation of the basic incongruity between thought and reality, man's mind and his soul, his conscious knowledge and his spiritual being. In attempting to span the opposing terms Robinson found himself confronted with and exploring the absurd. Always latent in his poetry, the absurd emerges most overtly in his middle period, in such poems as "Flammonde" and "The Man Against the Sky," where the mind acknowledges its inability ever to know a man or the nature and destiny of life. These poems explicitly dramatize the incommensurability of thought and being, and thereby reveal the impossibility of man's ever achieving an intellectual comprehension of the meaning of life.

The literary artist's encounter with the absurd, I might add, was not peculiar to Robinson in the nineties; Howells, Twain, Henry James, to mention only the bigger names, also experience it. Both Howells and Twain, as commentators have repeatedly noted, were scions of the Enlightenment who assumed in their observations of man and society a moral vision based on rational values. The actualities of American life conflicted with Howells' rational values, and the course of his art and thought, including his about face after the Haymarket riots, is the result of his attempt to reconcile them. Wrestling with the same conflict, Twain, with the most violent reaction to the absurd in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, managed to have Huck Finn preserve his moral integrity in a mad world by remaining morally aloof from it and finally fleeing; but by the time of The Mysterious Stranger life became totally insane for him--no correlation existed between the

ideal and the actual. Henry James, on the other hand, tells over and over again the tale of the destruction of an ideal in its conflict with the real: an Isabel Archer, for instance, beginning with confidence and hope in almost unlimited possibilities for herself, bitterly learns of the evil reality behind encouraging appearances. Actually the encounter with the absurd is inherent in the literary realism of the nineties and an integral part of what might be called its dominant myth. From its view life tends to be a drama in which man and nature, consciousness and the ontological order beyond it, the ideal and the real, the inner life and the outer reality, are irreconcilable antagonists, and the result of their meeting is usually the triumph of reality over the ideal. Consequently, the archetypal story of the literary realism of the nineties tends to portray, not a suspension of the antagonists in a permanent absurd relation, as an existentialist story might do, but a resolution in which man recognizes his limitations and futility. The absurd is the beginning point, in other words, but man acknowledges his visions as fantasies, his spiritual demands as hopeless, and adapts himself to the world he inhabits. In the meeting of the ideal and the real, man, the human spirit and its aspiration, is discovered to be impotent.

This was the view of life Robinson and his contemporaries inherited from materialism; these were the conditions under which thinkers and artists had to find the form and meaning of human existence. The prose realists tended to accept these conditions as irrefragable, but Robinson did not and worked toward a more satisfactory vision of and justification for the human reality or the ideal. Hans Meyerhof

has said of the French Existentialists that they seek a "new theory of action through a return to the concrete. . . . after the twilight of all absolutes, how to transcend the puzzling gap between thinking and acting, between the aesthetic contemplation of and active participation in the stream of life--these are the essential questions in the sense that the concrete existence of the individual is at stake."⁴⁴ Not content with yielding to the reality of materialism, Robinson, like the French Existentialists, sought a way to transcend the absurd that would preserve the claims and affirm the existence and value of things spiritual; that would provide a ground for action and the concrete existence of the individual.

IV

Many of Robinson's problems as a poet were inherent in his medium, the language of realism. Obviously he could not write poetry with a language which had no poetic dimensions, no roots in or link to poetic reality. To utter successfully the truth about man, he needed a language whose words were not dead but could tell of spiritual things. C. S. Lewis has said that the task of the poets of love allegory in the Middle Ages was to create a language to paint the inner world in an objective age.⁴⁵ Robinson, too, lived in an objective age, and he also needed a language to paint the inner world, which was his subject no less than it was the love allegorists'. But allegory, at least as it was conceived in the Middle Ages, was not available to him because

⁴⁴ "The Return to the Concrete," p. 37.

⁴⁵ The Allegory of Love (London, 1936).

of his commitment to the realistic point of view. To be rid of materialism he had to rely upon a different solution, but one which would nevertheless bridge the puzzling gap between head and heart, thought and being. In effect, he had to write against the language of realism; he had in using it to undermine or subvert it and its implied conception of reality.

Robinson has a reputation for being obscure, and critics have on occasion been inclined to make much of his obscurity as a defect in his poetry. But odd as it may seem, he claimed the obscurity was intentionally there. In a remark already cited on a sonnet titled "Supremacy," he said, "The verses in question must be taken as rather vague generalities: they will not bear, and I never intended them to bear, definite analysis."⁴⁶ And on another occasion, more generally, he said, "I have encountered so much rotten imbecility in the way of failure to get my meaning that I am beginning to wonder myself if it may not be vague. But I won't have it anything worse than obscure, which I meant it to be--to a certain extent."⁴⁷ Robinson was naturally inclined to obscurity to begin with: "Habitually, in conversation," Elizabeth Bates observed, "he made oblique statements, or statements of implication, only. Because of a deep-seated caution and an equally deep reserve, he disliked being required to be explicit."⁴⁸ Perhaps in conversation obscurity was a protective strategy, but what could

⁴⁶ Quoted above, p. 84.

⁴⁷ SL, p. 67.

⁴⁸ E. A. R. and His Manuscripts, p. 27.

its point be in a poem? Why would he say of a poem he was working on that he had the problem "of keeping the idea of destiny ever present without saying much about it"?⁴⁹ One reason might be that he wanted to keep the poem from being confused with the idea, from being regarded as merely philosophy. But there is a deeper reason. The truth he sought to state even in his early poetry when ideas could be subjects of poems could not be straightforwardly uttered by the language of realism; it had to be hinted at, or presented indirectly or obliquely.

Undoubtedly the best evidence of his deliberate cultivation of obscurity is the way in which it became more pronounced the more he wrote. Instead of practice resulting in the perfection of concreteness and vividness, which might seem to be the logical and customary course, he became progressively more vague, until by the time of the late long poems his narratives are so dimly motivated and tortuously plotted that it is a major task just to determine what happens in them.⁵⁰ And the language of his late long poems was as much affected as their narrative structure. Carlin T. Kindilien has pointed out how Robinson's stature as a poet in the nineties largely rests on the native quality of his language, situations, and themes--in other words, on his creating poetry out of the life in which he was directly involved

⁴⁹ US, p. 196.

⁵⁰ Cf. Winters, "The Other Long Poems," op. cit., pp. 97-130; in his discussion of Robinson's long poems Winters summarizes their plots as a service to the reader because, he says, they require at least one reading just to understand what happens in them.

rather than the anachronistic romantic sentiments that were abroad.⁵¹ Like Howells, and in accordance with the interests of realism, he regarded his work in the early stage of his career as largely "an attempt to show the poetry of the commonplace."⁵² He sought, that is, to make poetry out of, or to find poetry in, the real as he understood it at this time. Consequently, his early poems at their best tended to be tight, succinct, sharp, concrete, lucid, vivid, exact. Poems like "Flammonde," "Richard Cory," "Eben Flood," though each in different ways, derive their power from their concreteness, from the sense of reality they evoke, of meaning achieved through sharp observation of the actual. The long poems are in no way devoted to the poetry of the commonplace. The consequence is that the language in them becomes dissociated from things seen, actual speech, and concrete situations. Passionate, long-winded talk; general, abstract diction; relatively formal, high-toned syntax; circumlocution and rhetoric become the hallmarks of his style in them.

The proof that he had not simply lost his poetic power in the long poems is found in Robinson's support of his practice with theory. Of Van Zorn, which he called "more a poem than a play," he said, "The play is for the most part the working of character upon character,

⁵¹ "The New Traditionalism," American Poetry in the Eighteen Nineties (Providence, 1956), pp. 73-123.

⁵² US, p. 132. On another occasion he said, "There is poetry in all types of humanity--even in lawyers and horse-jockeys--if we are willing to search it out; and I have tried to find a little for the poor fellows in my hell, which is an exceedingly worldly and transitory one. . ." (US, p. 108).

the plot being left, more or less, to reveal itself by inference."⁵³ A play, this remark implies, presents explicitly; a poem suggests, hints of things dimly felt. Communication between people in his poems is always a matter of the tone of a remark or of the expression of the eyes, never of just the language, and his character's convictions are always based on feeling rather than clearly conceived ideas.⁵⁴ Moreover, never does Robinson interpret the nature of spiritual reality, yet almost every poem of his testifies to its existence by creating an aura or situation that suggests a hidden life beyond the explicit language of the poem. So what was true for his characters was also true of his poems. "I suppose I always depended rather more on context than on vocabulary for my poetical effects,"⁵⁵ he once remarked. The poetry in a poem, as he finally understood it, resides primarily in the form, the tone, the style, those intangible elements that encompass and permeate the specific words and hold them in suspension. He made this point quite clear when he asserted that poetry "tells us what cannot be said."⁵⁶

In the course of attempting to accommodate the motives and assumptions of realism to his subject, the human spirit, Robinson discovered on his own the now well-known fact that meaning primarily resides in the context. Marshall McLuhan, a cryptic sage of popular

⁵³ E. A. R. and His Manuscripts, pp. 8-9.

⁵⁴ See, for example, passages from "Ponce de Leon" quoted in Chapter II, pp. 56-57.

⁵⁵ SL, p. 102.

⁵⁶ Quoted above, p. 39.

culture, has said, on this point, in characteristic style, "The paradox of statement without syntax rides herd on our world now."⁵⁷ What he means here is somewhat illuminated by his further statement:

Recent studies make clear that so great is the semantic variation in ordinary discourse that communication between people cannot be accounted for by the notion of agreement on the meaning of words. That we communicate at all seems to be the result of sharing an action that is made possible by words and persons as actors and actions. The pattern or structure of meaning is communicable not the "content" in the sense of some detachable, fixable set of data. As soon as the artists liberated us from lineality into field theory, a century ago, the idea of meaning as a package or capsule assumed a grotesque aspect. The idea of art as self-expression faded out at the same time.⁵⁸

McLuhan speaks from the vantage point of the mid-twentieth century, when these notions are well established and readily acknowledged. When Robinson wrote they were just emerging, but they were nevertheless clearly conceived by the advanced thinkers of his generation. George Herbert Mead, an almost exact contemporary of Robinson's, said, for instance, in his study Mind, Self and Society, "We want to approach language not from the standpoint of inner meanings to be expressed, but in the larger context of co-operation in the group taking place by means of signals and gestures. Meaning appears within that process."⁵⁹ Robinson, along with Mead, recognized that the language of realism had no syncretistic powers, only analytic ones, and that consequently meaning did not reside in words themselves, the abstract

⁵⁷ From an unpublished notebook of McLuhan's which I was privileged to inspect.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Chicago, 1934, p. 6.

counters of the mind, but in the context or "frame of reference" in which they are used. Robinson had hit upon the equivalence of form and content, and he represents perhaps the first instance in America of what F. W. Bateson has called "the return to structure" in modern poetry.⁶⁰ Though he did not make this return in quite so experimental and dramatic a fashion as most subsequent poets have, nevertheless he did make it. In McLuhan's terms, he discovered the paradox of statement without syntax.

By means of that paradox, by regarding structure or form as a kind of language, Robinson was able to subvert the "dead" language of realism. For if the meaning of a poem resides in its structure, then a poem truly tells us something that cannot be said, something that is embodied in its form. I earlier quoted W. B. Yeats as saying, in part, that "although you can expound an opinion, or describe a thing when your words are not quite well chosen, you cannot give a body to something that moves beyond the senses, unless your words are as subtle, as complex, as full of mysterious life, as the body of a flower or of a woman."⁶¹ Now Robinson sought to tell the truth about the something that moves beyond the senses, but finding the words in the language of realism without subtlety, complexity, or mysterious life, he could not directly use them to give body to the Word. Instead, he had to rely upon context, that is, upon the aesthetic elements of form, to reveal

⁶⁰ "The Present Day," English Language and English Poetry, pp. 114-129.

⁶¹ Quoted above, p. 78.

"symbolically"⁶² the spiritual reality beyond the apprehension of language. As the idealistic side of him gained in clarity and force, he became more concrete, if you will, about the spiritual but more obscure about the sensory. However, since the spirit had always been his subject, he had from the beginning of his career purposely cultivated obscurity in order to hint of a dimly felt life beyond words.

Reliance upon context for symbolic effects was one means employed by Robinson to obviate the effects of materialism on his medium; another way, and it also contributed to his obscurity, was the adoption of radical empiricism. I said that Robinson more and more concentrated on the something beyond the senses, but a more accurate statement would be that he concentrated on the something behind them, for like Flax, who found the Word living within him, Robinson turned inward to the self. Like William James, who, it will be remembered, also argued against materialism and its dualistic implications, Robinson realized that the affirmation of the human reality, of the spirit and its claims, required the acceptance of consciousness or experience per se as the fundamental fact of life. This meant mind had to be subsumed under being or the stream of consciousness; it had to be put into the service of the self to tell its truth. It has been said of Nietzsche that he came to realize, in working through the conflict of reason and spirit, that to conceptualize oneself is to commit suicide. Robinson, I think,

⁶² I am using this term in Yeats' sense in his essay "Symbolism in Poetry" (Essays and Introduction, pp. 153-164). Yeats writes that symbols "call down upon us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions"; they whisper of "far-off multitudinous things," to use a phrase from another essay--"The Emotion of Multitude" (pp. 215-216).

along with many other men besides Nietzsche and James, realized this: that wholly objective thought--or, scientific empiricism--turned upon man or oneself denies the vital impulse and the creative power of spirit and life. The defense of man consequently required an adamant rejection of this kind of objectivity. In The Tragic Sense of Life, Unamuno, a contemporary of these men, and reacting to the same circumstances, vigorously spoke for them all when he said,

And what all the objectivists do not see, or rather do not wish to see, is that when a man affirms his "I," his personal consciousness, he affirms man, man concrete and real, affirms the true humanism--the humanism of man, not the things of man--and in affirming man he affirms consciousness. For the only consciousness of which we have consciousness is that of man.

The world is for consciousness. Or rather this for, this notion of finality, the feeling rather than notion, this teleological feeling, is born only where there is consciousness. Consciousness and finality are fundamentally the same thing.

If the sun possessed consciousness it would think, no doubt, that it lived in order to give light to the world; but it would also and above all think that the world existed in order that it might give them light and enjoy itself in giving them light and so live. And it would think well.⁶³

In the end, like Unamuno, Robinson broke with the objectivists by accepting consciousness as the primary fact of life and manifestation of spirit. Thus he got around the effect of materialism on his medium by redefining reality, or more precisely by extending its limits. By replacing the epistemology of scientific empiricism with that of radical empiricism, he could take consciousness, which he always knew existed, as a legitimate province of objective knowledge. As his epistemology changed, his task correspondingly became the representation, not of

⁶³ Op. cit., p. 13.

external natural phenomena, but of the human reality, and that entailed being true to inner being rather than to outer appearances. The late long poems, consequently, are narrative dramas of the self concerned with the structure of pre-reflective experience. Robinson's obscurity increases in them partly because clarity of observation and thought are subordinated to rendering the "subconscious life,"⁶⁴ or the intangible religious-moral aspects of consciousness.

The espousal of radical empiricism was not a departure from realism but was consistent with its principles. As William James did not repudiate science, so Robinson did not repudiate objectivity and the desire to make poems that give a true account of reality. In fact, in the last stage of his poetry he was even more explicitly concerned with representing things as they are, life as it is here and now, than he was when he assumed an external view of life to be possible. In the earlier poetry he limited himself to the phenomenal, but in the later poetry he explicitly acknowledged and accepted this limitation as necessary and inescapable. I pointed out in Chapter II, for instance, that in the later stage of his career he abandoned his attitude that the poet is a superior man with a privileged relation to other men and the community and felt instead that he is a man among men, seeing life with perhaps greater perceptiveness but not with the special gift of a sage. It was during this period that he wrote the letter to Will Durant in which he argued against the possibility of objective knowledge of

⁶⁴ William James employs this phrase to designate the location of the ideal, religious elements in experience (Varieties of Religious Experience, p. 73.)

truth and allowed that every man has his own light. Moreover, at no time, not even in his last period, did he unite the spiritual and phenomenal realities, or reconcile eternity and time, man's life in this world and his life hereafter. Remarking on a dead friend who had professed a belief that she would be reunited with her acquaintances hereafter, he said, "I doubt if she meets them, but I don't know that she will not. My notion of immortality, and I have some sort of notion, doesn't include the memory of this rather trivial phase of existence."⁶⁵ Between life in this world and any other, there is no transaction, no connection except duration; between here and there is an all but absolute cleavage. Man will not remember this life in the next, nor can he reach by memory, intuition, or anything else beyond this one while he lives to know the destiny and thus the nature of spirit. He is indeed confined to what appears to be, and for the poet, as for any man, all he can know is the human condition in this world. Like James, Robinson could not locate the understanding of things in a transcendental source; only what was immediately, empirically, existentially available could provide a grounds for knowledge. In other words, the adoption of radical empiricism did not bring with it a knowledge of the nature and destiny of life. And this meant that all he could explicitly do was give a realistic account of consciousness. Furthermore, it meant that, as in his earlier poetry, he could not directly express the spiritual but still had to hint of a life beyond the explicit language of the poem by means of form. Though it allowed the inner being of man to be

⁶⁵ SL, p. 170.

taken seriously, and allowed an accommodation of the medium to this subject, radical empiricism did not eliminate the dichotomy of language and reality. His long poems, based on these conditions, are true to life, and therefore they are realistic; however, because consciousness, not man as social being or as natural phenomenon, is their subject, they are realistic in the poetic rather than prosaic sense.⁶⁶ To paint the inner world in an objective age, to get access to man's inner being, the only manifestation of the spiritual in this world, Robinson subsumed thought within experience, head within heart, intellect within will. And by locating his poetic effects in the context rather than the individual words, he got around the dualism of language and reality. These strategies were his means of accommodating the language and aesthetics of realism to the "unrealistic" subject of man's inner being. They are his solutions to the puzzling gap between thought and action, man's conscious knowledge and his spiritual being. The divorce of mind

⁶⁶ The difference between prose and poetry has been a prominent aesthetic question for some time now. Recent attempts at isolating what distinguishes them tend to be based on the schism between the objective and subjective, the intellect and emotion. Herbert Read, for example, says, "If the thought is of a discursive or speculative origin, with creation or feeling subsumed or induced within its framework, then the form of expression is prosaic; if the thought is of an immediate or intuitive origin, if it is 'essentially vital,' but nevertheless assumes order and harmony, then the form of expression is poetic"--English Prose Style (London, 1928), p. 138. A more famous instance is the Ogden and Richards distinction, in The Meaning of Meaning (New York, 1959), between scientific and emotive language, but they go too far in making the two kinds of thought or language completely antithetical. Read is closer to the truth, and he is also closer to Robinson's understanding of the matter. Thus the difference between prosaic and poetic realism is a matter of emphasis, the first favoring the objective over the subjective, intellect over emotion, and the latter reversing the emphasis. Though decidedly objective and intellectual, Robinson's primordial source and ultimate commitment are the subjective and emotional.

from life, of language from reality, of reason from Truth, is obviated through a return to the primacy of personal experience over abstraction, through a return to the concrete, existential phenomena of life and consciousness, and through statement without syntax.

CHAPTER IV

POETRY, SELF, AND SOCIETY

The recesses of feeling, the darker, blinder strata of character, are the only places in the world in which we catch real fact in the making.

William James

People are the walls of our room, not philosophies.

William Golding

I

No discussion of Robinson's poetry can proceed very far without taking notice of Tilbury Town, the fictional community that provides the setting for many of his poems, and that identifies him and his poetry with small-town New England--with, that is, the repressive, utilitarian climate of thought and feeling characteristic of the Puritan Ethic.¹ Though a useful reference to the New England quality

¹ A rather good though historically irrelevant description of one aspect of the Puritan Ethic is Richard Foster Jones' statement,

The more ignorant and fanatical Puritans wished to abolish all university learning, but others wished to substitute for traditional education scientific, professional, and vocational subjects. Some would leave the universities as they were with the exception that Baconian science was to take the place of the traditional natural philosophy. It was a Philistine age and the beginning of our world. Puritanism conducted an aggressive campaign against Humanism, and inevitably the classical literatures and languages suffered. A very critical attitude was maintained toward the study of poetry and rhetoric.

of his poetry, Tilbury Town has greater significance than that; it is literally a character--an antagonist, to be exact--in the drama of life as Robinson imagines it. In this capacity it is a term in another aspect of the dualism he inherited from materialism--the dichotomy between self and society, which is one of his major subjects.

The first reference to Tilbury Town occurs in "John Evereldown," which appeared in The Torrent and The Night Before (1896), Robinson's first volume of poetry. Here, simply a place, it has not yet acquired a dramatic role. In other poems of the same volume, however, the small town community, though unnamed, does begin to assume such a role, as for instance in "Richard Cory," where the collective "We" speaks as a character. By the time of "Captain Craig" (1902) Tilbury Town is fully dressed for its part and firmly established as a dramatic persona. Here, from the beginning of the poem, the town is Captain Craig's explicit antagonist. The Captain defines the conflict between them this way:

"Forget you not that he who in his work
Would mount these low roads of measured shame
To tread the leagueless highways must fling first
And fling forever more beyond his reach
The shackles of a slave who doubts the sun.
There is no servitude so fraudulent
As a sun-shut mind; for 'tis the mind
That makes you craven or invincible,
Diseased or puissant. The mind will pay
Ten thousand fold and be the richer then
To grant new service; but the world pays hard,

(The Triumph of the English Language Stanford, Calif., 1953 , pp. 303-304.) Although Jones is speaking about seventeenth century English Puritanism here, his remark, more than any other I know of, reveals the Puritan antipathy to humanism and poetry that was still virulent, though secularized, when Robinson wrote his poetry.

And accurately sickens till in years
 The dole has eked its end and there is left
 What all of you are noting on all days
 In these Athenian streets, where squandered men
 Drag ruins of half-warriors to the grave--
 Or to Hippocrates." (166)

At issue, as the Captain sees it, is the quality of life, with the two possible choices being the way of the sun-receptive mind, which is life enhancing, and the way of the world, which is life squandering. The narrator of the poem, one of the few citizens of the town eventually to look after and listen to the Captain, agrees with his views but even more explicitly criticizes the town. He remarks,

A few
 Some five or six of us--had found somehow
 The spark in him, and we had fanned it there,
 Choked under, like a jest in Holy Writ,
 By Tilbury prudence. (113)

Tilbury's prudence callously squanders life--literally, in this instance. But the Captain does not blame the town, or some privileged faction of it, for his hard times; he is not interested in criticizing prevailing institutions for purposes of social reform. Nor is the narrator, who writes,

And he was right: there were no men to blame;
 There was just a false note in the Tilbury tune--
 A note that able-bodied men might sound
 Hosannas on while Captain Craig lay quiet.
 They might have made him sing by feeding him
 Till he should work again, but probably
 Such yielding would have jeopardized the rhythm;
 They found it more melodious to shout
 Right on, with unmolested adoration,
 To keep the time as it had always been,
 To trust in God, and let the Captain starve. (114)

For both the Captain and the narrator it is social or collective man, whose interests are in getting on well materially rather than in humanity or the quality of life, that is the object of their criticism.

By befriending the Captain the narrator receives as reward for his generous sympathy a rediscovery of an old truth, which he states at the conclusion of his tale:

The ways have scattered us, and all things
Have changed; and we have wisdom, I doubt not,
More fit for the world's work than we had then;
But neither parted roads nor cent per cent
May starve quite out the child that lives in us--
The Child that is the Man, the Mystery,
The Phoenix of the World. (168)

Throughout the poem, much is made of the child's consciousness as the source of spiritual health, or as the saving power, and that consciousness is consistently linked with the imagery of light. Both the child and the light are excluded from Tilbury Town, and this repudiation of the heart or spirit is the town's most grievous sin. Its social materialism--its prudence, its righteousness and inhumanity, its "cent per cent" engrossment, its obsession with conventional worldly success--results in indifference to the Captain as a suffering individual and to the eccentric, anti-conformist ways of art, the soul, and the Light for which he speaks. Crying out against this indifference Robinson wrote, in "Zola,"

Never until we conquer the uncouth
Connivance of our shamed indifference
(We call it Christian faith) are we to scan
The racked and shrieking hideousness of truth
To find, in hate's polluted self-defense
Throbbing, the pulse, the divine heart of man. (85)

Thus the town's prudence is a spiritual crassness and blindness that makes it an adamant enemy of the Captain and of what he values. The sun's light and the phoenix's fire are forever locked outside its walls.

Although Tilbury Town is not personified in "Captain Craig," as it is in "Richard Cory" and other poems where the collective "We" or a

representative member of it speaks the lines, "Captain Craig" provides the town with its biggest role. Never again does it rise to such explicit dramatic prominence. Yet whenever it appears thereafter, no matter how briefly, it bears the stamp of the spiritual crassness and blindness suggested in "Richard Cory" and fully and explicitly defined in "Captain Craig." For example, in "Isaac and Archibald," two old men of rough but ready friendship unconsciously instruct a boy, the narrator, in the ways of humanity, but that instruction takes place outside the town, as it must. And never again is Tilbury Town simply a place; it is always a character, the collective consciousness, antagonist to the peculiar, gifted, or far-seeing individual, who, a failure by conventional standards, concerns himself with man's inner being.

The conflict of individual and community treated in "Captain Craig" was a deeply disturbing personal problem for Robinson, and much sharper and more complicated for him than it was for the Captain. As Hermann Hagedorn remarks, "In his diffidence, as a man, [Robinson] tacitly accepted the standards which, as a poet, he vehemently rejected, and judged himself by them. . . He became obsessed by what, rightly or wrongly, he believed Gardiner thought of him."² And Robinson said of Gardiner: "It . . . makes me positively sick to see the results of modern materialism as they are revealed in a town like this . . . we need local idealism . . . I wonder if a time is ever coming when the human race will acquire anything like a logical notion of human life."³

² Edwin Arlington Robinson, pp. 87-88.

³ US, p. 260.

Robinson's letters abundantly testify to his obsession with Gardiner. He repeatedly refers to his home town and townsmen defensively or critically, and he anxiously returns over and over again to the subjects of money, his vocation, and success. Sorely plagued by the pressure Gardiner exerted upon him, he exclaimed, while a young man, "Business be damned,"⁴ yet later, when a successful poet, he made a point of itemizing his income from poetry, evidently pleased to measure his success by conventional standards.⁵ The itemization could have been meant ironically, but that is of no consequence: Gardiner never left him in peace. His poetry also testifies to the obsession and irritation, not only in poems such as "Captain Craig" in which Tilbury Town occurs, but also in direct critical outbursts, as in "Cassandra." Here, addressing himself to all America, he wrote:

I heard one who said: "Verily,
 What word have I for children here?
 Your Dollar is your only Word,
 The wrath of it your only fear.

"You build its altars tall enough
 To make you see, but you are blind;
 You cannot leave it long enough
 To look before you or behind.

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"Your Dollar, Dove and Eagle make
 A Trinity that even you
 Rate higher than you rate yourselves,
 It pays, it flutters, and its new.

"And though your very flesh and blood
 Be what your eagle eats and drinks,
 You'll praise him for the best of birds." (11-12)

⁴ US, p. 4.

⁵ SL, p. 157.

Captain Craig never becomes so vehement; because he was not as susceptible to their temptation, his life is not as deeply entangled in the hated values as was Robinson's. As a poet, as a spokesman for the life of the spirit in a materialistic society, Robinson was genuinely fighting for his life.

Although Tilbury Town, easily identified with Gardiner, Maine, is the most direct representation of Robinson's experience with the conflict of individual and community, it is not his only way of representing it. Shakespeare's obsession with Stratford, and Rembrandt's troubles with Amsterdam, as well as St. Paul's with Rome, the Wandering Jew's with New York, and Merlin's and Lancelot's with Camelot, are no less powerful representations of the conflict of poetry and materialism. In fact, as this brief list suggests, most of Robinson's better known poems are on this subject. His personal experience of the conflict permitted him to imagine concrete and profound images of men caught in a sharp antagonism of radically opposed values, of poetry and materialism, whether the men were citizens of Tilbury Town, artists, religious figures, or knights. And the number and the quality of his poems on the conflict of individual and community testify that Tilbury Town represents one of Robinson's deepest obsessions, and a fundamental fact of the human condition as he experienced it.

II

The conflict of individual and community was not, however, a peculiar obsession of Robinson's; it was one of the nineteenth century's presiding concerns, beginning with the Romantics, who linked man with nature and opposed both to society; continuing, indeed growing in

intensity, through the Victorians; and culminating in the last half of the century. And it is still absorbing much attention today, as a cursory survey of the social sciences, the popular and elite press, and the humanities readily reveals. Sometimes called the Age of Sociology, the last half of the century witnessed, through the work of Hegel, Marx, Comte, Dewey and others, the triumph of the idea of man as a social creature, a being whose self-awareness and realization are to be explained as originating in and bound by society. For a religious period, say that of early Christianity, the supernatural provides the definitive arena of man's life, and for the Romantics nature in league with the supernatural provides it. Thus for a Christian or a Romantic the claims of society can be countered with an appeal to God or nature, since for them man's life is always larger than, always has its origin and destiny beyond, society. Man's freedom and individuality rest upon pre- or supra-social realities. But for the last half of the nineteenth century society provided the arena of man's life. And once defined as a social creature, all that man is or is capable of being beyond his animal faculties derives from his social existence. There was, to be sure, a wide variety of positions on the relation of individual to society, ranging from the deterministic inclinations of the Europeans (for example, Hegel's absolutism of spirit, Marx's dialectical materialism, and positivism) to the more open and flexible idea of society preferred by Americans. But common to them all was the assumption that society is the context within and against which man's nature and destiny are determined.

An instance of the thought that results from this socialization of man, as it might be called, is George Herbert Mead's study in social psychology, Mind, Self, and Society.⁶ Taking an "objective and naturalistic" as opposed to a "subjective and idealistic"⁷ approach in his book, Mead identifies his subject by stating that he "regards the development of the individual's self, and of his self-consciousness within the field of his experience, as the social psychologist's special interest."⁸ He then describes his method for studying the self in this manner:

Social psychology is behavioristic in the sense of starting off with an observable activity--the dynamic, on-going social process, and the social acts which are its component elements--to be studied and analyzed scientifically. . . it is particularly concerned with the rise of such experience within the process as a whole. It simply works from the outside to the inside instead of from the inside to the outside, so to speak, in its endeavor to determine how such experience does arise within the process. The act, then, and not the tract, is the fundamental datum.⁹

Mead's approach leads him--indeed, commits him--to the assumption that "the self is essentially a social structure."¹⁰ Abandoning "the conception of the substantive soul endowed with the self of the individual at birth,"¹¹ Mead adopts the conception of an "existential" self that

⁶ Op. cit.

⁷ Mead, p. 224.

⁸ Ibid., p. 1.

⁹ Ibid., p. 65.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 140.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 1.

emerges through social action. As he states it in one place,

The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process.¹²

And in another, more fully,

The individual experiences himself as such, not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of other individual members of the same social group, or from the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he belongs. For he enters his own experience as a self or individual, not directly or immediately, not by becoming a subject to himself, but only in so far as he first becomes an object to himself just as other individuals are objects to him or in his experience; and he becomes an object to himself only by taking the attitudes of others toward himself within a social environment or context of experience and behavior in which both he and they are involved.¹³

The mind is the agency by which a self is developed and socialization achieved. Thus Mead writes,

We are concerned with intelligence on the human level, that is, with the adjustment to one another of the acts of different human individuals within the social process; an adjustment which takes place through communication.¹⁴

He explains what he means here when he says, later in his argument, that

The process [of exercising intelligence] is made possible by the mechanism of the central nervous system, which permits the individual's taking an attitude of the other toward himself, and thus becoming an object to himself. This is the most effective means of adjustment to the social environment,

¹² Mead, p. 135.

¹³ Ibid., p. 138.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 75.

and indeed to the environment in general, that the individual has at his disposal.¹⁵

And again:

The principle basic to human social organization is that of communication involving participation in the other. This requires the appearance of the other in the self, the identification of the other with the self, the reaching of self-consciousness through the other.¹⁶

For "the individual reaches his self only through communication with others, only through the elaboration of social processes by means of significant communication."¹⁷ The mind makes possible a dialogue between man and men, between, that is, the individual and the collective consciousness, and by means of that dialogue in which, not ideas, but attitudes are exchanged and social relations defined the mind creates a self. But in turn, "It is the self as such that makes the distinctly human society possible,"¹⁸ for the self not only derives its existence from social relations but creates or augments a society by existing.

A creature for whom socialization is so natural is prone to identify his nature with the underlying motives and goals of socialization. As Mead puts it, with overtones of Veblen's notion of "invidious comparison,"

Since it is a social self, it is a self that is realized in its relationship to others. It must be recognized by others to have the very values which we want to have to

¹⁵ Mead, p. 100.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 253.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 233.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 240.

belong to it. It realizes itself in some sense through its superiority to others, as it recognizes its inferiorities in comparison to others.¹⁹

A social phenomenon, the self arises out of and finds its fulfillment in society.

But despite some of these unqualified statements, Mead, a typical American, does not completely reduce the self to its social aspects; the relation of self to society, he realizes, is much more complicated than what it is stripped to in order to serve the social psychologist's purposes. Actually, the self is comprised of two parts, so that there is in addition to the "social self" a "personal self";

The "I," then, in this relation of the "I" and the "Me," is something that is, so to speak, responding to a social situation which is within the experience of the individual. It is the answer which the individual makes to the attitude which others take toward him when he assumes an attitude toward them. Now, the attitudes he is taking toward them are present in his own experience, but his response to them will contain a novel element. The "I" gives the sense of freedom, of initiative. The situation is there for us to act in a self-conscious fashion. We are aware of ourselves, and of what the situation is, but exactly how we will act never gets into experience until after the action takes place.²⁰

The personal self, the "I," is the mysterious power guiding the mind in the development of the social self, or "Me"; it is, in other words, the faculty of selection and judgment, the means of "self-transcendence." It is an autonomous aspect of the self and exists prior to the social self. Consequently,

The possibilities in our nature, those sorts of energy which William James took so much pleasure in indicating,

¹⁹ Mead, p. 204.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 177-178.

are possibilities of the self that lie beyond our own immediate presentation. We do not know just what they are. . . . The possibilities of the "I" belong to that which is actually going on, taking place, and it is in some sense the most fascinating part of our experience. It is there that novelty arises and it is there that our most important values are located. It is the realization in some sense of this self that we are continually seeking.²¹

This complication in the relation of self to society results in an obvious dualism, which Mead characterizes as "the selfish versus the unselfish sides or aspects of the self. . . . the relation between the rational and primarily social side of the self and its impulsive or emotional or primarily anti-social and individual side."²² It also leads to the location of the springs of behavior in irrational sources:

The traditional supposition has been that the purposive element in behavior must ultimately be an idea, a conscious motive, and hence must imply or depend upon the presence of mind. . . . the purposive element in behavior has a physiological seat, a behavioristic basis, and is not fundamentally nor necessarily conscious or psychical.²³

Obviously, man's deepest longings, the impulses of his "I," do not issue from society or his social self, nor do they find fulfillment there.

Despite this complication in the nature of the self, in his approach to self and society Mead concentrates on the "Me," on the social aspect of the self, to explain how it is produced by the interaction of mind and society, and in turn makes society possible. Although he acknowledges the existence of the "I," and indeed regards it

²¹ Mead, p. 204.

²² Ibid., p. 230.

²³ Ibid., p. 100.

as the source of man's most important values; and although he admits a dualism within the self and thereby lays the ground for divisiveness, he nevertheless chooses to dwell on the way in which the "Me" functions to permit the individual to integrate himself into a community. This does not mean that men do not compete with one another in society; of course they do, and with malice aforethought, but they compete for position in a status hierarchy commonly subscribed to and providing the standard by which all roles are evaluated. Society is an arena in which selves vie for the prize of prestige and power, for self-esteem and the esteem of others. Through society, the "Me" acquires its value relative to other selves; and regardless of the role assumed, or the intensity of the competition, the "Me" insures and affirms the existence of society by accepting its position, and society returns the favor by granting the "Me" an identity in time and space. Through his "Me," the individual can adapt to a social environment and thereby become aware of his existence and provide for his survival. Thus the "Me" and society are not merely compatible; they are married in undivorceable interdependence, neither possible without the other; they are, in fact, functions of one another.

Recent students of Zen Buddhism and Oriental thought in general have delighted in reminding the West that its traditional and conventional notion of the self is an idea, or an abstraction, formulated by the mind, not the thing itself. But the dominant tendency during the nineties, as represented by Mead's social psychology, and against which these students are reacting, was completely to identify man with his social role and leave him with nothing in reserve, with no appeal to

anything outside his existence as a social creature. The ultimate possibility in the socialization of man was social totalitarianism, a reduction of the total person, including what had appeared to be his private moral, intellectual, and emotional experience, to a function of social forces. Though this extreme was not actually realized in American thought, where the traditional stature of the individual provided a strong dialectical resistance, such a totalitarianism was latent in the dominant tendency, and was clearly progressing in fact in the social-political patterns emerging with technology and urbanization. Social forces were encroaching upon the private life of the individual and threatening to make of him an object, an entity wholly determined by outside forces, without any vital power, intellectual freedom, or moral responsibility.

III

Mead's thought is especially relevant to a study of Robinson's poetry, not merely because he illustrates the socialization of man, but more importantly because he was almost Robinson's exact contemporary and a native of New England. It could of course be purely accidental that they should have so much in common intellectually as well as geographically, but the fact is that Mead's thought does closely parallel Robinson's poetry in assumptions, point of view, terms, and general subject and aims. It is in part for this reason that I have taken the liberty of extensively quoting Mead; his remarks offer ready explanations of many of the matters regarding Robinson's poetry that I have already discussed and will be discussing. For example, like Robinson, Mead takes his subject to be man's inner life, then approaches

it objectively, working from the outside to the inside; he disparages metaphysics and accepts the limitations of reason, whether considering the individual or the world at large; he defines language so that meaning is located in broad contextual relations rather than in one-to-one denotative relations;²⁴ and he abandons God and nature as concepts useful in accounting for man's being. After rejecting God and nature as workable concepts he finds himself, like Robinson, confronted with the task of defining man through the relation of self and society and of considering all the questions that relation raises, such as the nature and development of the self, the nature of mind, and communication. But there is an even profounder agreement between them on a matter I have yet to discuss: whether they consider the self autonomously or in relation to society, both regard the act, not the tract, as the fundamental datum--the fundamental fact, that is--of man's life. In short, Mead was writing out of the same time and place as Robinson, with the same sense of the fundamental character of man's life, and he was exploring the same territory with discursive thought that Robinson was with poetry.

Yet despite all the points on which they correspond, there is one profound difference, reflected in their contrasting vocations of thinker and poet, that distinguishes Robinson from Mead. And this difference is my primary reason for extensively quoting Mead, for he defines the social thought and experience with which Robinson had to struggle to save man from materialism or socialization. In other words,

²⁴ See above, p. 104.

Mead's social psychology describes the sociological aspects of the human condition with which Robinson carried on a deep and continuous argument, and that argument can best be understood if the terms on both sides are clear.²⁵ The difference--which is suggested in my adaptation of Mead's phrase, "mind, self, and society," as a title for this chapter--comes to this: whereas Mead is primarily interested in--and is necessarily limited to analyzing, by his own admission--the "Me," the adaptive, conscious aspect of the self, Robinson's primary interest is in the "I," the self's indeterminable resources for novelty or creativity. As a poet he was dedicated to the life of the spirit, not the social self, and therefore he was most anxiously concerned about the existence of the spirit--or poetry, since that was the form the life of the spirit took for him personally. Like Mead, Robinson regarded society as the foreground stage on which the drama of man's life is enacted, but identifying man's ultimate being with the "I," his task was to determine its relation to society, not that of the "Me."²⁶ It was his task, that

²⁵ It must be understood that these remarks apply only to Mead's social psychology, not to his philosophy, in which he gives the "I" the dominant role in his examination of the self as a structure of action. His emphasis on the social aspects of the self in Mind, Self and Society is thus balanced by an emphasis on its metaphysical aspects in The Philosophy of the Act--ed. Charles W. Norris (Chicago, 1938)--whose title, needless to say, I have adapted as a title for this study. My reasons for using Mead's title will be clear from my discussion of Robinson's definition of the self and poetry in Chapter V.

²⁶ This, incidentally, is the source of the problem of literature and society, and the form that it takes philosophically. The question arises from the state of affairs outlined by Mead: How does literature variously function as an agency for adaptation to a social milieu, for the development of a "Me," and as a means for transcending received social attitudes for self-realization, awareness of the "I," and creativity? Obviously, with God and nature out of the picture, its ambiguous function makes it very difficult to define the nature and role of literature, because literature both conditions and liberates at the same time.

is to say, to identify and chart the private, personal, pre-social elements in experience.

Tilbury Town is the most direct geographical embodiment of Robinson's experience with a materialistic community antipathetic to the "I," and "Captain Craig" is his largest dramatic rendering of the clash of self and society. However, his most direct and concrete expressions of the clash are found in medium length poems on the artist, in, for example, "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford" and "Rembrandt to Rembrandt." Ben Jonson says of Shakespeare, in defining the source of his black depression, that "there's the Stratford in him; he denies it, / And there's the Shakespeare in him" (21). "Manor-bitten to the bone" (23) and at the same time "Lord Apollo's homesick emissary" (21), Shakespeare is torn between the contrary pulls of these two sides of his being. In trying to account for the hold of "that House in Stratford" (32) on Shakespeare, Jonson thinks Shakespeare is racked by

. . .the fiery art that has no mercy
But what's in the prodigious grand new House.
I gather something happening in his boyhood
Fulfilled him with a boy's determination
To make Stratford 'ware of him. (27)

The insights that art has made available to him have revealed to Shakespeare that all is nothing, even his ambition for the house, yet the demon driving him to be a citizen of rank in Stratford will not give him freedom from this obsession.

In Shakespeare the conflict between the "I" and the "Me" is internalized, as it was personally for Robinson, so that he is the victim of their mutual animosity. Rembrandt, though he is caught in

the same counter-currents, has a better time of it in that he makes the choice of art at the sacrifice of his fame and fortune in Holland and gets out from between the rending antagonists within his self. "Sometimes a personage in Amsterdam / But now not much" (587), his "Me" addresses his "I," represented by his self-portrait on the canvas,

That was a fall, my friend, we had together--
Or rather it was my house, mine alone,
That fell, leaving you safe. Be glad of that.
There's life in you that shall outlive my clay
That's for a time alive and will in time
Be nothing--but not yet. You that are there
Where I have painted you are safe enough. (587)

As always with Robinson, this life in the "I," like the fire in Shakespeare's art, is the life of the spirit:

We know together of a golden flood
That with its overflow shall drown away
The dikes that held it; and we know thereby
That in its rising light there lives a fire
No devils that are lodging here in Holland
Shall put out wholly, or much agitate,
Except in official preparation
They put out first the sun. (587)

Holland's scorn had frightened him into submission and thus into self-denial, but latterly he had come to recognize the cost of his submission, which was

The taste of death in life--which is the food
Of art that has betrayed itself alive
And is the food of hell. (585)

And so he comes to realize that his life lies in his being and destiny as an artist:

Whether I would
Or not, I must, and here we are as one
With our necessity
.
You are the servant, Rembrandt, not the master,--
But you are not assigned with other slaves

That in their freedom are the most in fear.
 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. . . (590)

The price of being true to himself is ostracism and banishment; he has to go forth alone into the darkness, with his only solace being that "if you are right / Others will have to see" (590).

These two poems reveal that even the most concrete representation of the clash of self and society, which begins with the conflict of an artist's worldly ambition with his devotion to his art, transcends the psychological and moral issue of art versus materialism and becomes a conflict inherent in the nature of things. Two aspects of life, two realities, are pitted in eternal hostility, and when caught between them, a man's vital being is torn apart, and when he chooses between them, he must pay the price of either self-betrayal or exclusion from the human community. There are two truths and each abhors the other; so man is trapped in a tragic dilemma which will reward him with suffering and incompleteness no matter what he does.

Other poems more explicitly universalize the conflict of self and society, so that it is not necessary to make these two bear all the burden of this point. These other poems do so by objectifying the conflict even more than does "Rembrandt to Rembrandt"; that is, the antagonists are represented by separate entities that stand over against one another. Both Rembrandt and Shakespeare are instances of inner conflict, with one man resolving it and the other not. But this is not

so in the "Wandering Jew,"²⁷ where a mythological figure, representing a universal and eternal embodiment of the "I," angrily clashes with the society in which he finds himself--New York in this case. The narrator of the poem, an adult, reveals the nature of the Wandering Jew when he says, "I had known / His image when I was a child"; with "Captain Craig" as evidence, it is clear that this link with childhood connects the Wandering Jew with the Light. Robinson emphasizes the Wandering Jew's "loneliness" and the tragic dualism by asserting that "the figure and the scene / Were never to be reconciled." When he goes on to say that the Wandering Jew's eyes at times seem to look on a "Presence. . . One who never dies, / [and during] such a moment he revealed / What life has in it to be lost," there is no room for doubt that the Wandering Jew represents the spirit in a spiritually desiccated world. Thus his very existence is "an angry task / That relegates him out of time / To chaos," and he knows with bitterness the "many a lonely time in vain / The Second Coming came and went." He is quite aware that he is doomed to failure in his task, and though his "old, unyielding eyes may flash" when by chance he comes face to face with another person, they will "flinch--and look the other way"; for he knows that he can never enter society, that he is forever excluded from the human community, and that the waters of the spirit can never revive the arid "scene."

In "The Wandering Jew," where the protagonist is a mythological figure, the problem of art and society is transformed into the problem

²⁷ Collected Poems, pp. 456-459. All the following quotations from "The Wandering Jew" are to be found on these pages.

of myth and society, the two being at heart the same of course, except that the latter is a more inclusive category. No longer is the conflict of art and materialism simply a choice of contrasting values, if it ever was; it is but one instance of a much larger conflict. And that conflict is even larger than myth and society: a yet more inclusive form of it, found in such poems as "Three Taverns" and "Nicodemus," is the conflict of the religious experience with the social forms of religion--dogma and the church. In a remark quoted above in which he criticized Gardiner, Robinson asked when the human race would acquire anything like a logical notion of human life, then added, "or, in other words, of Christianity."²⁸ These two poems can be regarded as his characterization of the plight of Christianity in Gardiner, and it is of considerable significance that Christ, though his presence haunts the poems, never actually appears. They can also be regarded as treatments of the relation of the spirit, the ultimate human reality, to society.

In "Three Taverns" St. Paul says that he had had "men slain / For saying Something was beyond the Law, / And in ourselves" (462) when he had been an orthodox Jew. But after his religious experience on the road to Damascus, he looks back upon his past and concludes he was "A prisoner of the Law, and of the Lord / A voice [now] made free" (462). He tells his audience that now, after his conversion, "The man you see not-- / The man within the man--is most alive" (463). And for this discovery of his spiritual being he has "lost all else / For wisdom, and

²⁸ See above, p. 116.

the wealth of it" (470) and is a "criminal . . . for seeing beyond the Law / That which the Law saw not" (471). Though aware that he is a criminal and will be executed if apprehended, he nevertheless intends to enter Rome for the inevitable tragic encounter with entrenched authority. His religious experience has given him the terrible knowledge that the spirit, "the man within the man," is the radical enemy of social forms, religious and otherwise.

The antagonism between the mystical inner reality and society is finally stated in its largest terms at the end of Lancelot, which is a lengthy treatment of the relation between self and society--though the latter must be understood to include personal relations (that of lovers, in this case) as well as that of an individual to a group. Here Robinson writes of Lancelot,

he rode on, under the stars,
Out of the world, into he knew not what,
Until a vision chilled him and he saw,
Now as in Camelot, long ago in the garden,
The face of Galahad who had seen and died,
And was alive now in a mist of gold.
He rode on into the dark, under the stars,
And there were no more faces. There was nothing.
But always in the darkness he rode on,
Alone; and in the darkness came the Light. (449)

The Light and the world are not simultaneously available to man; he must choose between them; and what is finally at stake in that choice is life and death. As Nicodemus expresses it in an impassioned argument against Caiaphas, who defends the Law,

You are a priest of death, not knowing it.
There is no life in those old laws of ours,
Caiaphas; they are forms and rules and fears,
So venerable and impressive and majestic
That we forget how little there is in them
For us to love. We are afraid of them.
They are the laws of death; and, Caiaphas,
They are the dead who are afraid of dying. (1164)

Shakespeare's black depression, the Wandering Jew's anger, Rembrandt's and St. Paul's risking all for the Light, Nicodemus' impassioned attack-- show how the man with special knowledge of the spirit's truth reacts to the conflict between self and society, between spiritual life and life in death. Inherent in the nature of man is a conflict between inner being and external forms and relations, between what Emerson called "the instantaneous in-streaming causing power"²⁹ and the objects that can hinder or misdirect its flowing.

Despite his obvious sympathies with the spirit, Robinson never assumes an immediate or long-run triumph of the self over society in which social forms are "saved." As with every subject, he adopts an objective attitude toward the relation of self to society, and he simply states, from a variety of points of view and with varying results, the simultaneous presence and irreconcilability of the two. Rembrandt chooses art and is free; Shakespeare cannot choose and suffers; St. Paul discovers the inner man and is doomed; Nicodemus recognizes the truth but is impotent; the Wandering Jew is the truth but he too is impotent. Richard Cory is viewed from the point of view of the town; the town is viewed from the point of view of Eben Flood. The first dies tragically; the second lives comically. Lancelot rides out of the world, but in the long poems after Lancelot the protagonist--for example, Fargo of Amaranth, who abandons art to become a plumber--in effect returns to the world. But in every instance, regardless of what happens in a poem, the first and largest truth is the dualism of self and society, a schism

²⁹ Collected Works, I, 73.

between art and social values, the spirit and social forms, the soul and doctrine, the Light and the world. And finally that dualism is a schism between the "I" and the "Me" or "We," an irremediable dichotomy in man's being between his personal and his social self.

Materialism, which conceives of nature as a mechanism of force acting upon substance, also results in the socialization of man, in his reduction to a function or part in the "machine" of society or to an object acted upon by the forces of a social order. To preserve the uniquely human from metaphysical materialism, man has to be dissociated from nature; to preserve it from "social materialism," the self has to be dissociated from society. Thus in getting rid of materialism Robinson freed the spirit from the anti-spiritual reality of society as well as from nature by giving the spirit an autonomous, alien existence beyond both. William Barrett has written, "It has become a law of modern society that man is assimilated more and more completely to his social function."³⁰ It is this historical, intellectual development that Robinson, though he intensely desired the unity of life, had to acknowledge and respond to, and because of it he could in honesty only record the split between the individual and society. Following the sociologists' lead, Paul Radin, an anthropologist interested in primitive thought, discovered that the function of myth and ritual is "on the one hand, to validate the reality of the physical, outward world and the psychical, inward world and, on the other, to dramatize the struggle for integration, of the individual, the group, and the external world."³¹

³⁰ Irrational Man, p. 4.

³¹ The World of Primitive Man (New York, 1953), p. 172.

Perhaps he is right (most mythologists apparently concur), but Robinson's poetry, though it validates the reality of the outward and inward world, dramatizes not the integration but the disintegration of the individual from the group, the external world, and himself, and that disintegration is inherent in the validation of the two worlds.

Nowhere are the effects of the alienation more apparent than in one of Robinson's favorite characters, the empowered person who can help others but not himself. Bearer of the secret knowledge of the spirit, he can see what others are blind to and work mysterious effects on their lives, but as a bearer of that knowledge he, like Rembrandt, is outlawed from intimate human relations and the human community. His knowledge bars him from worldly position and power, for having broken through to the higher truth, he can never reënter a community as a "Me," and can never do anything for himself as a social creature. This, incidentally, was Robinson's personal predicament in Gardiner, the predicament of the poet and poetry in a materialistic society.

The empowered person's predicament is only one instance of the plight of the "I" in every man. If the "I" and the "Me" are antithetical aspects of the self and of life, how can the conscious, reflective mind apprehend and value the spirit? How, that is, can the two aspects of the self communicate with and tolerate one another? How can man survive as man? For if the "I" is "unsocializable," the communication and harmony between the "I" and "Me" are impossible. And if they are impossible, so is poetry, for it would be impossible to affirm consciously the "I" in discursive and aesthetic terms. In fact, the spirit, if it can be said to have ever existed, could not be known

and would perish from neglect. In other words, the predicament of the empowered person who can help others but not himself contains all the problems resulting from the alienation of self from society, including the relation of man to society, to man, and to himself--all forms of the fundamental problem of communication.

Robinson returns over and over again to these problems, considering them from varying perspectives and under various conditions. One of his best known poems on the subject is "Eros Turannos," which treats of human isolation in its most extreme form. Here, a woman, betrayed by the man she was depending upon to protect her against the "downward years" and estranged from the town where she lives, is divested of her illusions of love and reality and is thrown back upon the terrible truth of her being. Commenting on her experience, the narrator, the collective "We," remarks:

We tell you, tapping on our brows,
The story as it should be,--
As if the story of a house
Were told, or ever could be;
We'll have no kindly veil between
Her visions and those we have seen,--
As if we guessed what hers have been,
Or what they are or would be.

Meanwhile we do no harm; for they
That with a god have striven,
Not hearing much of what we say,
Take what the god has given. . . (33)

The story of a house--Robinson's symbol for an individual's life--cannot be told; the depth where an individual strives with the gods, the realities of his being, cannot be apprehended by another, whether the "We" be the collective consciousness or storytellers. Thus the poem asserts that the existential level of experience, which is the spirit's

region, is inaccessible not only to the intellect ("our brows") but also to art. Under any and all circumstances it is true that, as Matthias says, "No man has known another / Since men were born (1133). The man within the man St. Paul spoke of is doomed to eternal isolation. Man is indeed alone.

But if "Eros Turannos" tells the whole truth, man, society, and poetry could not exist as we know them, because there would be no way for the spirit to enter the world, society, or consciousness; and if it cannot enter these, then all of life is reduced to inert matter, and materialism is triumphant. But society, man, and the self do survive, regardless of how precariously. For Robinson the spirit does enter into the world and communication between man and man and within man does take place. Captain Craig, for instance, argues at great length for this communication as the mission of the poet and poetry. The empowered person who can help others but not himself is another instance of such communication. Yet another is "Captain Craig," a poem that is typical of a form Robinson uses in "Isaac and Archibald," "Flammonde," and "The Man Who Died Twice." In "Captain Craig" a narrator who apprehends with his conscious, intellectual faculties tells the story of his encounter with an eccentric character who lives by a deeper, spiritual awareness. The eccentric communicates his awareness to the narrator so that in the end the narrator's life is deepened. Although Captain Craig dies without altering the quality of life in Tilbury Town and is in part killed by the town's indifference, he does have his influence; he produces a spiritual enhancement in the lives of five or six of its citizens. This transaction, as slight and vague as it may be, results in self-discovery

and awakens and sustains the life of the spirit.

Although the spirit can enter society, it can do so only at specific points and temporarily. Society as a whole, antithetical by nature to spirit, is not itself redeemable. The spirit enters only through specific persons and is only communicable between individuals. And then it cannot enter directly or be straightforwardly communicated, but only indirectly through an infinitesimal gap provided by compassion, the glint of eyes, or the tone of voice. The narrator of "Captain Craig" asserts that he and his friends could have been "wrecked on [the Captain's] own abstractions" (167) had they taken the Captain's words for the Word; the narrator of The Man Who Died Twice, though he professes to believe, cannot be sure that Fernando Nash's claims for the meaning of his mystical experience are true; and the Wandering Jew, Ponce de Leon, Rembrandt, and numerous other communicate spiritually through their eyes, not through language. Not negotiable through words or institutions, the transaction between man and man occurs obliquely. But it does occur, and with God and nature dead, this silent dialogue is the sole means by which the special knowledge of the "seer" can enter the consciousness of a normal person and the "I" can become known to the conscious mind.

It seems somewhat paradoxical for Robinson to emphasize the dialogue between man and man, which is a social relation, and to denigrate society so thoroughly. But there is no paradox: the dialogue simply takes place on two levels, that of the "I" and the "Me." On the level of the "Me" the dialogue consists of an exchange of derived attitudes towards roles; on the level of the "I" it consists of an

awakening of the underground, personal religious self. Nothing of value, and in fact much that is harmful, is transferred in the communication between "Me's," whereas the existence, integrity, and realization of the spirit is aided through the communication between "I's." It is for this reason that Robinson so heavily emphasizes the value and role of compassion, explicitly in "Zola," and implicitly in the poems in which a narrator, a sympathetic observer and listener, discovers the deeper reaches of his self through a "seer." And it is also for this reason that he returns repeatedly to the subject of guilt, which as he conceived it is the betrayal, not of God by man, but of man by man. A large number of his poems--"Bokardo," "Avon's Harvest," "Sisera," "Cavender's House," "King Jasper," for example--are devoted in whole or in large part to rendering the destructive effects of guilt on the self. Guilt, of course, presupposes conscience, and for Robinson conscience is a moral sense innate in the "I" for which the primary moral value is the sanctity of the individual person. In "Sisera" Jael for her own aggrandizement treacherously murdered Sisera while he slept. "Tell Deborah," she exultantly proclaims, "That a woman, / A woman filled with God, killed Sisera / For love of Israel" (1178). And she defends her act with the argument, "What is one man, or one man's way of dying, / So long as Israel has no more of him" (1177). A man is of no significance; Israel and God, superhuman entities, justify sacrificing him should one choose to serve them and seek their rewards. Everyone else in the poem, however, though they are impotent before the orthodox values of God and country, clearly react with horror and disgust to what Jael has done. Through vanity, the enemy of compassion,

she breaks the bond between man and man and thereby loses her humanity, the very life of the spirit that she ironically affirms in placing the murdered Sisera at the feet of God and Israel. By betraying another she betrayed herself.

I quoted Robinson in Chapter III as saying that his main purpose was to show that men and women are individuals, and also pointed out that for him man is a mystery, an unfathomable spiritual being. But the individual is more than a fact for Robinson; as "Sisera" implies, he is also a value, the supreme one, in fact, in Robinson's humanism. In a sonnet on Erasmus, the major historical figure in humanism, Robinson wrote,

When he protested, not too solemnly,
That for a world's achieving maintenance
The crust of overdone divinity
Lacked ailment, they called it recreance;
And when he chose through his own glass to scan
Sick Europe, and reduced, unyieldingly,
The monk within the cassock to the man
Within the monk, they called it heresy.

And when he made so perilously bold
As to be scattered forth in black and white,
Good fathers looked askance at him and rolled
Their inward eyes in anguish and affright;
There was some of them did shake at what was told
And they shook best who knew that he was right. (193)

And he is of course speaking for himself here, although his target was society and sick America rather than the church and sick Europe: he protested against the crust of overdone socialization, and he reduced man to the man within the man, the "Me" to the "I." Now Robinson was not a romantic; he did not assume that paradise would be regained by returning to a natural state. Rather, he felt, like Hawthorne, that social existence is prerequisite to humanity and requires the compromise

of individual aberrations, but society itself, he recognized, suffers from severe limitations. By its very nature it is incapable of honoring and encouraging the individual or the man within the man. Of course, society is only the behavior of individuals in relation to one another, so that what the term actually refers to is the tendency of human beings to deny the spiritual being in themselves and in others by preferring the social to the spiritual relation between men. It is only natural, therefore, that society and spirit be permanently at odds: they are radical alternatives within the self that the individual must choose from and take the consequences, as Rembrandt or any artist must choose between fame and fortune and his art. And it is obvious that should an individual pursue economic or social ends--wealth, status, power, etc.--he must perforce neglect his soul. Society or social motives are thus the antithesis of humanism, and the true bond between men, instead of being a social relation of "Me's," is a relation of individuals based on identity, compassion, and conscience. Humanism, as it is commonly understood, is simultaneously an affirmation of man's dignity and an acceptance of his limitations. With Robinson, this ambiguity takes the form of honoring the marvelous and mysterious spiritual life in man and recognizing that man is human only when he is moral, when, that is, he repudiates egotism and lives in accordance with his responsibility to man. The forces that produce society and the "Me," that are the instruments of socialization, block communication and the life of the spirit; but regardless of how hidden that life must be, regardless of how estranged it may be from society, the private, personal, pre-social

elements in experience do exist and do get expressed and man is thereby saved from social totalitarianism.

IV

Robinson's most complete and felicitous poetic statement on the subject of self and society is "Flammonde," and it is also, in my estimation, his greatest poem. More precisely and profoundly than any other, this poem dramatizes the entire act (the central myth, it might be called) of the meeting of self and society, in its multi-dimensions and with its full consequences. Yvor Winters, a strong admirer of Robinson's poetry, discarded "Flammonde" from the Robinson canon for being "repulsively sentimental,"³² and his criticism of the poem as unadulterated romanticism would seem to be supported by biographical fact. It did result from a storybook kind of inspiration: "While sitting in a movie theatre," Robinson said, "suddenly I saw Flammonde and I could hear the poem quite clearly. All the lines were there and I only had to write them down."³³ But this romantic origin of the poem could mean that as a "spontaneous" creation it represents in its deepest or truest form Robinson's vision of life. Nevertheless, I regard the poem as central to Robinson's work and offer the following discussion of it as a test case for my reading of his poetry as a whole as well as for the ideas developed in this chapter.

³² Edwin Arlington Robinson, p. 51.

³³ Nancy Evans, *op. cit.*

The poem is ostensibly about Flammonde, or more precisely, "the man Flammonde."³⁴ He is one of those gifted persons ("rarely at once will nature give / The power to be Flammonde and live") who sees but cannot do for himself. He comes for a brief sojourn in Tilbury Town, where in appearance and demeanor he is everything that its citizens are not; no one knows where he came from or where he went, only that he is characterized by a "firm address and foreign air"; has "the news of nations in his talk / And something royal in his walk," "a glint of iron in his eyes / But never doubt, nor yet surprise"; stands "Erect, with his alert repose / About him and his clothes." He appears, in short, "As one by kings accredited" (this term is Robinson's favorite way of identifying the man of superior knowledge and power). While in Tilbury Town Flammonde befriends a disgraced woman, recognizes the intellectual ability of a boy and provides for his education, and joins old enemies in friendship, among other good works. Through his superior vision and power he sees more deeply into the heart of man's being and is able to work wonders among a few individual citizens of the town by introducing an unaccustomed compassion and humanity into their lives. That is the man in Flammonde. But he is indeed an unusual man, for if he is a man at all, he is the essential spiritual being and power of man. As his name implies, "the flame of the earth," he, like the Wandering Jew, is a mythological figure, and this flame along with the glint of iron in his eyes and everything else about him establish him as an envoy of the Light who comes out of nowhere ("God knows where")

³⁴ Collected Poems, pp. 3-6. All the following quotations from "Flammonde" are to be found on these pages.

into a community of futile people to work his wonders, then disappears without a trace. It is impossible for the townsmen to tell whether he is playing a role (assuming a "Me" as the "Prince of Castaways") or is genuine; but despite their uncertainty, he brings the Light, the mystic power, into society for a brief moment, redeeming a portion of it by introducing the "I," the capacity for creative action for good, into an impotent community.

Flammonde is not, however, the subject of the poem: more properly, the subject, to take advantage of the pun, is the narrator's consciousness; Flammonde is the object. That is to say, the poem is about the narrator's attempt to understand what Flammonde was; it is a dramatization of the meeting of mind and soul, of the "Me" and the "I." The broad structural outlines of the poem are sufficient testimony of this fact. The first three stanzas describe Flammonde, and thus fix an image of him before the narrator's and the reader's eyes; the next five recount his exploits and reveal his powers; the concluding four are devoted to abstract meditation on what Flammonde was. The poem, in short, is a kind of meditation in which the eyes fix themselves on an image and the mind, working upon the image, tries to comprehend its significance. And this is an action of consciousness in which awareness proceeds from its simplest form, sensory perception, to its higher forms.

But to understand what is involved in the higher forms of awareness, it is necessary to look much closer at the action. In the first place the narrator is trying to answer his question about Flammonde some time after his appearance in Tilbury Town, so that the narrator is not, so to speak, conducting an empirical investigation but is working

on material provided by his memory, the storehouse of the impressions Flammonde made upon him. Sensory perception was the means of the narrator's acquaintance with Flammonde, the source of the "contact" of his consciousness with the other, but during perception no understanding took place, only the awareness of physical features, bearing, and behavior. Although the conscious transaction between subject and object during perception was limited to apprehension of the phenomenal, the narrator was touched in the depths of his being, and in time this unconscious depth response erupts into the conscious through unabatted recollection. As the narrator says,

We cannot know how much we learn
From those who never will return,
Until a flash of unforeseen
Remembrance falls on what has been.

Apparently the mysterious and strangely powerful man has set astir something in the darker recesses of the narrator's being; perhaps a power present but not detected in the sensory images awakens his "I" through resonance. In time those aspects of his self emerge from darkness; then they are available for the reflective mind to ponder. It is at this moment and for this purpose that the narrator writes the poem, seeking an answer to the haunting question of who Flammonde was.

His question is obviously misplaced: it is not Flammonde but that part of his own being brought disturbingly alive by him that he wants to understand. But typically and of necessity for Robinson, the "I" has to be viewed objectively, and so the narrator's attention is directed away from introspection toward an objectified, mythological embodiment of his inner being. He must work from the outside to the

inside, to recall Mead's language. And to go in that direction is not to go very far: the inescapable consequence is the inability of the narrator to answer his question. Flammonde remains unknown, a mystery. But that isn't the complete story: intellectual comprehension fails, true, but a transaction has taken place, as the narrator's writing of the poem testifies, and as the narrator points out when he says in conclusion that "from time to time / In Tilbury Town, we look beyond / Horizons for the man Flammonde." Tilbury Town has not been redeemed once and for all, but it has been made aware that something exists beyond its horizons and beyond the horizon. Although Tilbury Town and Flammonde are not permanently compatible, communication has taken place between them and the "We" has become aware--dimly, to be sure--of the deeper, hidden life of the self and of man's nature and destiny. Its life will never be the same again; as when Captain Craig passed through it, some of its members have had their awareness and life enhanced.

Such is the form, the dynamics, and the consequences of the meeting of self and society in "Flammonde." It should be noted in addition, however, that the meeting takes place on three levels: between an individual and the community (Flammonde and Tilbury Town); between man and man (Flammonde and the narrator); and between the "I" and the "Me" of the narrator. These multi-dimensions give the subject its depth and breadth. It is also of significance that Flammonde is linked with tradition, which is collective memory, and that tradition represents the endurance of the self's essential being through history, while society, with no roots outside of time or permanence within it, is caught in the flux of endless, pointless change. Because the self

transcends society and the corrosive effects of time, it is also beyond conventional morality, and therefore Flammonde cannot be ethically judged. His was a hero's or a saint's fate, his vocation being with the divine, not with man, except when Christ-like he passed through a community as bearer of the Word and left behind him a dim wake of Light. When that light awakens some men to the existence of their spirit, they are driven to ponder what lies beyond the horizon, death, as they continue their climb up the darkening hill of life. But Flammonde must continue on his way, enduring his special fate of wandering the earth like a bonze, alone and estranged. And though he possessed mythic power and exercised it, he could not escape his fate. What he accomplished was done by juxtaposition and resonance, not by overt words or force of will. He can never directly offer his gift, and he can never turn it to his own advantage. These further aspects of Robinson's primary "myth" of the soul's journey to self-awareness, under the conditions life provides and to the degree possible, reveal why "Flammonde" is his greatest poem: with tremendous concentration and depth of comprehension, it embodies the vision of life which he was inclined to treat piecemeal or to spread out thinly in a loose and prosy manner in so much of his other poetry.

Although communication does take place, the immediate and enduring fact is the dichotomy of self and society. Almost all of the poems I have discussed in this chapter, and many that I have not, whatever their perspective or whether they record tragedy or triumph, dramatize the antagonistic meeting of the "I" and the "Me" or "We." Because a transaction between them can, and in some poems does, occur,

society and the conscious mind are saved from becoming hollow, inert forms. But whether or not the vitalizing communication occurs in a poem, the "I" is always seen objectively from the point of view of the "Me." "Flammonde" adequately illustrates this fact; an even more vivid instance, however, is "Rembrandt to Rembrandt," where the "Me" even speaks for the "I" during an occasion of the latter's triumph. Not only can the "I" not enter directly into society and the conscious mind, it also cannot enter directly into a poem, though the primary function of the poem is to be its vehicle. Unable to express itself directly in any kind of static forms or external relations, the "I" must employ the "Me" as a kind of go-between--the Word must be obliquely uttered through words. Consequently, poetry, itself split in two by the dichotomy, views its own being objectively, from the outside.

The disintegration of self and society is recorded, therefore, in the very form and style of Robinson's poetry. A poem has its "Me" and its "I," its letter and its spirit, its social form and role and its mystical reality. It is an artifice of words, whereas poetry, the "spirit" of the poem, equivalent to the "I," is the creative power which begot and darkly inhabits the poem. It is possible to read "Flammonde" as a poem on poetry in which the mind attempts to comprehend the poetic power and fails because of the dichotomy between thought and being. Read this way, the poem dramatizes the dichotomy between itself and the spiritual reality for which it speaks, between its "Me" and its "I." Now this internal dualism is a terrible plight for poetry and the poet

to be in, but they are nevertheless in it; and because they are, they cannot directly share their truth. They can only "give" it--that is, be available to others--and "a few thereby / May taste of it, and so not wholly starve."

CHAPTER V

THE MAKING OF TOWERS

The wind that blows
Is all that anybody knows.

Henry David Thoreau

The poem of the mind in the act of finding
What will suffice. It has not always had
To find: the scene was set; it repeated what
Was in the script.

Then the theatre was changed
To something else. Its past was a souvenir.

Wallace Stevens

I

To discuss Robinson's notion of the relation of self to society, which is all I have done in Chapter IV, is only to establish the autonomy of the self; it is not to define his concept of the self for what it is in and of itself. The definition has been partly accomplished, of course, in distinguishing the self from society, but it remains to be completed, and since the self and poetry are synonymous, Robinson's definition of poetry also remains to be completed. It is to these tasks that I now turn.

The primary source for the definitions is Robinson's late long poems, from Roman Bartholow (1923) to King Jasper (1935), which bring to a culmination the dominant tendency of his art. Those who have emphasized Robinson's thought have overlooked or slighted his turning to the long poem, preferring in the most extreme instances to consider it an unfortunate whim of a poet whose ideas had remained the same

but who could not resist the temptation of fame and fortune.¹ But Robinson did not consider it so. While writing his long poems, he remarked about short ones, "They don't come anymore";² and on a later occasion, speaking of the long poems he had already written, he said, "Anyway, I had to do them."³ He was a determinist regarding the larger formal elements of a poem; he felt that the subject--in Henry James' sense⁴--took possession of the poet's imagination, and since its form was an inherent element of its being, the poet had no choice in its mode of expression. "If a man has something worth saying," Robinson remarked, in criticism of experimental poetry, "the character of its expression will come out of its content; but some of these new fellows have so little to say that the manner of expression is an assumed one. It doesn't grow out of its material."⁵ With this equating of form and content, which was as fully accepted by Robinson as it was by James, form is not a vehicle for ideas: it is the literary idea. Thus a change in form is a change in thought, and since the late long poems are clearly different in form from the rest of his poetry, they assert their own unique and particular truth. Moreover, since they are Robinson's final "utterances," in them is to be found his final vision of life--indeed, in form as well as in theme they are that vision.

¹ This is the opinion of Yvor Winters, op. cit.

² E. A. R. and His Manuscripts, p. 22.

³ SL, p. 168.

⁴ "The Art of Fiction," The House of Fiction, ed. Leon Edel (London, 1957), pp. 23-45.

⁵ Hagedorn, p. 338.

One of the main differences between the late long poems and the others is that the dichotomy of self and society merely gets stated in the earlier poems, but in the late long poems it is resolved. This resolution is partially and momentarily achieved in a few shorter poems and the one early long poem, "Captain Craig," where the Captain influences the lives of a few citizens of Tilbury Town. But the Captain's entry into those lives is a meagre reconciliation of the "I" and Tilbury Town; more important, he dies, and his death, like Flammonde's departure from the town, speaks of the irrevocable estrangement of the "I" from society. In "Captain Craig" Robinson is trapped between the terms of the dichotomy and can only assert the simultaneous, tragic presence of the antagonists; in the late long poems, however, he assumes a different, "metaphysical," perspective which allows him to concentrate upon the larger, "transcendental" aspects of his subject and to observe the later stages of its drama. Roman Bartholow and Matthias can be seen achieving freedom through enlightenment; Fernando Nash can be seen being reborn through a mystical experience; Cavender, racked by guilt, and Talifer, misled by the seductive beauty of a woman, can both be seen winning peace; and Fargo, Malory, and King Jasper can be seen being saved from themselves through the sacrifice of their personal aspirations to superpersonal considerations. Now this larger perspective, it must be emphasized, does not produce a literal reconciliation of the "I" and society, whose estrangement is and must remain a necessary condition of life; rather, it makes possible a reconciliation in which the self becomes reconciled to its own being, or its necessity, as Robinson calls it, on a level beyond its relation to society. In other words, the

larger perspective results in a translation of the "objective" conflict of self and society into the subjective one of the "I" and the "Me"; and once the conflict is located in the consciousness of the individual, one aspect of the self can prevail over the other. All protagonists of the late long poems experience the conflict and pass through a spiritual death to rebirth or reawakening; they lose the "Me" to find the "I," and in doing so pass through disintegration to a higher integration. Each of them learns by experience that

Before you build a tower that will remain
Where it is built and will not crumble down
To another poor ruin of self, you must be born. (1138)

Regardless of who their protagonist may be, the late long poems dramatize, not a partial or abortive, but a completed action in which a man moves beyond the antagonism between the "I" and the "Me" to a higher ground of freedom and peace through self-knowledge and self-realization. In other words, concentration upon the self allows Robinson to by-pass the social aspects of the self and to consider the "I" in relation to its reality, so to speak.

This concentration on the "I's" autonomous existence is the natural consequence of Robinson's curiosity about the nature and destiny of man. But he had to work his way through powerful counter tendencies before that subject could be directly dealt with. Early in his career, while still under the influence of prosaic realism, he called "Luke Havergal," a poem in which a man stands at the Western gate listening to a voice from beyond the grave, an "uncomfortable abstraction,"⁶ and

⁶ SL, p. 30.

in so doing revealed a theoretical malaise with subjects not realistic, that is, not empirically and socially concrete. The more he wrote, however, the more he was given to uncomfortable abstractions. As a poem about an individual struggling with those aspects of life that transcend social life, "Luke Havergal" belongs to a conspicuous minority; but by the time Robinson wrote "The Man Against the Sky," perhaps his most explicit poem on this subject, he was quite comfortable with "abstractions." Perhaps a better way of putting it would be to say that he found a way to make these abstractions concrete, for although other poems of this period were less severe in structure than "The Man Against the Sky," the majority of them were devoted to one or another aspect of the dynamics of self-knowledge, either through solitary speculation or through the conflict of the "I" and society. The late long poems bring to fulfillment the tendency uncomfortably present in "Luke Havergal" and more confidently treated in "The Man Against the Sky" and companion poems. They are exclusively and quite confidently devoted to examining man's nature and destiny, independent of a social setting. Again, it might be best to say that in them Robinson found a way to treat the life of the self concretely or realistically and therefore could directly concentrate upon the socially transcendent, or metaphysical, truths of man's being. In them, in other words, he found a way to free and satisfy his curiosity about the nature of man.

The evolution of Robinson's curiosity amounts to a progress from poems of statement like "Credo" to dramas of the intellect like "The Man Against the Sky" to dramas of the self, in the late long poems. I have already outlined the development of Robinson's poetry through the

three stages of his career and have elaborated on various phases of it, such as the change in his attitude toward poetry and his progress from prosaic to poetic realism, or from a desire for a comprehensive intellectual view of life to engagement, so here I shall merely amplify it with some further detail. After Captain Craig (1902) Robinson published only one book of poems before 1916, the year of The Man Against the Sky. This was The Town Down the River (1910), a volume rather thin in both quantity and quality; and in it he was still holding out for a comprehensive intellectual view of life. But he was not completely idle until 1916; as early as 1912 he was working on the poems for The Man Against the Sky and on his plays, evolving in the former the dramas of the intellect in which the mind discovers its limitations, or the absurd, and redefining in the latter the gifted man's relation to other men. These two themes, or these two aspects of a single theme, emerge simultaneously and Robinson's poetry thereafter is governed by them. All of his shorter poems after The Town Down the River and his Arthurian poems, regardless of when they were written, treat the dualism of the "I" and society as a given, inescapable fact, the shorter ones on a small scale as a conflict of self and society, the long ones on a large scale as a conflict between the Light and the world. The theme of engagement, for example, received its first poetic treatment in Merlin (1917), but though a long poem, Merlin is not the same kind of poem as Roman Bartholow. Merlin is not reborn; he does not achieve peace or freedom; instead, he acquires a bitter knowledge of the limitations of his own vision and power. Merlin and the other Arthurian poems, like the shorter ones, are about a man who stands, or thinks he stands, outside the current of

life, whereas the late long poems deal with men who are implicated in life. This amounts to a reversal of perspective in that the "I" is approached from the point of view of the "Me"--or the conscious mind and reflective intellect--in the earlier poems, and the "Me" is approached from the point of view of the "I" in the late long poems. Though both points of view are present from roughly 1910 on, during the second stage of Robinson's career the first predominates; and in the final stage, the second predominates--to such an extent, in fact, that all but three of his last eleven volumes are long poems. Roman Bartholow, in which the protagonist finds out what it means to be free, initiates the dramas of the self, and from then on Robinson almost exclusively concentrates on the "I" abstracted from a social setting, as free to discover and work out its autonomous destiny.

The changes in the larger formal elements, though sufficient proof, are not the only evidence that the late long poems bring to a culmination the dominant tendency of Robinson's poetry. In addition to these there are decisive changes of style and tone. As Robinson's subject becomes more general, his language correspondingly becomes less colloquial and more abstract and "literary." Eventually this tendency towards the general leads to allegory, a literary form that readily serves as a vehicle for abstract ideas. In changing his perspective, however, Robinson does not abandon his objectivity; his view is not from the self but of the self, for he continues to seek an objective understanding of his subject rather than let his poetry become its direct voice. But his reversal of perspective from the "Me" to the "I" does lead to the desire to render the truth of the interior life, and

for this purpose he turns to hallucinations, dreams, and symbolism, all subjective phenomena. The reversal also involves a change of mood in which comedy, rather frequent in his early poetry and natural to his objectivity of that period, gives way to an almost unrelieved sombreness in the late poems; the exuberance of "Captain Craig," for example, is replaced by an Arnoldian high seriousness when the tragic sense of life inherent in engagement becomes dominant. Life is not so ludicrous when seen from the inside, and certainly the truth of the "I" is not revealed to a scoffing mind. Since sober compassion and responsibility are the prerequisites of receiving that truth, they set the dominant mood of the late long poems.

Furthermore, these changes of style and tone are accompanied by profound changes in theme. One of the least obvious thematic transformations is Robinson's change in attitude towards the child, who, it will be remembered, figured largely in "Captain Craig." There, the narrator notes at the conclusion of his tale that we may not "starve quite out the child in us, / The child that is the Man, the Mystery, / The Phoenix of the World" (168). In this early long poem and elsewhere in his early work--for example, in the title poem of his second volume, The Children of the Night--Robinson was inclined to identify man and the spirit with the child. He did so partly because man appeared small and impotent in a vast, dark universe in which he was beyond the reach of his Father's voice. But in "Captain Craig" and generally Robinson was attracted to the child for the same reason the Romantics and Transcendentalists were--because the child, trailing clouds of glory, was still close to his spiritual origins in his pristine awareness. His

soul unalloyed, uncontaminated by the gross matters of the world, the child represents the saving remnant of spirit in man. To the end of his career Robinson continued to regard this side of the child's awareness with respect, and wrote in his last poem, King Jasper, "Who knows a child, knows God" (1417). However, there is another side to the child's awareness--his innocence and naivete, his ignorance of the terrible complexity and difficulty of life. Robinson's enthusiasm for the child in "Captain Craig" included this side of the child's awareness, too; for he felt then that if the spirit could keep from becoming involved in life, it could remain pure and whole. But his change of perspective inextricably bound the spirit to the world, and once implicated in life it could not escape adult intellectual and moral awareness. In "Hillcrest," a poem written about fifteen years after "Captain Craig," Robinson gave expression to his changing attitude toward the child:

Who sees unchastened here the soul
Triumphant has no other sight
Than has a child who sees the whole
World radiant with its own delight. (17)

And in "The Three Taverns," published in 1920, he elaborated on the way in which the soul is chastened:

The fire that smites
A few on highways, changing all at once
Is not for all. The power that holds the world
Away from God that holds himself away
.
Was not, or ever shall be, a small hazard
Enlivening the ways of easy leisure
Or the cold road of knowledge. (466)

To pass from the desire for a comprehensive intellectual view of life to a recognition of engagement is to fall from innocence; and in a fallen state spiritual awareness is not a gift but is earned through

suffering and sacrifice. For this reason the child, who appears rather frequently in the early poems, disappears from the late poetry except for a couple of passing allusions.

This change in attitude toward the child, however, is superficial compared to the transformation of Robinson's attitude toward thought and will. In his early poetry Robinson designates the ultimate spiritual reality as "Thought"--for example, in these lines from "Two Quatrains":

As eons of incalculable strife
Are in the vision of one moment caught,
So are the common, concrete things of life
Divinely shadowed on the walls of Thought. (107)

At this time Robinson was leaning toward Idealism, which assumes that man and reality are rational, and Transcendentalism, which, though it emphasizes intuition, organicism, and dynamism, nevertheless locates man's spiritual being in his conscious faculties. For example, in a poem entitled "Thought" Emerson spoke of "Thought's holy light" and asserted that "Thought will glow when the sun grows cold / And mix with Deity."⁷ And in her more startling imagery, Emily Dickinson stated the same transcendentalist tenet in the lines,

The Brain is just the weight of God -
For - Heft them - Pound for Pound -
And they will differ - if they do -
As Syllable from Sound - ⁸

Later "Thought" disappears from Robinson's vocabulary and is replaced by "Power" and "Will," the first of which occurs in the opening passage of Roman Bartholow, where Roman is portrayed as awakening to a new life:

⁷ The Complete Works, IX, 380.

⁸ The Complete Poems, pp. 312-313.

he might

This morning have addressed a votive shout,
 Affirming his emergence, to the Power
 That filled him as light fills a buried room
 When earth is lifted and the sun comes in. (733)

The second occurs in "Maya":

The soul of man went up to a far height;
 And where those others would have had no sight
 Or sense of else than terror for the blind,
 Soul met the Will . . . (872)

At this later time Robinson turns to a voluntarism which makes the Mind and Soul different orders of reality and locates the source of life and action in the unconscious or irrational. Conceived of as Thought, reality is a fixed order of eternal forms that can be rationally comprehended; conceived of as Power or Will, it is a ceaseless force of destruction and construction that never attaches itself permanently to any given order. Moreover, the concrete things of life are not shadowed on the walls of Power or Will; it has no walls, in the first place, and in the second, the forms of concrete things are not replicas of Platonic ideas but are genuine novelties created, so to speak, by the hands of the divine potter. Thus the shift from Thought to Power and Will is a radical shift in the conception of reality, a shift whereby stability, certainty, and permanence are replaced by change, possibility, and creativity. No longer a fixed, coherent structure of form and meaning, reality becomes ceaselessly active; and no longer commensurate with thought or the brain, it becomes unfathomable and unpredictable.

All the aspects of the dualism Robinson inherited from materialism have their source in this basic dichotomy of thought and will, and in the last analysis his quest for truth is aimed at escaping its dis-

ruptive effects on man's inner life. He once remarked that

Man, even if divine, is mechanism
While he is here, and so is not himself
If much of him be broken. (1012)

Actually, man is mechanism only if broken, only if he is so divided against himself that he cannot be himself. At least this is the truth asserted by the late long poems, which point out the way to freedom and wholeness, to the transcendence of materialism and mechanism. Thought--identified with abstractions, analysis, objectivity, stasis; with external features or what appears to be; with, in short, conceptual apprehension--is the antithesis of spirit and life. It is of this world, as is nature, including man's body--or more exactly, it is the agency by which this world is known--so the mechanical and material is its domain. But man, despite the physical limitations placed upon him in this world, is a vital and spiritual creature, who can only be himself if he remains whole, or in harmony with the source of his being. The change in the conception of reality from Thought to Will and Power is the means of freeing the "I" to be itself; it is a radical change in which the will, or the vital and spiritual, assumes its rightful preëminence over thought, or matter and mechanical force.

II

Before proceeding with an analysis of the late long poems, I want to say something about their aesthetic merit, for Robinson's reputation, such as it is, rests entirely upon the shorter poems of his early and middle period. If the long poems are appreciated at all, it is usually the Arthurian ones that are praised, while the others continue to be ignored. Taste has been a determinant here, for it is

in the shorter poems of the early and especially of the middle period and the Arthurian poems that Robinson comes closest to the kind of poetry preferred by the New Criticism. Based on the dualism of self and society or of the Light and the world, they possess ambiguity, tension, and irony, though somewhat more in theme than overtly in style; by suggestion they hint of a spiritual life beyond the wasteland; and they affirm the spiritual nature and superior value of art. However, the low regard of the late long poems is not merely a matter of taste. These poems, as a group and individually, do not have sustained dramatic and poetic power, a quality that cannot be argued into existence but must be directly experienced. Of course, if a poem is read in the wrong manner, its aesthetic power may be ineffective. Although the New Criticism does erroneously approach Robinson's late long poems, the deficiency remains. The late long poems have their brilliant and good passages, but individually and on the whole they suffer from a deficiency Robinson pointed to in "Captain Craig," that is, "from prosiness."⁹

I can perhaps best explain the source and character of this prosiness by briefly comparing Robinson to Ibsen, whom he regarded so highly as to remark, "Ibsen has proved himself beyond all questioning to be one of the greatest men of the time (or of any other time)."¹⁰ The two men had a great deal in common as artists. First, like Robinson, Ibsen began as a realist, concerned with the conflict of self and

⁹ Hagedorn, p. 175.

¹⁰ US, p. 218.

society, or, in his terms, with the conflict of the joy of life with bourgeois repressive morality. And from his early plays in which he portrayed the tragic defeat of the joy of life, he progressed to dramas of the self and eventually to symbolic drama. One of his dramas of the self, The Master Builder, is especially relevant here. In it an artist expresses his spiritual life through buildings, especially towers, first dedicated to God, then to man, and finally to the self. Although Robinson had always tended to use a house as a symbol of an individual's life, he probably got his image of the tower, which he employs on several occasions in the late long poems, from The Master Builder. Secondly, Robinson had a strong inclination toward drama, and even suggested that on his grave stone he put the words, "D.D."--Defeated Dramatist."¹¹ Indeed, the late long poems try in their way to become drama but never manage to, and their failure in this respect is the best clue to the source of their prosiness. In his two unproduced plays, which suffer from the same deficiencies as the late long poems, Robinson revealed that he could not identify the inner spiritual life with outward physical action; the real drama in his view of things had to go on surreptitiously off stage. Consequently, whereas Ibsen directly and vividly represented the life of the spirit in overt conflict, Robinson did not; the springs of action and of the life of the spirit are so hidden for him that they can only be vaguely hinted at. One of the more telling symptoms of this condition--and it is typical of realistic fiction and drama--is that a Robinson character cannot act; he can only

¹¹ E. A. R. and His Manuscripts, p. 11.

be acted upon. He does not--indeed, cannot--seek out aggressively and possess the real or the truth; they must come to him. The late long poems are thus "uncomfortable abstractions" in a sense, for they do not, they cannot, directly present through character and action the reality that is their subject. Robinson lacked that capacity, required by the third voice of poetry, of making characters real through action, through a communication between autonomous people.¹² Put otherwise, his eye was so fixed, like that of the Transcendentalists, on the abstract, universal human reality that he was indifferent to the concrete, individualizing elements and so could not envisage the meeting of the two in a character and thereby give a character depth, or a third dimension. Thus the late long poems do not have the dramatic and poetic power of The Master Builder, with which thematically they have a great deal in common because Robinson could not individualize characters, and because no concrete communication is possible between his characters. The buried reality of spirit so weakly and dimly enters the world and so obliquely affects things, that it cannot inhabit a body and use it for acting. The gap between the spirit and the body has therefore to be filled with words.

From another point of view, the late long poems lack the vividness, compactness, and concentration of "Flammonde." Robinson spread out over nine long poems the material that he largely covers in one

¹² Robinson wrote, in Matthias at the Door, ". . . drama is a show that's always played / By someone else" (1115). This statement has numerous implications, one of which is that the artist who works in such an objective form cannot identify his characters with himself, and for Robinson, though not necessarily for others, that means an inability to "tell their story" (cf. "Eros Turannos").

short poem and that Ibsen more than covers in one play. What he does prove is that the metal he is working cannot be hammered out to large dimensions without becoming exceedingly thin. The self in and of itself proves to be too small a subject for nine long poems; in fact, it may be too small a subject for one long poem. Thoreau managed to sustain his epic treatment of it over the length of Walden, but to do so he made the self identical with all nature, or existence, and its triumph of realization was a triumph of and for the universe. But Robinson did not regard the self as a microcosm, and so he could not introduce the concentric and infinitely various reverberations of existence into a poem. In one sense Robinson does concentrate: he reduces the self's existence to its autonomy, whereas Thoreau permits it to diffuse into the universe. His way is an extreme form of the egocentric predicament in which each separate self must save itself and can redeem nothing beyond it. And in the late long poems nothing more is redeemed; nature, society, and collective mankind continue to be adamantly anti-spiritual. The self therefore bears the complete burden of its existence, and a poem bears the complete but sole burden of the self, or universal "I," and this is apparently too lean a subject for a long poem. If it is to have dramatic and poetic power, it needs the rich texture and variety that only an intimate interrelation of the abstract and concrete can give.

The late long poems, I must hasten to add, are not as insignificant as their neglect or my criticism of their aesthetic merit might lead one to believe. If an invitation to read them is to be extended, however, it should not be on the grounds of sustained aesthetic

pleasure; rather, it should be on the grounds of the truth they reveal. Robinson fully recognized that a poem must give pleasure to merit consideration, but at the same time his primary concern as poet was with the truth. And in this latter respect the late long poems do succeed: in them Robinson worked through to a final comprehension and aesthetic rendering of the knowledge of the "I" which he set out to achieve. Their justification for existing and for being read is that they do carry a large, coherent, and fully realized truth consistent within the limitations of the human condition they issue from. But for that truth to be accessible the poems must be approached correctly, and to do that it is necessary to understand, first, that their subject is the interior life, and, secondly, that they treat that subject objectively. And it must be added that, though each emphasizes a different aspect of it, they all treat the same subject; they are all devoted to rendering the truth of the "I." Consequently, all of them together tell the complete story; instead of a progress of thought from one to the next, each complements the other so that together they constitute a full exploration of the world they envisage. What Robinson said of Merlin, that it "was written in anticipation of L. and G. (Lancelot), to complement its various incompletenesses, and the two should be read together,"¹³ is also true for the late long poems from Roman Bartholow to King Jasper. Though not written in anticipation of one another, they must be read together, as a group, to get the whole truth of Robinson's final vision of life.

¹³ SL, p. 112.

III

In form as well as in theme the late long poems are the definition of the "I"; that, I think, is now clear. But if it is assumed that Mead's characterization of the "I" as indeterminable is true--and certainly Robinson accepts it as so--then a definition would seem impossible. In one sense it is: the "I" is not a thing and therefore it cannot be defined by its essential or formal properties. But in another sense it can be defined: regarded as a power rather than a thing, it can be defined by its functions, or by what it does. Electricity, for example, is defined as "an agency producing various physical phenomena, as attraction and repulsion, luminous and heating effects, shock to the body, chemical decomposition, etc."¹⁴ Like electricity, the self is definable as an agency producing various phenomena; what it is, is what it does--or what happens to it, since in the present case the subject is poetry, where the self's story is told, rather than the reality itself. Thus Robinson's definition of the self resides in the plot which I have already briefly described, the progress of the self through death to rebirth. And since the climactic experience in what happens to it is a moment of self-discovery and self-realization, the major portion of the definition is found in the rebirth, typically represented by a passage near the close of Amaranth:

The world around him flamed amazingly
With light that comforted and startled him
With joy, and with ineffable release.

¹⁴ Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield, Mass., 1953).

There was a picture of unrolling moments
 In a full morning light, and out of it
 Familiar walls and windows were emerging
 From an inscrutable white mist that melted
 Transparently to air

 Fargo, partly awake, with eyes half open,
 Saw sunlight and deliverance, and all through him
 Felt a slow gratitude that he was hearing
 Outside, somewhere, at last, the sound of living-- (1392)

What happens to the self comes to a culmination in this moment of deliverance and joy, but that moment is linked to, and explained by, a chain of phenomena leading up to it.

The initial state in the self's journey to truth is, of course, the opposite of this climactic one; it is imprisonment in blindness and agony. Put another way, it is--if I may use a phrase of A. N. Whitehead's--an error of "misplaced concreteness" in which the "Me" is mistaken for the real thing, the "I." Amaranth describes this condition to Fargo, in commenting on some damned souls:

These are men so disordered and wrong sighted,
 So blind with self, that freedom, when they have it,
 Is only a new road, and not a long one,
 To new imprisonment. (1337)

Here, and on every occasion that he uses the term, Robinson means by "self" the "Me"--egotism, vanity, self-interest, dominance, all those attitudes by which men relate themselves invidiously to other men or arrogate to themselves an exalted status in society or the universe. His terms for the "I," on the other hand, are Power, Will, and Light; for viewing it as a philosophical or religious rather than a psychological or sociological matter, Robinson regards the "I" as transcending the individual consciousness. Matthias, of Matthias at the Door, is a prime example of a man blind with self, in Robinson's sense of the term:

He was apart,
 Because, being who he was, and as he was,
 His natural station would inevitably
 Be somewhat on an imminence, like his house. (1077)

.
 He was not one
 To move unenvied or to fade unseen,
 Or to be elbowed and anonymous
 In a known multitude. There was that in him
 That was not theirs; and that was all of him
 There was for them to know. (1081)

This is social pride, the assumption of superiority over other men
 because one has been successful in acquiring wealth and position.
 Matthias' vanity leads to even greater presumption, however:

for Matthias pride was more than life.
 So, on a chilly Sunday afternoon
 Alone there with a winter-laden wind
 Whirling dead leaves over a darkening floor,
 Matthias heard their message and was proud
 That he could meet with patience and high scorn
 A life without a scheme and to no purpose--
 An accident of nameless energies,
 Of which he was a part, and no small part.
 His blindness to his insignificance
 Was like another faith, and would not die. (1127)

This is intellectual pride, the demand that the universe honor the
 claims of the individual for a rationally meaningful life and justify
 his arrogantly assumed position as the central figure in the scheme of
 things. This insistence that life be made subservient to man's intellect
 is Faustian; even more obviously Faustian is the desire for dominance,
 which was King Jasper's blind obsession. When he realized he had been
 "wongsighted," he said of himself,

Hebron,
 It was for power that I neglected you--
 So selfishly. It was for power, not gold.

 You could not have known
 My demon of ambition; for in you,
 Hebron, he never dwelt. (1425)

King Jasper builds what he assumes to be an indestructible tower from which he, like Faust, can be the master of all that he surveys, for he, like Matthias, and also Cavender, who was "afraid of time and life" (1005), seeks control over the vicissitudes of fortune and the flux of time.

Others--Fernando Nash, Fargo, Malory--were not so grandly motivated, but because of some form of pride--an artist's exaggerated notion of his talent, jealousy, revenge--each is blinded by the quest for exaltation of the "Me." Men who live on such heights live precariously, and sooner or later they must fall. For though it is possible to live by error for a time, eventually, at least in a man of any fiber, the "I" demands its wages, and cannot be refused. All of Robinson's major characters in the late long poems have one virtue in common with Matthias,

A man who must have light
Or darkness that was rest or certainty,
With no fool-fire of an unfuelled faith
Invading it and losing its own spark. (1144)

They are truth seekers, and in their uncompromising demand for truth lies their dignity; there also lies the seed of their defeat--and later their salvation. But the truth cannot be sought out, run down, and captured; like grace, it must come silently out of the darkness as a gift from an inexplicable source. Once caught in the vicious circle of pride, a man cannot will that he be reborn to truth, since in his error he is not even conscious of the possibility. So spiritual awakening must come to him against his better judgment through a degeneration and disintegration wrought by forces external to his self-consciousness. The "Me" must be sufficiently weakened so that a counter force can

emerge and abet its total collapse. This is precisely what happens to King Jasper, who feels the "touch of hidden fingers everywhere" (1397) on the foundations of his kingdom and life. Identifying the source of the destructive power, Robinson wrote,

The fears he felt
Were not the tinglings of inveiglement;
They were unsought, inept awakenings
Of truth he had long fancied was asleep,
Knowing truth never sleeps. (1413)

The external force that works against his "Me," though sometimes abetted by circumstances or an empowered person, is strictly speaking part of King Jasper's own being that he has denied. Repression was clamped upon the "I" so that the exaltation of self could proceed unhampered; but truth will out, as it is commonly said, and in time the truth seeker's spiritual being revolts against the dominion of the "Me" and adamantly demands that justice be done.

Built into a man is a self-corrective principle which never sleeps; a truth that cannot be betrayed with impunity, even though the punishment may not be immediately evident. The nature of this principle and punishment is obliquely revealed by Hebron, the man King Jasper destroyed in order to acquire his kingdom and power, when he ways to the latter:

Did you know what you were doing
While you enlarged your dream, and swelled and changed,
Till you were more a monster than a man?
When I was gone, men said you were a king;
But you were more. You were almost a kingdom;
And you forgot that kingdoms are not men.
They are composite and obscure creations
Of men, and in a manner are comparable
To moving and unmanageable machines
And somehow are infernally animated
With a self-interest so omnivorous

That ultimately they must eat themselves.
 You cannot eat yourself very long and live,
 Jasper; and that's about what you were doing. (1425-1426)

Although Hebron makes a severe judgment on the nature of society here, the main thrust of his criticism is aimed at King Jasper, who has become a monster through identifying himself with a kingdom. He and his kingdom being one and the same, what is true of it is also true of him; and so he too is an "unmanageable machine" and "inferentially animated," a mechanical and diabolical monster, rather than a man. To live blindly, to mistake the "Me" for the "I," is to betray the vital spiritual center, the source of one's humanity, and when this center is betrayed all that remains is a mechanism capable of negation--of self-destruction and the destruction of others. Malory, bent on revenge, the destruction of another person for solace to his pride, degenerates to this extreme state, and there is

Nothing left
 Of[him]] but some primitive wheels and springs,
 Would still to go till he was tired of them,
 And of their ticking. (1018)

To gain a self (in Robinson's sense) it is necessary to lose one's soul, because what exalts the "Me" in the struggle for superiority automatically denigrates the "I." Thus the inevitable wages of pride are self-alienation, a kind of death in which a man, though physically alive, is imprisoned in the necessity of killing all that he touches, including himself. Under such circumstances a man is a "nay-sayer" whose thought and action negate himself, truth, and reality.

All of the protagonists of the late long poems are victims of self-alienation, doomed on a death-bound course to a ruin of self. They become the "player of that necessity" (941) when pride becomes

more important to them than life. So they all inevitably come, like Matthias, to the door of death, which takes many forms but in every case is the ultimate negation and bitterest agony. Here is Fernando Nash's visit to that door in an hallucination:

And still the music sounded, weird but firm,
 And the more fearful as it forged along
 To a dark and surging climax, which at length
 Broke horribly into coarse and unclean laughter
 That rose above a groaning of the damned;
 And through it all there were those drums of death,
 Which always had been haunting him from childhood.

the rats
 Danced madly to the long cacophony
 They made, and they made faces at Fernando
 The while they danced--till one of them, the leader,
 Bowed mockingly, and vanished through the keyhole,
 As he had come; and after him went others,
 Each with a leering courtesy as he went . . . (940)

To die spiritually is to discover that all that one has been or aspired to be, the "Me" in short, is nothing, is, in fact, a horrible mockery of the true and the good. And when that discovery occurs, life becomes meaningless and intolerable.

Some--those who have engaged in a "mischosen warfare against self and nature" (1349)--cannot take off the "armor of negation" (943) they don at this point and so pass through the door by suicide. Others--the truth seekers, with their unquenchable spark of life and affirmation--consume that armor in the fire of the "I's" passion to be reborn out of its ruins. Fernando Nash is among these, and as he reawakened to life,

He was hungry--
 Hungry beyond a longer forced endurance,
 But in this new unwillingness not to live,
 No longer forced, there was a gratefulness
 Of infinite freedom and humility,
 After a bondage of indignant years

And evil sloth; and there was in this calm,
Which had unlooked for been so long in coming,
A balanced wealth of debts and benefits
Vaster than all ambition or achievement.
Hereafter it would be enough to serve,
And let the chosen shine. (944)

With the death of the "Me" and the rebirth of the "I" he understands,
like Malory, that

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. (1065)

It is then that he hears "outside, somewhere, at last, the sound of
living" (1392) and is free to live again, to live for good rather than
evil.

As pride gives way to selflessness the protagonist becomes
conscious of something outside of or beyond the "Me." Every protagonist
in the late long poems consciously or unconsciously asks of himself,
as Penn-Raven asks of Roman Bartholow,

if. . . we see beyond ourselves
Nothing, what have we within ourselves
Worth seeing or worth saving? (824)

And the answer to the question is,

You are to serve
Henceforth as one may serve who is alive
Among so many that are not alive. (829)

Or as it was said of the proudful Matthias,

he must be born,
And then must live; and he who had been always
So promptly served, and was to be a servant,
Must now be of some use in a new world . . . (1154)

The truth that never sleeps awakens the protagonist to the knowledge
that life is greater than pride. So to be reborn is to discover,

contrary to one's knowledge and conscious desire, that once the "Me" yields hegemony to the "I" life is supremely valuable. Malory, like the others, experiences this rebirth, and as he watched the ocean he saw that

Those flashing waves were life; they were not death,
Or sleep. The power that made them flash was power,
It was not nothing. It was like a wish
To live, and an awakening wish to serve. (1060)

Deliverance and joy come when, freed from the prison of the "Me," the individual subordinates himself to a "cause" that transcends his ego-centric motives.

But again the discovery is not literally of something outside man. Fernando Nash, for instance, commented on his rebirth by saying, "And fear not for my soul. I have found that, / Though I have lost all else" (953). Where he found a soul, Young Gideon found a man:

Now that he knew the man that in himself
Had been a stranger, freedom, like a bell,
Sang through him. (1208-1209)

Both, however, make the same discovery, of man's innermost being, of the man within the man, as St. Paul spoke of it. They learn that the "Me" is an illusion born of pride, and that the real thing, the "I," is greater than a man's idea of himself. Like Malory, they come to realize that

If I had learned,
In time, to know that I was not the law
That made me live, I should have done more shining,
And in a light more grateful to my eyes. (1049)

They first recognize, in other words, that there is a law which begets and sustains them, and then they subordinate the "Me" to the "I" by

placing it in service to that law. That law, therefore, is not outside man but is his own being.

The deliverance of the man within the man is the moment of self-discovery and self-realization, for as the "Me" dies so that the "I" can be reborn, the truth seeker's illusions fall from his eyes and he sees for the first time what he truly is. Until then he has sought to build a life on something outside himself or on external relations, not on the truth of his own being. But at deliverance he knows that authentic existence is only achieved through conforming the soul to reality. As I mentioned in Chapter III, Robinson dedicated himself to the quest for truth, initially thinking that his task was one of intellectually representing an objective state of affairs. In the course of his quest, however, he discovered that accuracy of reference or representation is a lower order of truth; the highest order is sincerity, which is adherence to inner necessity. In his final and most profound notion of it Robinson regards truth, not as intellectual knowledge or belief, but as a way of living in which a man remains true to himself. Truth is not so much proper knowledge as it is living truly; in fact, truth and life are one and the same, for to live affirmatively rather than negatively one must be true to the law that made him, which is simply the desire and power of life to be. Now adherence to inner necessity is not the same thing for a man as it is for a stone, because man, having a soul, is morally aware and capable of free choice and action. To conform his soul to reality he must integrate his conscious faculties with the ground of their being, placing them in service to that ground so that he can become an agent for the affirma-

tion and enhancement of life. Thus rebirth is the achievement, or reachivement, of a free and whole spirit through a return to the inherently moral "I" as the source of one's motives and values. The dualism of thought and will is not resolved through becoming a stone, but through a moral-spiritual enlightenment, achieved through suffering, in which man's powerful propensity toward egotism is sacrificed to the law that makes man live.

The indeterminable true self, the "I," has the two determinable qualities, both manifested most obviously during the period of death-rebirth, of the need for truth and moral integrity. If this were all there was to the "I," it would be easily definable, but a third quality, readily determinable, though most obvious after rebirth, eliminates any possibility of an essential or formal definition. That quality is freedom. Materialism negates freedom, and thus negates man, so that a repudiation of materialism and an affirmation of man requires above all the affirmation of freedom. Paradoxically, freedom results from yielding to necessity, an apparent bondage; but it is no paradox really, for, when one is reborn, freedom is simply an inherent part of one's being. As Roman Bartholow learned, once enlightened he was "doomed to be free" (825); there was no choice in the matter.

Of course, the question is, free of what, for what? The answer, though implicit in all the long poems and much of the journey to truth I have already discussed, is most fully given in Roman Bartholow, which opens with Roman already enlightened; at the beginning of the poem, for instance, it is said of him, "He looked about him with a life renewed / Upon a world renewed" (835). The poem, therefore, dramatizes

Roman's education in what it means to be free. He learns, first of all, like every protagonist of the late long poems, that pride is less than life, that freedom, in other words, entails an escape from the bondage of the "Me"; he also learns that "tradition [is] less than life" (770), that freedom entails an escape from the bondage of the past, whether the past be represented by custom or learning; and he also learns that freedom means loneliness, inescapable estrangement from the external supports of other persons or social life. Other protagonists add to this list--Talifer learns, for example, that freedom means anti-intellectualism or the repudiation of the abstract for the concrete; and King Jasper learns that it entails a disbelief in the permanence of any social order. But all this education adds up to one large truth: to be truly alive is to be free of everything that hinders or prohibits life from being true to itself. Roman Bartholow jettisons everything inessential until all he has left is the pure impulse to live; and shorn of all accidental accretions, free of every restrictive element, life is simply an "uncertain fire" (944), a mysterious energy with the capacity as well as the desire to assert and perpetuate its existence.

Cavender was rebuked by the apparition of his murdered wife for being afraid of life and time. And I have accused Matthias and King Jasper of this fear, but all the other protagonists are equally guilty before they are reborn. Rebirth means a confident, tranquil dedication to life; it also means a confident, tranquil acceptance of time, for life in addition to being free exists in time--indeed can only exist in time. Flax, in Amaranth, advises another,

Be at peace
 With time, for in this region where we are,
 There is no other peace. (1345)

Reality is flux, change, process; this is a crucial truth in the protagonist's education in freedom, learned most frequently through painful experience. Some, in fact, cannot tolerate that truth--for example, Honoria, King Jasper's wife, who "was not made for changes" (1474) and so commits suicide. But the truth seekers come to know through failure that all forms of apparent certainty or security--honor, achievement, possession, dominance, tradition, the status quo, etc.--being contrary to the nature of things, "ultimately must eat themselves" (1426) in the desperation of defending themselves against change. Zoë, King Jasper's nemesis, representative of truth and thus of life,

is too free and holy,
 Or so he [Jasper's son] says, to let herself be bound
 Or tangled in the flimsy nets or threads
 Of church or state.
she seems to be a sort
 Of charming and transfigured wasp, equipped
 To sting the mightiest spiders of convention
 And fly away from them as free as ever. (1402)

Time cannot be stopped, life cannot be compressed into permanent molds, and if either is tried, an inevitable explosion is the consequence.

Conversely, and perhaps more significantly, time exists in life. Life is a potential, an aspiration and a power, that genuinely exists only in action. Since action is movement out of the past through the present into the future, time is an essential attribute of life. But mere progress through time, which can be mechanical, is not enough for life; its action must be creative; life must be purposive and result in the extension and enhancement of life. Consequently, life can never rest on its achievements, its past being nothing more than a souvenir,

but must continually act, must continually assert and reaffirm its existence. To be, it must eternally prove its existence through creative action, because to act is to be alive, and to be alive is to act. Moreover, it is impossible to be alive and not to act. Acting entails purpose, which entails choice, which in turn entails morality. It presupposes freedom, which presupposes power, and both presuppose time. To be true to itself, life must be all these things, the necessary conditions of its existence, but finally and simply, the irreducible fact is that life is action. Or, in Mead's phrase, "the act, then, and not the tract, is the fundamental datum." For this reason, the past, which is gone, and the present, which is going, are less important than the future, which is an open territory of possibility.

The "I," the man within the man, equated with the law that makes man live, is life, the power to be and to act. The "I," therefore, is not identified with character or personality, with, that is, the conscious, social aspects of man's being; it is an activity, a truth-demanding, moral, creative force not identifiable with or derivable from a role, idea, institution, community, state, or culture. In other words, the "I" is not a phenomenon but the begetter and sustainer of phenomena, the energy behind the mask of things, the ground of their existence. When man is viewed as a creature for whom the "I" is his definitive being, it follows, as Charles Cestre, Robinson's contemporary and endorsed interpreter, put it, that "there is no such thing as one permanent ego, but . . . we pass successively through various personalities, as we go through various phases of experience."¹⁵ This is the

¹⁵ Introduction, p. 142.

now prevalent conception of the self espoused by Existentialism, which claims, in the words of Everett W. Knight, that "there is no self considered as a sort of 'thing'; it is an intention, a direction, an orientation."¹⁶ For Robinson too, the "I" is an intention, a "structure of action," which knows itself and the world through doing and making; an artificer in time and space building towers as monuments of the primal energy that truly knows itself only when the product is not confused with its origins. Since the primordial feature of the self is its purposive, teleological disposition; since what it is, is always yet to be completed in the future; since, in short, it is "becoming" rather than "being"--the "I" is indeed not amenable to formal definition but is an indeterminable power for life and good with infinite possibilities of phenomenal concretion.

But man is obviously not absolutely free to do or make anything he pleases; he not only has to act within the physical limitations of time and space, which include history as well as contemporary circumstances, but he cannot will that he physically or spiritually become, for example, a serpent or God, though he may attempt morally to emulate them. Robinson, fully cognizant of this matter, took account of it by stating that, "There is no cure for self; / There's only an occasional revelation" (1137). Here he uses "self," as always, to mean the "Me," and his point is that as a creature of this world a man acts from a given place, at a definite time, with finite knowledge and finite power. A reborn man is still a man, not God; when reborn, he is an

¹⁶ Literature Considered as Philosophy (London, 1957), p. 25.

agent of spirit, asserting and extending its existence through acting, not universal, disembodied spirit itself. This limitation results in the paradox, applicable to Robinson as well as his characters, that "In art you must esteem yourself or perish" (1324). Once the source of all evil, in the end pride is the source of good. Without pride, there is no value, no moral conviction, no passion to live; thus the pride that doomed Matthias to a fall saves him to live again. Though resolved in rebirth, the dualism of the "I" and "Me" is not totally annihilated. Existence, at least in this world, is a conjunction of spirit and matter, of energy and form, of time and eternity, and the annihilation of either puts an end to life. Life, therefore, is a delicate balance of proper proportions and relations between antithetical elements. "All things," Robinson said on this point,

that are worth having are perilous,
And have their resident devil, respectively.
There's this that I have here, there's love, pride, art,
Humility, ambition, power and glory,
The kingdom itself, which may come out all right,
And truth. They are all very perilous,
And admirable, so long as there is in them
Passion that knows itself. (1131)

This knowledge is of course self-knowledge, existential awareness of the relation between the personal and spiritual or the ego and the other, not intellectual understanding of the ultimate nature of the universe. During rebirth Matthias is told by a voice from beyond the grave, in answer to his question about the meaning of life,

If you could know, Matthias, you would be free;
But you are far from knowing, and are not free. (1151)

Knowledge here means intellectual understanding of absolutes; freedom here means complete control of life. Neither is possible for man

while he lives. He cannot know the beginning and end of life, decide its direction, or determine a hierarchy of values in it. Because he is implicated in life, his knowledge is severely limited, and even more remarkable than the limitation of his knowledge is the meagreness of man's control over his life. Awaking in mid-stream, with life flowing through and about him, carried ceaselessly by a current without detectable shores or ascertainable direction, as long as he is a creature in this world he is life's servant. Grimly acknowledging the human predicament, Zollikofsky remarks,

I don't say what God is, but it's a name
That somehow answers us when we are driven
To feel and think how little we have to do
With what we are. (1472)

However, what man can achieve, despite the limitations of his knowledge and power, is wisdom. He can know himself, the immediacy of his interior life and outer circumstances, the existential facts of his life; and knowing this, his life will flow out of the heart of his being, the "I." This is the truth told by the late long poems, aesthetic journeys into the vital center of the self to discover the will to be, the joy of life.

IV

For Robinson, then, poetry is the "I" made manifest, and what is true for one is also true for the other: poetry, too, has its dual aspects of language and reality, letter and spirit; and though fashioned by the "Me," a poem is an emanation of the "I," the spiritual power endowing man with the capacity for creative acts.

On occasion Robinson would disclaim any knowledge of what poetry is, but when disposed to be more assertive, he would say, as he had Rembrandt remark, "I am but a living instrument / Played upon by powers that are invisible" (589). Such a statement is not much more definite than a profession of ignorance, but it is as far as Robinson could go, simply because it is as much as he could ascertain. Speaking directly for himself, he could be no more specific: "I discovered long ago," he said, "that an artist is just a sort of living whistle through which Something blows."¹⁷ A poet is an agent compulsively serving a super-personal power which uses him and his products, poems, to exercise its being while he remains in ignorance of its nature and purposes. Clearly, his existence, talent, and inspiration do not belong to him; instead, he belongs to them. Although employing inappropriate imagery, Hermann Hagedorn provides the fullest account of this, Robinson's final, conception of poetry in his statement, Robinson

had a mystic sense of his calling. At bottom, he did not think of his poetry as his own achievement. He fetched it from subterranean streams deeper than any driven cogitation of his. He was not its creator, he knew, but only the pump which brought it to the surface, an instrument of transmission whom the power he had a way of denoting "Whatever-it-is" had chosen to use. . . . He himself could do nothing about it all, except to keep the instrument clean and clear.¹⁸

Obviously, this is also Robinson's conception of the "I." On the whole Robinson's definition of poetry is rather vague, yet this

¹⁷ Quoted by Ellsworth Barnard (p. 10) from an unpublished letter of Robinson's to Mrs. Lionel Marks, dated November 17, 1919 in Houghton Library.

¹⁸ Edwin Arlington Robinson, p. 340.

much about it is specific: the power, Whatever-it-is, is Something--with capital letters!--which is quite different from nothing, and that Something plays, blows, and uses--in short, acts. An indeterminable, superpersonal power, clearly not mechanical or electrical energy, is the source or ultimate reality of a poet's self, and therefore of a poem, too. This conception of reality as power is characteristic of the nineties. George Santayana, for example, set out to determine the irreducible elements of existence, and discovered,

That at once, by a mere act of self-examination and frankness, the spirit has come upon one of the most important and radical of religious perceptions. It has perceived that though it is living, it is powerless to live; that though it may die, it is powerless to die; and that altogether, at every moment and in every particular, it is in the hands of some alien and inscrutable power.¹⁹

Eventually this conception of reality becomes the great leveller and the basis of literary naturalism, with the result that, as Frank Norris put it, "Men were naught, death was naught, life was naught; Force only existed--Force that brought men into the world . . . Force that made the wheat grow . . ."²⁰ But Robinson did not go that far. True, in such a world, change, process, eternal birth and death hold unchallengeable dominion over everything, but that does not necessarily eliminate all meaning or value. A creature such as man, having a teleological disposition and doomed to act, cannot negate itself or life; to live, he must morally justify and intellectually affirm his existence. And conversely, if he continues to live, he implicitly affirms at least

¹⁹ The Works of George Santayana, X, 248.

²⁰ The Octopus (New York, 1928), II, 343.

life, if nothing more specific. Understanding this, Robinson could not tolerate a permanent estrangement of will and belief, and so he, like Henry Adams, humanized power--that is, interpreted reality to allow for rather than negate man's will to live.

There are two general ways of conceiving of power. First, it can be regarded as a force acting upon a body from an external source. In this case, though its effects may be to propel, change the state, construct, or disintegrate, force is mechanical, an agency of causality or of quantitative, determined relations. On the other hand, force can be regarded as acting through a body, as being expressed and directed by it, in which case force is creative, a resource by which an entity enhances itself or evolves into a higher form. This is a qualitative change: here force is a potential or aspiration toward greater life, not a system of energy in which output equals input. During the nineties, the first conception was favored by materialism, the latter by the biological sciences; the first was the assumption of mechanism the second the assumption of the theory of evolution, so that both were live options for Robinson. He obviously rejected the first, which is perhaps appropriate to matter but clearly antithetical to life. That leaves the second, but though he chose it, he did not subscribe to the theory of evolution. In fact, though early in his career he spoke as though the theory might be valid, later he dismissed it outright, his disjunction between man and nature ruling out the possibility of natural phenomena evolving into spiritual being. Though the Something is a superpersonal power, it has nothing to do with the development of the species or historical progress, nor is it a world spirit, Hegelian or otherwise,

which uses men as means to work out its destiny. Actually, for Robinson an entity cannot evolve into what it is not; it can only become what it truly is. Consequently, his conception of power is classical and Christian: power acts through a body, yes, but only through self-realization in an individual; it is not a grand march through time but a pulsating creation and destruction, not the implacable drive of history to a millennium but a moral awareness in the eternal present. Thus he could say, while making time an inherent condition of this world, that he didn't believe in time; the Something and the "I" are simply eternal activity, being rather than becoming, that perpetually exists for the sake of existence.

Charles Cestre, detecting Robinson's conception of reality as power, said, "In this Robinson is modern, and he is American; for it is in America, if anywhere, that the Life-Force--energy, will-to-live, desire for action--makes itself heard."²¹ True, Robinson is modern, but not just American; his conception of life as force aligns him with William James, Bergson, Whitehead, Shaw, Nietzsche, Unamuno, with those thinkers of the nineties who celebrated life in their notions of plurality, the adventure of ideas, the elan vital, the Life-Force, the will to power. Although Robinson tends to be cautious and solemn where these men tend to be vigorously assertive and confident, nevertheless he accepted the will to live as the fundamental fact of man's existence. And like most of these men he repudiates all theories envisaging history, life, and society as governed by superpersonal values, that, in other

²¹ Introduction, p. 138.

words, favor an abstraction over the concrete person. Robinson, in fact, is even more modern than Cestre thought: he is close to Existentialism in that he repudiates the historical and sociological views of force in favor of a view that locates the power in the will and imagination of the individual. Man is not made by and for larger cosmic designs but makes himself in the sense that the aspirations of the power begin and end in his need for individual moral action. If Existentialism is a humanism, giving autonomy and the highest value to the individual person, Robinson's conception of the power is humanistic, for the existence of an individual is an end in itself for the superpersonal power and, conversely, the individual can celebrate that power only by affirming his own existence.

Robinson's idea of power has still broader implications; it amounts to a rejection of the basis of modern Western culture, the Faustian, Baconian, scientific drive for power over nature through knowledge. He is not concerned with the will to power, but with the will to live, and the will to live is not an assertion of self through the use, manipulation, or alteration of nature, man, or oneself. Rather, it is submission to the mysterious law that makes man live, that is his origin and sustenance, and that endows him with the capacities for truth, moral awareness, and creativity. The cauldron of energy, for the most part accurately represented by the dynamo, turns out to be capable of consciousness and creative action in one of its states of activity. Strictly speaking, of course, spiritual power and mechanical power are antithetical. So the Something does not reduce man and life to nought but, on the contrary, makes them possible--indeed,

creates and thus gives them value. Provided man keeps the self "clean and clear," the Something can flow through him and he can genuinely live in accordance with his being, which, since it is their source, antedates his capacities. The mind cannot turn back upon itself, know its origins, and encompass the source of its being; and should it substitute a concept of the self for the "I," a partial and distorted knowledge obstructs the flow of the Something through the self. Under circumstances in which, as A. N. Whitehead stated it, feeling is basic, reason emergent, the enlightened mind does not stand outside of and question the power but feels the power behind itself. Turning its attention inward, the mind realizes that it is a manifestation of the will to live, and that that will to live is good. Then it knows that its duty is to serve as a kind of lens through which the power of life can radiate beyond it.

If the "I" is spiritual power, then poetry is that power made manifest. Robinson's confidence in poetry as a universal savior waned somewhat as his career progressed, but he never totally abandoned his conviction that poetry is the envoy of the spirit. As late as Amaranth (1934) he wrote,

Though he fail, or die,
The poet somehow has the best of us;
He has a gage for us that we have not. (1388)

The poet's gage is his familiarity with the man within the man, the source of the vital and the good. The assumption of modern realism that a reality objectively exists to which thought must conform if it is to be true implies, when applied to the conduct of life, that an inner, moral reality of a superpersonal character exists to which man must

conform if he is to live truly. Contrary to prosaic realism, which apprehends external forms and appearances and seeks to determine the objective physical and moral laws acting upon them, poetic realism is concerned with the dynamic spirit inhabiting and acting through forms and appearances. A poet, having first-hand, existential knowledge of this reality, knows the best in man, and so can measure the truth or falsity of a life. However, the poet's utterances, his poems, are not didactic statements about the spirit; they are the spirit itself, for a poem is literally a revelation of man's inner being. Instead of being a statement about the best in man, it is the best in him, an expression of his highest capability of awareness and activity. Consequently, whether an assertion of the spirit's predicament when imprisoned or of its truth when free, a poem is simply an announcement and affirmation of its own being, or of the power that makes the poem possible. ". . . in speaking about poetry," Erich Heller has written,

we always mean more than poetry, just as poetry always means more than itself. What is it, then, that poetry means? Its meaning is the vindication of the worth and value of the world of life and human experience. At heart all poetry is praise and celebration. Its joy is not mere pleasure, its lamentation not mere weeping, and its despair not mere despondency. Whatever it does, it cannot but affirm the existence of a meaningful world--even when it denounces its meaninglessness. Poetry means order, even with the indictment of chaos; it means hope, even with the outcry of despair. It is concerned with the true stature of things. And being concerned with the true stature of things, all great poetry is realistic.²²

When poetry is realistic in Heller's sense, it does not mean, it is; it does not represent, it presents; it is not a symbol remotely standing

²² The Disinherited Mind, p. 268.

for something beyond it, but a sign announcing the presence, or the past presence, of Something. Nor is it a self-contained structure of words or a supreme fiction, but, being realistic, it directs attention to its origins. That way it affirms not just itself or art or fictions, but the reality from which it issues, and in doing so it testifies that genuine poetry, rather than being an end in itself, is a handmaiden to life. A "real" poem is praise and celebration of life; it says, "I am," but means by that that life is order and meaning, existence is good, and creativity is a supreme value.

In a world in which reality is power and all existence interminably changes, man can readily fall into despair for want of certainty and rest. But though his life may seem blind and futile, he can be sure of one thing, that his existence is an expression of the power and that he is also a wielder of it. Recognizing this, he knows that, regardless of the ephemerality of his creations, as he was made, so he is a maker. Emerson saw this quite clearly, and said

Every spirit builds itself a house, and beyond its house
a world, and beyond its world a heaven. Know then that
the world exists for you. For you is the phenomenon perfect.
What we are, that only can we see. All that Adam had, all
that Caesar could, you have and can do. Adam called his
house, heaven and earth; Caesar called his house, Rome;
you perhaps call yours a cobbler's trade; a hundred acres of
plowed land; or a scholar's garret. Yet life for life
and point for point your dominion is as great as theirs,
though without fine names. Build therefore your own
world. As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea
in your mind, that will unfold its great proportions.²³

A poet by vocation, Robinson built his spirit's house--or tower, to use the image he preferred in his last period--out of poems, finishing

²³ The Collected Works, I, 76.

it off with the late long poems, in which the "Me," acknowledging the hegemony of the "I," places the mind in the service of uttering the truth of the soul. By living his vocation through to the realization of its inner truth, he learned that the meaning of life is in the making of it, or just in making, since life is perpetual re-creation of the true and the good. Timberlake, a character in Matthias at the Door, remarks,

We do not increase ourselves with our regrets
Unless there's action in them. Let us act. (1130)

Robinson acted by writing poems, and though he acknowledged the validity of other modes of life, it was through them that he increased himself. Or perhaps more appropriately, it was through them that he created himself, for they were his means to self-knowledge and spiritual enlightenment, to conforming his life to the pure idea in his "mind."

CHAPTER VI

"THE INTELLECTUAL MYSTIC"

Since we only live in and by contradictions, since life is tragedy and tragedy is perpetual struggle, without victory or the hope of victory, life is contradiction.

Miguel de Unamuno

Now we Celts mate with despair out of which alone comes laughter and the desperate romance of the eternally hopeless. We hunt the attainless, and for us there is only the search unending.

Lawrence Durrell

I

In "New England," which comes in the relatively late volume Dionysus in Doubt (1925), Robinson diagnoses that province of American life in which he was born and reared and in which he wrote his poetry:

Here where the wind is always north-north-east
And children learn to walk on frozen toes,
Wonder begets an envy of all those
Who boil elsewhere with such a lyric yeast
Of love that you will hear them at a feast
Where demons would appeal for some repose,
Still clamoring where the chalice overflows
And crying wildest who have drunk the least.

Passion is here a soilure of the wits,
We're told, and Love a cross for them to bear;
Joy shivers in the corner where she knits
And Conscience always has the rocking-chair,
Cheerful as when she tortured into fits
The first cat that was ever killed by Care. (900)

Perhaps unwittingly, but nevertheless inevitably and with equal accuracy, the poem also diagnoses the major ailment of Robinson's poetry: like New England, whose voice it is, his poetry is without

passion, love, or joy, since these have been killed, or all but killed, by conscience and care.

To be sure, passion, love, and joy are not totally absent from Robinson's poetry. Tristram, for instance, is a retelling of the classic love story, and Fernando Nash, of The Man Who Died Twice, has a religious experience,

and a vast joy,
Which broke and swept and covered him like a sea
Of innocence, leaving him eager as a child
That has outlived experience and remembers
Only the golden moment as it flows,
Told him in silence that was more than speech
That after passion, arrogance and ambition,
Doubt, fear, defeat, sorrow and desperation,
He had wrought out of martyrdom the peace
That passeth understanding. (943)

But this is a transcendent joy, an ecstasy issuing from the reduction of life to its austere spiritual essence, not a joy of life like that referred to in "New England." Moreover, though Nash breaks free of all the bonds prohibiting mystical release, the poem does not; for Nash's experience, related second-hand by a narrator--who, indeed, speaks of himself as "making several entrances with his determinism" (956)--is observed from a spectator's point of view. Consequently, the emphasis in the poem falls, not on Nash's experience, but on the narrator's relation to Nash. By means of mutual compassion and trust the narrator comes to know and value Nash's humanity and thereby discovers the deeper reaches of his own spiritual life; but the poem, as its form and especially its ending make clear, is a reflection on the mystical experience, a meeting of the reason of one man with the vital facts of another man's life. Unable to know those vital facts first hand, the narrator refuses to commit himself categorically to Nash's interpreta-

tion of his experience. Though he proclaims, "I believe / Today that all told me for the truth / Was true" (957), he nevertheless prefaces his confession with the remark, "To each his own credulity, I say, / And ask as much" (956). He understands and he believes, but he cannot be certain; his reason cannot truly comprehend or prove Nash's claims. And so it is with the poem. The cautious tone of the concluding passage as well as the point of view and emphasis of the poem--the fact that Nash's mystical experience is not allowed to stand triumphantly alone--leaves no doubt that the joy is remotely perceived. Like Tristram, where love is not passionately exclaimed but cautiously assessed, this poem does not joyously affirm a deep spiritual experience but views it from the cool perspective of the mind.

Thus, though joy and love and passion occur in Robinson's poetry, they never enter directly into it. This fact is so readily apparent that almost every critic who has written on Robinson has commented on it. Louis Untermeyer, for instance, said,

It is not that he is devious in the way he gives himself, but that, in the sense of a complete abandon to an emotion, he never gives himself at all. The reader feels the lack of surrender, and it is this insufficiency which keeps Robinson from joining the small company of those whose lines not only smiled their ironies in cryptic meditation or sang their loveliness beneath their breath, but also leaped and raged and bled and suffered with their creator.¹

Making the same point in different terms, Edward Sapir remarked,

Robinson's comment on life is too icy for bulk. His interest in the color and detail of the human scene is too languid to save his work from a cumulative monotony. His

¹ American Poetry Since 1900 (New York, 1923), p. 66.

art does not, in any deeply valid sense, reflect life . . .
 it sets in nearly always where life has unrayelled itself
 and is waiting for its tart, ironic epitaph.²

Regardless of how it is described or defined, the point is the same: never does Robinson's poetry sing; never does it become a vehicle for the direct expression of the agonies or ecstasies of passion, worldly or spiritual.

The absence of the lyrical from Robinson's poetry, too obvious to be missed by even the casual reader, was not an oversight; he deliberately, or rather of necessity, excluded it. For example, though an avid devotee of the theatre, Robinson nevertheless disliked comic opera, of which he said, "I do not care for that kind of celebration--for it always seems to be a celebration of some kind."³ And that kind of celebration never occurs in his poetry; for he insisted on the negation or repression rather than the release of man's vital powers. Charles Cestre quite accurately detected this characteristic of Robinson and his poetry, and identified its source, when he said that Robinson

stands at variance with what has been called the "insurgent" movement in contemporary American literature. If we readers of the twentieth century lent ourselves unreservedly to the influence of a number of writings that claim to mirror the modern spirit, we might cease to believe that the greatness of man is to be a rational being. A large part of the literature of today seems to have become a free field for impulse to romp in, with sensation and sensuality as companions. Reason and conscience undergo an eclipse . . . we might think we are living in a pandemonium of mad appetite and crazy fantasy.⁴

² Op. cit.

³ US, p. 93.

⁴ Introduction, p. 14.

Robinson's poetry, written from the same bias as Cestre's remark, is indeed ascetic, moral, and rational. He does not sing of the body and the soul; he could not, as Whitman did, delight in the flesh, the mass of men, nature, the things of this world. Nor did he find anything of value in impulse, the gustier passions, sexual love, the procreative urge.

Robinson acknowledged that he was not concerned with these matters when he wrote, to William Vaughn Moody, "I am what I am, and therefore I have my own paint pots to dabble with. Blacks and grays and browns and blues for the most part--but also a trick, I hope, of letting the white come through in places."⁵ And he made this confession while he was criticizing Moody for getting too much color into his poetry. The trick of letting the white come through depended, in fact, on his deliberately choosing sombre paint pots. As Robinson had the speaker of "Credo" say, he

welcomes when he fears,
The black and awful chaos of the Night;
For through it all--above, beyond it all--
I know the far-sent message of the years,
I feel the coming glory of the Light. (94)

Passion, love, color, sensory delights, the joy of life--these compete with the white by drawing attention to the things of this world and the flesh, their brightness obscuring or flooding out the light of the transcendent spiritual reality behind them. Robinson welcomed the black and awful chaos of the night because only when the things of the world and the flesh wane in lustre could the far-sent message come

⁵ SL, p. 49.

through; and it is this message, linked to the glory of the Light, not to the iridescent hues of life, that he dedicates his poetry to recording. Had Robinson been able to attain completely his highest aspiration--a spiritual realization of things and their significance through the coming of the Light in its full glory--his poetry, totally free of contamination by the colors of the world, would have radiated an icy, pure whiteness.

Even if he had achieved that, his poetry would of course still be open to the criticism that it excludes too much of life, that its vision is too straight and narrow, too sublimated or negative. This criticism, as long as it acknowledges the narrowness as a limitation inherent in his commitment rather than a clumsy defect, is true and just, but it does not go to the heart of the effect of conscience and care on Robinson's poetry. Early in his career Robinson announced the coming of the Light on the basis of a dim feeling; at the end of his career that feeling was still dim and the Light still distant: in the form that he had hoped for it (ultimate Truth), the Light came no closer, got no brighter. The criticism that his poetry excludes too much of life stops short, therefore, of the more profound truth that his poetry never fulfills its own inherent tendency: the Light does not wax into a pervading whiteness. And that was because the same censor which denied expression to the other vital powers ultimately denied full expression of the poetic impulse also. Not just passion and the senses, but, more important, his soul, mind, and imagination could not be free to fully realize themselves either.

In what is probably the angriest moment of his life, at least as far as this published writing is concerned, Robinson violently attacked the curtailment of freedom effected by Prohibition. It was at this time that he wrote most of the poems in Dionysus in Doubt, including "New England," and in this volume is to be found his most explicit, if not his only, didactic poetry of the last half of his career, a poetry which directly attacks social-political conditions in contemporary America. His mood at this time is expressed most trenchantly in his letters, where he wrote on one occasion of "Dionysus in Doubt," "I had to come out, for it the poem had been accumulating in me ever since the hypocritical (or worse) action of the so-called Supreme Court on the constitutionality of a certain much to be damned amendment";⁶ and on another,

I don't see the independence of an alleged democracy that will accept the eighteenth amendment without general secession or civil war. The worst feature of it all is that the people don't seem to see that such a thing is fundamentally evil and arbitrary, and therefore cannot work for good.⁷

Robinson was not simply protecting his own access to alcohol, or anyone else's, for having once been a heavy drinker, he knew well the curse of alcoholism. Rather, he was arguing for freedom and all that it makes possible. Dionysus says:

"Sometimes I wonder what machine
Your innocence will employ,
.
When all are niched and ticketed and all
Are standardized and unexceptional,

⁶ SL, p. 137.

⁷ Hagedorn, p. 332.

To perpetuate complacency and joy
 Of uniform size and strength
 Sometimes I ponder whether you have seen,
 Or contemplated over much down there,
 The treacherous ways that you are now pursuing,
 Or by just what immeasurable expense
 Of unexplained omnipotence
 You are to make it lead you anywhere
 Than to the wonder of a sick despair
 That waits upon a gullible undoing." (866)

What mattered to Robinson was the opportunity for each man to realize "the truth toward which he was tending" (152). In Roman Bartholow, published two years before Dionysus in Doubt, he had stated the metaphysical fact of freedom, and throughout the last half of his career he reiterated the conviction that every man, caught in the egocentric predicament, must discover the Light on his own, in his own way. But the truth toward which he himself was tending was identified with poetry, so that his defense of freedom was also a defense of poetry, of himself and his career, and of the life of the spirit in a thoroughly materialistic society. To defend these, which are not commonplace matters, he had to argue for the nonstandardized and exceptional. Dionysus, the god of wine, who is also the god of inspiration, of the spirit reaching for release and joy, represents the extreme aspiration and achievement; as a god he is ideally all that conventional earth-bound man is not--free, exuberant, exultant. In short, Robinson sought to preserve man's Dionysian possibilities. So, although it diagnoses an adamantly repressive society, "New England," along with other poems in Dionysus in Doubt, indirectly defends the right of his life and art to be free to realize their inherent truth.

Nevertheless, although Robinson passionately defended freedom as a necessary condition of the good, he could not morally or aestheti-

cally liberate himself. W. B. Yeats once cried out in protest against the characters in late nineteenth-century drama, "Why did they not speak out with louder voices or more with freer gestures? What was it that weighted upon their souls perpetually? Certainly they were all in a prison, and yet there was no prison."⁸ Like so many of his contemporaries, Robinson was in such a prison. We have seen how, through the dualism of his consciousness, he saw himself objectively through the eyes of Gardiner's materialistic values; we have seen how he made poems out of the conflict between self and society in which the claims of society predominate; and we have seen, in his criticism of W. B. Yeats, that he was acutely conscious that a certain kind of poetry was to be expected in the nineteenth century, a poetry that did not make a holy show of the poet's self. During the crucial period between his early and late poetry, in a play overtly addressed to the subject of the artist's task, he had Van Zorn tell Farnham, "It is your age . . . and you had better not play with it. If I were you, I should try to meet it half way."⁹ In his other play, Porcupine, written about the same time as Van Zorn, the despondent protagonist says to a rather high-spirited nonconformist, "Men who would set the individual apart from the community are almost always disappointed."¹⁰ And the late long poems, as I have shown, repeatedly dramatize the progress of a man from pride

⁸ Plays and Controversies (New York, 1924), p. 122.

⁹ Quoted above, p. 60.

¹⁰ New York, 1915, p. 140.

to service. All of these matters testify to Robinson's respect for external conditions, a respect he explicitly acknowledged when he wrote, "I do not care to break any moral laws myself, and see no necessity in it."¹¹ He expanded on this surrender to the claims of social morality when he said, after reading Thoreau's Walking,

"[I] did not quite relish what seemed to me to be a sort of glorified Thoreau cowardice all through the thing. For God's sake, says the sage, let me get away into the wilderness where I shall not have a single responsibility or the first symptom of social discipline, let me be a pickerel or a skunk cabbage, anything that will not have to meet the realities of civilization. There is a wholesomeness about some people that is positively unhealthy, and I find it in this essay. Still I am ready for Walden."¹²

Clearly, although he held himself aloof from normal society and popular taste, maintaining not a splendid but a solemn isolation and autonomy, the world was too much with him; it never released him from its dominion over his spirit and imagination.

For a poet who accepts his responsibility to the social order, particularly a social order in which poetry is not valued, the conflict between the poetic impulse and social morality is obviously going to result in one or the other, and perhaps both, being compromised. In Robinson's case the poetic impulse is the most conspicuous victim. Because he could not--indeed, did not choose to--set the individual apart from the community, he accepted a truth and morality which did not issue solely from the poetic impulse but came in part from an external, alien source. His social-historical awareness--and his objectivity and

¹¹ US, p. 97.

¹² SL, p. 17.

realism as well, for they imply the intractable otherness of reality--forced him, in other words, to limit freedom with responsibilities and to restrain and suppress the vital powers. Consequently, he did not free impulse, appetite, or fantasy; nor passion, love or joy from conscience and care. Nor did he free the intellect. "Valery," Elizabeth Sewall has said, "speaks of that 'Intellectual Comedy which has not yet found its poet, and which in my view would be even more precious than the *Comedie Humaine*, than the *Divine Comedy* itself.'"¹³ Robinson, though intellectual and thereby linked with modernism,¹⁴ was certainly not its poet. He could "identify and define what darkens man's intellect,"¹⁵ but he could not set the mind free--he could not, as a painter might say, release the mind from the object to create pure abstraction. That which darkens man's intellect or spirit clung too tenaciously to Robinson's consciousness for the poetic impulse to be released to soar or celebrate.

Most important, conscience and care would not permit his spirit to realize its inherent truth. In a passage where he is defining and assessing Robinson's achievement, Herman Hagedorn writes, of "Nicodemus,"

¹³ Paul Valery, p. 11.

¹⁴ Cf. Harry Levin, "What was Modernism?" The Massachusetts Review, I (August, 1960), 609-630. Levin remarks about the moderns, the generation of Joyce, Proust, Picasso, etc., "Their ultimate quality, which pervades their work to the very marrow, is its uncompromising intellectuality" (p. 628). Robinson shared this quality with these men, who were only slightly younger than he, except that he compromised his intellectuality by insisting upon the limits of reason and the responsibilities of the gifted individual to the community. He could not release the mind to express itself in accordance with its own laws.

¹⁵ Oscar Kokoshka, quoted by Herbert Read, A Concise History of Modern Painting (New York, 1959), p. 244.

"Out of the unconscious, with the controls relaxed by fatigue, came this song of the intellectual mystic, who wanted to give himself wholly yet could not quite manage it."¹⁶ I do not know Hagedorn's sources for his information regarding Robinson's state of mind at the writing of "Nicodemus," so I do not know whether he is justified on biographical grounds in viewing the poem as an unrestrained lyrical release of Robinson's soul. But regardless of biographical accuracy, in the phrase "intellectual mystic" Hagedorn vividly captures the dramatic tensions not only of "Nicodemus" but of Robinson's poetry as a whole. An oxymoron, "intellectual" implying separateness and abstraction and "mystic" implying union and concrete feeling, the phrase succinctly identifies the irreconcilable conflict between mind and soul with which Robinson struggled. Because his mind's allegiance was with objectivity and social morality, he could not give himself wholly to the favored mystic side of himself; and to have given himself wholly to the intellectual side would have been to completely expunge the vital source of his art and his life. Unable to assert completely his creative desire and to attain fully his spiritual aspirations, Robinson could not give himself wholly to the poetic impulse or the spirit.

To be sure, Robinson envisaged somewhat of a release from his prison through enlightenment and exercised his freedom in writing poems and in adhering to his vocation. But he never attains in his poetry that icy, pure whiteness Fernando Nash experiences. Like several of the protagonists of his late long poems, he recognizes that freedom

¹⁶ Edwin Arlington Robinson, p. 263.

exists but he is unable to take full advantage of it; in fact, he finally identifies freedom with service, with the acceptance of responsibility to a community or the Something beyond himself. In his emphasis on the moral burden inherent in freedom, in his notion of there being no escape from self, Robinson is linked with the artists of blackness in America. Like Hawthorne, for instance, he accepts the sacrifice of extreme self-assertion as necessary for the maintenance of the great chain of humanity. As a result, no open road, no infinite vistas, no spacious America is to be found in the world as he imagines it. Though freedom and possibility exist, they are operative only within definite boundaries. The pervasive condition is a tightly contained space--a closed room, an oppressive community, an inescapable self, a universe that is forever doomed to be what it now is, spirit perpetually unable to reach beyond the pales of life. This condition reveals that the truth toward which Robinson was tending involved a recognition and acceptance of limitations. His particular being, life in general, and poetry, are not consummated in absolute freedom but exist only when the opposites of which they are composed check and define one another. The conscience and care which kept him from freely asserting his creative desire is a necessary condition of life, just as form in addition to creative power is a necessary condition of poetry, just as the intellect in addition to the mystical is a necessary condition of man.

II

When Robinson is criticized for the exclusion of too much of life from his poetry it might be well to remember that of those poets

who wrote with passion and bright colors in the nineties few are today remembered and none, with the exception of Robert Frost, come near challenging him as the greatest poet of his generation. Perhaps he did what under the circumstances could be done without pretense or falsification. Perhaps he is a poet of stature because he was so thoroughly a man of his times, because he paid the price of living close to its pulse and making genuine poetry out of its troubled life. At any rate, Carlin Kindilien has shown that the largest portion of the poetry written during the nineties was made out of airy romantic sentiments that had nothing to do with the actual currents of life and feeling that were sweeping through the minds of men.¹⁷ This poetry had color and passion in it at the cost of being bad poetry, for in it emotion was so separated from reality that the emotion was meaningless. Robinson, on the other hand, addressed himself to those actual currents. In fact, his greatest virtue is his ability to acknowledge these currents of life and feeling as the ineluctable realities of life and at the same time make poetry of them. He once said, and it is a criticism applicable to most of his contemporaries who were poets, "So far as I can make out, most people are so afraid of life that when they see it coming their first impulse is to hide behind a tree and shut their eyes."¹⁸ He kept his eyes open, and without taking refuge in irrelevant

¹⁷ American Poetry in the Nineties, pp. 1-72.

¹⁸ SL, p. 168.

sources of meaning, he achieved an emotion appropriate to reality as he could know it.¹⁹

Such an achievement was no small task, for Robinson lived in a transitional period, and his art had a foot in the two worlds of the past and the future. He was well aware of this. He said of Thomas Sergeant Perry, and it was equally true of himself,

He knew, like many others, that the Great War had carried away with it the world that he had known, and in which he had best belonged; he knew also that time was at his heels, and that the new world would somehow take care of itself without him. He was undoubtedly more at home with his Victorian memories than with his twentieth century questionings and apprehensions.²⁰

Now there is no doubt that the predominant feeling of Robinson's poetry, resulting from the dominion of conscience and care over passion, love, and joy, is of the nineteenth century. And for the most part viewing the new order through the eyes of the old, he sadly records the throes of the latter's disintegration and death. But it is wrong to conclude from this, as some have done, that his allegiance is entirely to the nineteenth century. He once remarked, "My spiritual

¹⁹ This is the way the nineties was inclined to speak about the relation of the inner and outer world. William James, for example, said, "As concrete states of mind, made up of a feeling plus a specific sort of object, religious emotions of course are psychic entities . . ." (Varieties of Religious Experience, p. 28); and again, ". . . every philosophy should be touched with emotion to be rightly understood" (*Ibid.*, p. 433). See also the passage quoted from Santayana's Three Philosophical Poets on p. 216 below. Objects and ideas can be abstracted out of experience until, as in science, they have no human relevance; then, if they are to be significant for man or an individual, emotion has to be turned upon them. In other words, given the dichotomy between subject and object, meaning and value enter the world through man's contribution of a subjective element to his experience. Even though radical empiricism was designed to break down this dichotomy, semantic habits forced James and others to speak in its terms.

²⁰ The Letters of Thomas Sergeant Perry, p. 10.

and intellectual activity . . . are all for the future, but somehow my human life is all for the past."²¹ Janus-like, Robinson looked to the past but at the same time faced toward the future, forthrightly confronting his twentieth-century questionings and apprehensions. He did not totally despair of the new order; on occasion he spoke of America as the hope of mankind and, as his above remark indicates, he even thought of himself as making a contribution to the future. Moreover, in his last period, when he was concentrating on the enlightened self, the future became the most important dimension of time for him. Appropriately, he does not passively lament the passage or the ravages of time but, consistent with his realism, changes as his understanding of reality changes, meeting the new on its own terms, accepting its creative challenge.

Because he could unflinchingly face the actualities of life as they unfolded before him, Robinson was rewarded with an insight into the human condition in the twentieth century that encompasses almost everything that Existentialism has revealed.²² Existentialism, of course, has refined its terms and explored its ideas at greater length, but Robinson knew the unheven experience from which they arise. He saw the distinctiveness of man, or the pour-soi, to use Sartre's phrase; he saw the irreconcilability of thought and being, or the ultimate

²¹ US, p. 254.

²² For a fuller examination of the parallels between Robinson and Existentialism see Richard Crowder, "E. A. Robinson and the Meaning of Life," Chicago Review, XV (Summer, 1961), 5-17. Though Crowder is too much concerned with Robinson's "so-called philosophy," his essay does properly establish and enlarge the context in which Robinson's poetry must be viewed to be correctly understood.

irrationality of life; he saw that the essential context of human life is the relation of man to man, not of man to God or nature; he saw that static categories and institutions are hostile to creativity; he saw the threatening absurdity and nothingness from which life has to be perpetually redeemed. In so far as he saw and recorded these things, Robinson participated in the climate of moral and intellectual feeling now identified as Existentialism. But what he saw finally, and what constitutes his deepest link with this climate of moral and intellectual feeling, was that under circumstances in which there is no recourse to transcendental, traditional, or a priori forms of knowledge, meaning resides in the act, or, as the Existentialist would say, in intention. Since the soul cannot be apprehended by reason, and the spirit's powers do not issue from but are antithetical to the conscious mind, the spirit can know itself only through an activity which expresses its being, that is, through exercising its powers.

As I said in Chapter V, for Robinson writing poetry was a way of acting; through it he learned that the poetic impulse and power harbor the deepest truth of the spirit. Intellectually confined to what appears to be, to what is empirically experienced, man can know for certain only the forms and energies that existentially sweep about and through him. Under such circumstances the maintenance of a belief in poetry is a nearly Herculean achievement. Without any certainties beyond those he felt within himself, with no external grounds for an explanation of the nature of poetry or a justification of its existence, Robinson was thrown back upon his own naked impulse to be a poet. Deprived of every-

thing but the unquenchable fire deep within him, he still maintained an adamant belief in poetry and the life of the spirit.

Incidentally, in this view of poetry Robinson is at odds with the New Criticism, which, as I noted in the first chapter, has all but ignored his work. Both his view and that of the New Criticism arise as reactions to the displacement of substance and essences by form and function when reality is identified with process. Departing from the traditional Western preference in aesthetics for art as mimesis or representation, both accept the dictum that "a poem should not mean but be," for a poem cannot "mean" when there is no fixed reality to which it can refer. But the two views differ on what a poem is. For the New Criticism a poem is a structure of words constituting an autonomous verbal world held together by tension, ambiguity, and irony. When conceived in this manner, a poem exists outside of time, independent of the will of a creator; its beginning and end are in the mystic realm of language; or if it is related to human consciousness, it is the voice of the spirit freed of will and desire. Obviously, this describes not only an aesthetic doctrine, but also the poetry of the French Symbolists, of Yeats and Eliot, and of other moderns favored by the New Criticism. For Robinson, however, a poem is "a Wind through which Something blows"; its meaning--or, more properly, its being--resides not in the finished autonomous work but in the power that produced it; not in the object but in the creative act. From this view a poem is an act, an activity of the spirit whose essential nature is to create, not once and for all, but continuously, for its very existence is activity.

Little wonder that the New Criticism has ignored Robinson's poetry: the two ideas of poetry are radically opposed.

On the other hand, though his view of poetry and the kind of poetry he wrote puts him at odds with the New Criticism, it nevertheless puts Robinson solidly in the main American poetic and intellectual tradition. Emerson, it will be recalled, defined thought as action and action as thought, and he also called the poet the greatest of actors. And it was he who said, man "acts it as life, before he apprehends it as truth."²³ Emerson was of course the first to transform American practicality into a philosophical and moral view of life. This trait, now generally regarded as the definitive one of the American character, emerged triumphant in the nineties in pragmatism, "the American philosophy." The voluntarism which Emerson initiated and pragmatism formally articulated has continued to dominate American life and thought. To see how deep and pervasive the hold of voluntarism on the American mind is, one need only think of Wallace Stevens' notion of the poem as an act of the mind, or of Kenneth Burke's notion of literature as "equipment for living." Other evidence is the distinctively American style in painting (some say it is America's first original contribution to this art) known as "Action Painting"; Jack Kerouac's and Charles Olson's notion of spontaneous writing, which locates the significance of literature in the act of writing; the academic criticism of Louis Martz and Earl Wasserman, who read poems as acts; the interest in Zen Buddhism, particularly Zen art, for which meaning resides in the

²³ The Complete Works, I, 4.

aesthetic performance; and the aesthetic theory of Paul Ziff, who, quoting Chinese philosophers as authorities, is trying to account for the "meaning" of art on the basis of the aesthetic experience as an act.²⁴ This poetic and intellectual tradition represents the major sustained effort of the American to make sense of his experience; and as he has done so he has repeatedly acknowledged that, for him, to be is to act, and to act is to be. What he knows, what is real for him, is rooted ultimately in activity, in making and doing, in becoming, not in being.

The foregoing are the realities of life as Robinson understood them; to understand the emotion with which he responded to them, it is necessary to keep in mind the dualism to which he was heir and his perspective within it. A useful contrast here to Robinson is Unamuno, who summed up the first stage of his argument in The Tragic Sense of Life with the statement,

I have sought to strip naked, not only my own soul, but the human soul, be its nature what it may, its destiny to disappear or not to disappear. And we have arrived at the bottom of the abyss, at the irreconcilable conflict between reason and vital feeling. And having arrived here, I have told you that it is necessary to accept the conflict as such and to live by it.²⁵

He could even say at one point, "I do not wish to make peace between my heart and my head, between my faith and my reason--I wish rather that there should be a war between them!"²⁶ Unlike the passionate

²⁴ See "Reasons in Art Criticism," Philosophy and Education, ed. Isaac Scheffler (Boston, 1958), pp. 219-236.

²⁵ Tragic Sense of Life, p. 124.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

Spaniard, Robinson could not rejoice over the conflict. But he did have to live by it, and his poetry, like Unamuno's philosophy, makes sense of life by perpetuating the war between reason and vital feeling. To be a man, just to be, is to be caught in their crossway; that is the human condition this side of heaven.

Obviously Robinson was not dealing with a merely personal, local, or social problem but with the essential facts of life as they were understood by his generation. But for him the important point in the warfare of reason and faith is that faith did exist and that it held its own against its formidable enemy. Both Unamuno and Robinson--among others, of course--unwaveringly committed themselves to vital feeling, Unamuno grounding his philosophy and Robinson his poetry in it. But for Unamuno the commitment focused on the ego, the irrepressible will of a conscious being to perpetuate immortally its identity; whereas for Robinson, who could not so unrestrainedly celebrate the self, the commitment focused on poetry, which is an expression of the Something beyond the ego. Thus the two men approached the warfare of reason and vital feeling from opposite poles. While admitting the existence of reason, Unamuno's approach is from vital feeling, so that his emphasis is on passionate self-assertion. Robinson, on the other hand, though admitting the metaphysical priority of vital feeling or the mystical, always views it objectively, or from the perspective of reason, even in the late long poems when the "I" has dominion over the "Me." This intellectualism kept him from being passionate, celebrating the self, or, in Hagedorn's phrase, giving himself wholly; but it is not devoid of emotion. Quite the contrary:

underlying the changing moods of Robinson's poetry is a fundamental emotion, which, in contrast to what might be referred to as Unamuno's sentiment of identity, can be called the sentiment of reason.²⁷ In his discussion of Lucretius, in Three Philosophical Poets, George Santayana says,

The poetry we see in nature is due to the emotion the spectacle produces in us, the life of nature might be as romantic and sublime as it chose, it would be dust and ashes to us if there were nothing sublime and romantic in ourselves to be stirred by it to sympathy. But our emotion may be ingenuous; it may be concerned with what nature really is and does, has been and will do forever. It need not arise from a selfish preoccupation with what these immense realities involve for our own persons or may be used to suggest to our self-indulgent fancy. No, the poetry of nature may be discerned merely by the power of intuition which it awakens and the understanding which it employs. These faculties, more, I should say, than our moodiness or stuffy dreams, draw taut the strings of the soul, and bring out her full vitality and music. Naturalism is a philosophy of observation, and of an imagination that extends the observable; all the sights and sounds of nature enter into it, and lend it their directness, pungency, and coercive stress. At the same time, naturalism is an intellectual philosophy; it divines substance behind appearance, continuity behind change, law behind fortune. It therefore attaches all those sights and sounds to a hidden background that connects and explains them. So understood, nature has depth as well as sensuous variety. Before the sublimity of this insight, all forms of the pathetic fallacy seem cheap and artificial. Mythology, that to a childish mind is the only possible poetry, sounds like bad rhetoric in comparison. The naturalistic poet abandons fairyland, because he has discovered nature, history, the actual passions of man. His imagination has reached maturity; its pleasure is to dominate, not to play.²⁸

²⁷ This phrase is to be distinguished from William James' "sentiment of rationality," which he defines as a "feeling of the sufficiency of the present moment, of its absoluteness--this absence of all need to explain it, or justify it . . ." ("The Sentiment of Rationality," p. 64). My definition of the "sentiment of reason" is to be found in the discussion that follows.

²⁸ The Works of George Santayana, VI, 24-25.

Now not all of what Santayana says here applies to Robinson's poetry-- for instance, all the sights and sounds of nature do not enter into it. But though he slights the empirical side of naturalism to emphasize its intellectual side, Robinson does write a naturalistic poetry as it is defined here by Santayana.²⁹ He abandons fairyland for the actualities of life, and seeks to understand man in depth, to divine the higher law underlying the variety and accidents of his existence.³⁰

One of the major differences between Lucretius and Robinson is that whereas Lucretius subjected man along with the rest of nature to the principles governing the Democritean universe, Robinson, in accordance with the dualism he inherited from materialism, made the vital and spiritual a separate mode of existence. Life is for him an autonomous phenomenon which has to be understood on its own terms. Santayana defines what life is for Robinson and the nineties as well as for himself in his statement:

²⁹ I take naturalism in Santayana's sense and realism as I defined it in Chapter III to differ only in emphasis, in that the former primarily refers to a concept of reality and the latter to the epistemology of the same philosophical view of life. Here, however, Santayana is talking about the methodology of naturalism, so his remarks are for the most part also true of realism.

³⁰ Robinson remarked, for instance, about Tristram: "The fool potion, or philtre in the Tristram story has always been an incurable source of annoyance to me, and after fighting it away for four or five years I have finally succumbed to telling the story of what might have happened to human beings in those circumstances, without their wits and wills having been taken away by some impossible and wholly superfluous concoction. Men and women can make trouble enough for themselves without being denatured and turned into robots" (SL, p. 145). And again, "That damn dose has always spoiled one of the world's greatest stories and probably will continue to do so" (SL, p. 146).

We should explain motion and life rather by their purpose and end, by that unrealized ideal which moving and living things seem to aspire to, and may be said to love. What justifies itself is not any fact or law; for why should these not have been different? What justifies itself is what is good, what is as it ought to be. But things in motion, Aristotle conceived, declare, as it were, that they are not satisfied, and ought to be in some different condition. They look to a fulfillment which is as yet ideal. This fulfillment, if it included motion and life, could include them inwardly only; it would consist in a sustained activity, never lapsing or suffering change. Such an activity is the unchanging goal towards which life advances and by which its different states are measured.³¹

Life is purposeful activity, or, in man, teleological awareness. Matter is driven from behind by mechanical force and thus can never be any more than the causes that act upon it; life is magically drawn ahead by visions spun out of itself and projected ahead as goals. It is distinguished from matter by the faculty of intuition and the power to act, by the manner in which ideas or ideals function to make possible a transcendence of immediate circumstances and a higher state of being.

Employing the empirical, intellectual approach of naturalism, Robinson arrived at a rational comprehension of the vital for what it is in and of itself, and for this purpose he assumed, like Emerson, that "the highest reason is the truest."³² In other words, he sought a reduction of life to the necessary and sufficient conditions of its existence, to the most "abstract" truth about man's inner being. Herein is to be found his link with Transcendentalism, or the liberal tradition of American literature, for his aim, in Emerson's phrase, was "a return

³¹ The Works of George Santayana, VI, 67.

³² The Complete Works, I, 66.

to the essential man."³³ But Robinson is distinguished from his Transcendentalist predecessors, and from his twentieth-century successors as well, by the brand of intellectualism he employs in making that return. Whereas Emerson and Whitman, among others, made it through direct expression, Robinson did not sing the song of the self. Rather, standing back from the self, he remotely surveyed it. This perspective can perhaps best be understood if it is remembered that the nineties, in the works of William James, Josiah Royce, Bergson, A. N. Whitehead, George Herbert Mead, and others, is the last generation to try for a comprehensive metaphysical view of life. That generation could still believe in reason, at least as an instrument and point of view--they could still believe, as Cestre put it, that "the greatness of man is to be a rational creature"--though they were undermining the grounds of this belief and preparing the way for "irrational man." Robinson, too, sought a comprehension of life through reason. Unlike Transcendentalism, which emphasized the dynamics of spiritual life, the nineties were dominated by an intellectual thrust toward, in Emerson's sense of the terms, understanding rather than reason, and like his contemporaries Robinson sought to "interpret life." Consequently, while regarding the will as primary, he wrote a poetry of the act, a poetry that gives an objective account of man's existence as a teleological creature. This

³³ The Complete Works, II, 86.

poetry takes the act--which has its source in vital feeling or the mystical--as its subject but approaches it objectively.³⁴

The poetry of the act is characterized by those qualities that Santayana referred to in his remark on Lucretius, but in the Life of Reason, where he is speaking theoretically for himself rather than describing the works of another, he states more directly the virtues of such a poetry.

If a poet could clarify the myth he begins with, so as to reach ultimate scientific notions of nature and life, he would still be animated by vivid feeling and its imaginative expression. Tragic, fatal, intractable, he might well feel that the truth was; but these qualities have never been absent from that half-mythical world

³⁴ I use the phrase "poetry of the act" rather than "action poetry" because, should the latter exist--and I do not believe that it does--it would "rest on the enormous assumption that the artist accepts as real only that which he is in the process of creating." (Harold Rosenberg, p. 31). Wallace Stevens approaches such a poetry in his notion of the poem as an act of the mind, but reality is too intransigent and his fictions too self-conscious for him to take the creative act as a self-sufficient reality. Had he been able to, he would not have qualified the act by making it an affair of the mind. Actually, the poet, who works solely with imagination on language, a medium created by the mind, is at a disadvantage in a voluntaristic universe from which material reality has not been completely expunged. The plastic artist, working on matter with his hands, literally acts when he creates and sees nature being transformed before his eyes by the power of human will; but the poet never has that immediate satisfaction and therefore is prone to doubt the efficacy of his creative power, especially in a materialistic culture in which his efforts are clearly without significant consequences. Accordingly, Emerson himself, who was the first in America to define the voluntaristic universe as eternal creativity and who made the poet the hero of that world, was frustrated and saddened by his inability to produce a substantial change in American life. Like Emerson and the main stream of American poetry issuing from him, Robinson regards spiritual reality as creative power, from which it follows that man genuinely exists only while he is in the process of creating; but instead of writing poems that are direct acts of the will, Robinson wrote poems about the structure of the act from the perspective of reason. As I said earlier in this chapter, there was something besides the creative act that was real for him and that checked his poetic impulse, and the same is apparently true for American poets in general.

through which poets, for want of a rational education, have hitherto wandered. A rational poet's vision would have the same moral function which myth was asked to fulfill, and fulfilled so treacherously. Such a poet would no doubt need a robust genius. If he possessed it, and in transmitting all existence falsified nothing, giving that picture of everything which human experience in the end would have drawn, he would achieve an ideal result. In prompting mankind to imagine, he would be helping them to live. His poetry, without ceasing to be a fiction in its method and ideality, would be an ultimate truth in its practical scope. It would present in graphic images the total efficacy of surrounding things. Such a poetry would be more deeply rooted in human nature than in any casual fancy, and therefore more appealing to the heart. The images it had worked out would confront passion more intelligibly than does the world as at present conceived, with its mechanism half ignored and its ideality half invented . . .³⁵

Though he perhaps did not triumphantly attain this ideal, this is the kind of poetry Robinson attempted to write, and with varying degrees of success did write. Like Lucretius, he wanted to free men of illusion and superstition by means of a candid knowledge of life so that they could live without fear and trembling. For example, he had Amaranth, the voice of truth, say to Fargo,

To a few
I murmur not in vain: they fly from here
As you did, and I see no more of them
Where, far from this miasma of delusion
They know the best there is for man to know;
They know the peace of reason. (1392)

Robinson's idea of maturity in men and poetry is the same as Santayana's; it is the domination of reality through rational insight, which entails simultaneously a solemn recognition and assent to truth and a maintenance of faith in the value of life and the dignity of man. This is the

³⁵ The Life of Reason (New York, 1955), pp. 333-334.

sentiment of reason, the fundamental emotion with which he realistically faced the modern world.

To interpret life, which was, as he understood it, the poet's task, Robinson sacrificed the color and detail of the human scene along with passion, love, and joy to know the peace of reason. And though he could not give himself wholly to the mystic side of himself, he did give himself wholly to poetry approached intellectually, realistically, or objectively, going as far as he could go in that direction. As a result he is, in the end, preëminently modern. Consistent with his empiricism and intellectualism, he jettisons the past, including Christianity and European rationalism, and retains the present and the new and the uniquely American. I quoted him in the first chapter as saying that a non-theological religion was on the way. Following the predilection of the Transcendentalists for Eastern concepts of self, time, and thought, he shuns myth and dogma for the existential facts of life, concentrating his attention on what Hart Crane called the connective experience. By insisting upon the unglossed reality itself, and yet affirming life, and by never abandoning man's responsibilities to man, he makes a contribution in his poetry to the achievement of such a naturalistic religion. His achievement, his stature as the greatest poet of his generation and as a major American poet, lies in the thoroughness and consistency with which he explored the being of man in this direction. Herein resides the profundity Henry Steele Commager admired, the "philosophical" depth and breadth which characterizes his poetry. Despite a strong feeling for the past, he boldly faced his twentieth-century questionings and apprehensions and made poetry out

of the actual currents of thought and feeling during his time. In doing this he achieved in his own poetry the "hard, human pulse" and "the sure strength that fearless truth endows" which he admired in others.

Furthermore, by giving himself wholly to poetry in the manner he did, he discovered that poetry was his light, but he also discovered, more generally, the Light available to man in a radically, irredeemably empirical world, one from which the Christian God has withdrawn and in which material-mechanical nature is an alien field. His poetry reveals man's chill, stark predicament in the modern world, but at the same time it wrests from this world the illumination necessary to sustain and guide the spirit. Part of the fearless truth he achieved is a clear-sighted understanding that life entails the simultaneous and antagonistic presence of reason and vital feeling. Like Emerson, he recognized that "human life is made up of two elements, power and form, and the proportions must be invariably kept if we would have it sweet and sound."³⁶ In order to live or to be man, it is necessary, he realized, to cherish the puzzling complexity and tragic dichotomy which inheres in every concrete, individual person, for to simplify rather than delicately balance antitheses is to repudiate vital and human existence.³⁷ To care for life, to be a humanist, is not to demand the

³⁶ The Complete Works, III, 65.

³⁷ Cf. Albert Camus, The Rebel (New York, 1954), especially the last chapter, "Moderation and Excess," pp. 261-273.

extreme; it is to "have the spirit of wise moderation and love of classical completeness."³⁸

But above all Robinson discovered that man stands alone and free; that, in fact, he is doomed to be free; that in the twilight of all absolutes, with the only certainty his immediate concrete experience, his life's meaning is his own doing. In the world of radical empiricism, in a world which is at heart an aesthetic phenomenon, man's burden is to create endlessly, and creativity, which is a dialectic of form and power, can result only from a novel encounter with reality. To exist, as Whitehead has somewhere said, is to have a degree of order, but to live is also to aspire for the destruction of old and the creation of new order; for only through creativity can the spirit's will to live indomitably defy all the tendencies toward death in nature and society and man himself, only by continuous creative activity can the spirit resist lapsing into inertia and becoming matter. Significantly, Robinson wrote poetry to his last day, editing proof for King Jasper on his death bed. Poetry was indeed his life and his light.

³⁸ US, p. 141.

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I, William Ronald Robinson, was born in Steubenville, Ohio, October 21, 1927. I received my secondary-school education in the public schools of Weirton, W. Va., and Raspesburg, Md., and my undergraduate training at the University of Kentucky and Ohio State University, the latter of which granted me the Bachelor of Arts degree in 1952. I received the Masters of Arts degree in 1956 and the Doctor of Philosophy degree in 1962, both from Ohio State University. While completing the requirements for these degrees, I taught freshman and sophomore English courses, part time for two and full time for six years.

I have accepted a position as Lecturer in English at the University of Virginia for the academic year of 1962-1963.