1966


Ronald Wesson Moran Jr

Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College

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WITH FIRM ADDRESS: A CRITICAL STUDY OF 26 SHORTER POEMS OF E. A. ROBINSON.

Louisiana State University, Ph.D., 1966
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WITH FIRM ADDRESS
A CRITICAL STUDY OF 26 SHORTER POEMS OF E. A. ROBINSON

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
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requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by

Ronald Wesson Moran, Jr.
B.A., Colby College, 1958
M.A., Louisiana State University, 1962
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### TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I SOME CONCLUSIONS AND A PLAN</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II THE SHORTER POEMS (1897, 1902, 1910)</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III THE SHORTER POEMS (1916)</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV THE SHORTER POEMS (1920, 1921, 1925)</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V IN CLOSING</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF WORKS CONSULTED</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

This study is an analysis and an appraisal of the most significant shorter poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson. The first chapter begins with a review of the body of periodical and book-length treatments of Robinson. To date, there is no extended study devoted exclusively to isolating and examining the poet's achievements in the shorter poem. The first chapter concludes with a discussion of the critical method employed in the selection and examination of the poems singled out for study.


Even though each of the twenty-six poems is discussed individually as a separate and distinct unit, there are certain consistencies in subject matter, themes, and techniques that are recognizable in the poems. These are discussed in the final chapter since their recurrence provides an index to the Robinson method in his most successful shorter poems.
CHAPTER I

SOME CONCLUSIONS AND A PLAN

This introductory chapter perhaps concludes more than it introduces. However, in light of the considerable amount of critical, historical, and biographical writings that Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869-1935), as both poet and man, has occasioned, the purpose of this chapter seems not only desirable but, in fact, indispensable. Above all, in the chapters that follow in this study, I want to make the best of Robinson's shorter poems accessible and meaningful to his ever-increasing number of readers. In order to demonstrate why there is a genuine need for my method of examining Robinson, I am going to review at some length the body of literature on his poetry. This introduction concludes with a statement of my critical approach.

It is probably of little value to dwell on the fact that Robinson, a three time Pulitzer Prize winner for his poetry, had to wait until 1916 when he was in his late forties to receive a substantial amount of critical recognition, even though he was publishing good poetry while he was in his twenties. Robinson was under thirty when The Children of the Night was published. It contained such fine poems

Robinson's three Pulitzer Prizes came in 1922 for the first edition of his Collected Poems, in 1925 for The Man Who Died Twice, and in 1928 for Tristram, the most popular of his Arthurian poems. The period from 1920 to 1930 was also rich in the number of book-length treatments of his poetry. Lloyd Morris, Ben Ray Redman, Mark Van Doren, and Charles Cestre all produced volumes on his work. These studies, with the exception of Cestre's, are relatively short and serve more to introduce rather than to discuss thoroughly Robinson's poetry.

In 1921 The Authors Club of New York honored Robinson by designating him as the first recipient of its annual award for an American author who, in the opinion of the Club, produces the most significant book of the year. In that year, the Macmillan Company issued Robinson's Collected Poems, which was responsible for the distinction. Two years later, in 1923, Lloyd Morris published The Poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson, which, as the subtitle states, is An Essay in Appreciation, and which was authorized by the Club.

This first book-length study of Robinson's works attempts to cover nearly everything, including the plays, that Robinson had produced to 1921. Morris' praise of Robinson is more than enthusiastic and mirrors the growing attention being paid to the man as the twentieth century moved on. Here is a capsule appraisal by Morris:
He stands with Whitman among those few poets to whom no aspect of human experience is insignificant, to whom no subject in human life lies outside the field of art. He is certainly the most thoughtful of our poets and the most responsive to intellectual experience. Beneath the immediate emotional effect of his poems is the spell of an intellectual magic unique in American poetry. But it is his consistent preoccupation with the effects of life upon the mind and heart of man, his insight into the central interests of life itself, his capacity for revealing the spiritual possibilities of even the most meagre contacts with actuality which constitute the most explicit distinction of his poetry.¹

Ben Ray Redman's Edwin Arlington Robinson, published in 1926, is primarily an introductory critical study although it does contain a biographical sketch. As number VI in the Modern American Writers series, issued by the Robert H. McBride & Company, Redman's study, like those by Yvor Winters and Emery Neff published some twenty years later, is limited in that it is not able to devote many words to any individual poem. It is a good introduction, though, and I draw upon it a few times in subsequent chapters.

Redman's concluding statement is interesting and provides something of an index of how Robinson's poetry was being received by the critical public in 1926:

His poetry is the product of a thoughtful, enveloping, deeply penetrating mind, that must at times achieve expression in unfamiliar terms and patterns, because it has traveled much alone. He is above all a biographer of souls, who is bound

to humanity by the dual bond of sympathy and humor. He is a poet in his rhythmic interpretation of existence, in his conception of the relations of human beings with other human beings and with the universe, and in his ability to marshal thought in language that sustains comparison with the best that has been called poetic. Less egocentric and less subjective than any other poet of his generation, he has, more truly than any other, given us a whole world of his making. . . . It is because I believe that Edwin Arlington Robinson has, precisely, this total vision, this grasp, and this consequent capacity, that I can think of him only as the greatest poet this country has yet produced.  

In 1927, just a year after Redman's book, Mark Van Doren published *Edwin Arlington Robinson*, a study which treats briefly the poet's life and comments on both his shorter and longer poems. Van Doren places most emphasis on *Tristram*, the most popular of Robinson's Arthurian poems. Like Redman's, Van Doren's work is more of an introduction to than a thorough analysis of the poetry; however, he does demonstrate that he is a competent Robinson student. Take, for example, these statements concerning Robinson's shorter poems:

Mr. Robinson's shorter poems are many and various, and the perfection they reach is remarkably many-sided. In blank verse, in talkative rhyme, in suave epigram, in running eloquence he has found his forms; in men of all conditions and characters he has found his material. But he still is consistent, as we have a right to expect all major poets to be, in his presentation of the problem which existence is. A little light in a great deal of darkness, a wisp of music in a universe of irregular and ominous drums—-it is in such images that he tells, with all the variety that an artist must

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achieve if we are to continue attentive, of man's never quite wholly vain struggle for self-respect. 3

In 1930 Charles Cestre's *An Introduction to Edwin Arlington Robinson* was issued by the Macmillan Company, Robinson's major publisher. Cestre's enthusiastic introduction is somewhat floridly written, and his interpretations and evaluations of individual poems seem, at times, more emotive than right. Cestre is convinced that Robinson is a major poet: "The co-existence in Robinson's poetical genius of the power of imaginative creation with the qualities of constructive thought, analytic scrutiny, strict decorum and just poise, is one of the reasons why I feel entitled to call him a modern classic." 4

The years from 1931 to 1941 saw three bibliographies of Robinson, 5 two brief personal memoirs published shortly after the poet's death in 1935, 6 the definitive biography, 7 the first of a series


of editions of Robinson's letters, and an intellectual study of his poetry. In 1937 the complete edition of Robinson's Collected Poems was issued by the Macmillan Company. But during the ten-year interval (1931-1941), there was no book-length critical study of Robinson's poetry. This is particularly interesting since in the ten-year period prior to this five book-length critical studies had been published. However, during the 1931-1941 period, a number of articles concerning the poet's work appeared in the journals.

The year 1946 is, to date, perhaps the most significant in terms of Robinson criticism and scholarship. It marks the publication of two important articles by Richard Crowder concerning the poet's critical reputation in the first half of the century (more on these later). But more importantly, it is the date of publication of Yvor Winters' compressed study, Edwin Arlington Robinson, issued by New Directions as a volume in The Makers of Modern Literature series. As one would expect from a book which is part of a series, Winters' study is necessarily limited in that it has to touch upon nearly everything that Robinson wrote and in that it has to include sections on the poet's life, sources, and so forth. However, Edwin Arlington Robinson is

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9 Estelle Kaplan, Philosophy in the Poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York, 1940).
particularly valuable, for it is the first book-length treatment that tries
to come to grips with what Robinson was trying to do and tries to
evaluate the poet's canon. This book also was instrumental in establish-
ing Robinson as a major American poet. And, then, as a critic around
whom controversy centered as it does now, Winters was attacked by a
number of Robinson students who objected to both his analyses and
evaluations. This, of course, led to articles in retort, all of which
made Robinson more widely and carefully read, and in turn, led to
better criticism of the poems. Winters' book also had the fortunate
effect of focusing emphasis on the poems, not on the man.

Although I am compelled to disagree on occasion with Winters' readings and judgments, I find that frequently he demonstrates an
incisive critical acumen. He cites sixteen of the twenty-six poems
that I treat in my study as either among Robinson's greatest or among
his better efforts. One of the most annoying aspects of Winters is the
ease with which he dismisses some of Robinson's shorter poems. At
times, it seems as if he does not even try to give the poems a
thorough reading. Such is the unhappy case with "Luke Havergal,"
one of Robinson's most brilliant efforts. Of course, the requirements
of the series for which Winters wrote might well be responsible, in
part, for some of the limitations of his book.

Since Winters is important as a Robinson critic and since the
poet's reputation has been affected considerably by Winters' approach,
I feel that it is necessary here to outline the critical method that Winters uses. In his study of Robinson, he does not spell out his method; this, however, is given full expression in In Defense of Reason.

Winters defines a poem as a "statement in words about a human experience."10 This, of course, tells us very little about the nature or the function of poetry. However, Winters is very explicit about where he feels value lies in the poem and about what the functions or duties of the poet are. The words "human experience" are germane to an understanding of Winters' critical approach. The effectiveness of the communication of this "human experience" is an important standard in his method:

The poem is good in so far as it makes a defensible rational statement about a given human experience (the experience need not be real but must be in some sense possible) and at the same time communicates the emotion which ought to be motivated by that rational understanding of that experience. This notion of poetry, whatever its defects, will account both for the power of poetry and of artistic literature in general on its readers and for the seriousness with which the great poets have taken their art.11

Winters' appraisal of poetry rests, in large part, on the presence of formal elements in the poem and on form in general. He sees form


11Ibid., pp. 11-12.
as having a two-fold nature: (1) a progression of thoughts structured rationally and (2) a rhythm working individually within each line but also permeating the entire poem as a unit. The poet employs devices such as rhymes, cadences, and so on, all of which express "human experience." His function is to present to the reader, in an ordered and formal way (proportionate to the experience with which he is working), the values that he has found as the result of a "sharpening and training of his sensibilities." 13

The moral attitude expressed by the poet toward the experience is of major importance to Winters. However, he does state that he doesn't want "to establish poetry as a substitute for philosophy or religion." 14 But for Winters the value of the poem is partly determined by the value of the morality expressed: a good poem "represents the comprehension on a moral plane of a given experience" and "the poem will be most valuable" when it "represents the most difficult victory," if "granted it achieves formal perfection." 15

Here, then, is what Winters feels his pragmatic approach has to offer:

\[12\textit{Ibid.}, p. 12.\]
\[13\textit{Ibid.}, p. 17.\]
\[14\textit{Ibid.}, p. 24.\]
\[15\textit{Ibid.}, p. 25.\]
Poetry, if pursued either by the poet or by the reader, in the manner which I have suggested, should offer a means of enriching one's awareness of human experience and of so rendering greater the possibility of intelligence in the course of future action; and it should offer likewise a means of inducing certain more or less constant habits of feeling, which should render greater the possibility of one's acting, in a future situation, in accordance with the findings of one's improved intelligence. It should, in other words, increase the intelligence and strengthen the moral temper: these effects should naturally be carried over into action, if, through constant discipline, they are made permanent acquisitions.16

In 1948, two years after Winters' study on Robinson, Emery Neff's *Edwin Arlington Robinson* was published in the American Men of Letters series. Neff's work includes a considerable amount of biographical material. In addition, he discusses Robinson as a writer indigenous to New England, and he pays some attention to sources that Robinson perhaps used. Also, Neff gives chapters of his study over to generalized treatments of *Captain Craig* and other longer poems. One of the poems he singles out for an extended discussion is "The Man Against the Sky," which, he argues, "towers above any other poem written upon American soil."17 It is perhaps interesting to note that Winters sees very little to admire in this poem. In the final analysis, Neff's work suffers from his paying too little attention to Robinson's finer poems and in calling attention at least once to nearly every Robinson title.


In 1952, the Macmillan Company issued a critical study of Robinson's poetry by Ellsworth Barnard, who, like Winters and Neff, discusses nearly every Robinson poem. Rather than assign space to biographical, historical, and source considerations, Barnard organizes his study according to stylistic and thematic patterns that he sees in the poetry. In his Preface, Barnard claims that his book, "despite its length, makes no pretensions to being 'definitive.'" And in "A Foreword on Criticism," Barnard states that he "will not attempt absolute evaluations." Barnard has this to say concerning his critical approach:

Twenty-odd years of encountering such contradictory opinions, those expressed by Winters and Neff in regard to the value of "The Man Against the Sky," have convinced the present writer, who once held somewhat differing views of the critic's function, of the absurdity of pretending that any literary judgment is more than the expression of a personal taste. And if this conviction seems to lead to esthetic nihilism, my answer is that it seems to me to be in accord not only with the facts but with the philosophy that most of us say we believe in.

Barnard continues:

Literature is made to be read, if not by the public, at least by a public, and not merely by specialists. The literary artist is "a man speaking to men"; and so, properly, is the

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19Ibid., p. 3.

20Ibid., p. 4.
literary critic, whose primary function is to awaken in a widening circle of readers the state of mind and the quality of feeling that make possible the enjoyment of "good literature."21

From the foregoing remarks, it is obvious that Barnard does not follow any particular school of criticism; and furthermore, from other remarks made in the Foreword, it is obvious that Barnard has little sympathy toward any critical school that states dogmatically that a poem should or should not be, or do, one thing or another. What Barnard does is to establish certain areas of inquiry into which he feels Robinson's poetic canon fits easily. This leads him to devote chapters to the poet's seeming obscurity, his language, his characters, and so forth. While Barnard's readings often are valuable, he fails to discuss the poems as poems—as units, as complete wholes. He only examines the poems or parts of poems as they fit into one or more of his areas of inquiry. This approach makes it difficult for the serious student of Robinson's poetry to become involved with the poems as he meets them in Barnard's pages; he becomes involved rather in Barnard's categories.

Two years after Barnard's study appeared, Edwin S. Fussell added to the list of book-length studies on Robinson with Edwin Arlington Robinson: The Literary Background of a Traditional Poet. Fussell's major thesis is this:

21 Ibid., p. 5.
The greatest poetry of the past was to furnish him, not only models and techniques of construction, not only the means of fashioning his experience and his evaluation of it into plastic equilibrium, but was also to give him his evaluation in criteria and the very tools of sensibility and thus enable him to apprehend the life around and within him that was the basic material of his poetry.\textsuperscript{22}

The conclusions that Fussell reaches are, I think, important; however, his source-influence approach is perhaps strained at times.

An interval of thirteen years elapsed before the next book-length study of Robinson appeared. In the interim, though, two pamphlets, which will be discussed later, were printed. In 1965 after having worked a number of years compiling and collating public and personal material relevant to the poet, Chard Powers Smith brought out \textit{Where the Light Falls: A Portrait of Edwin Arlington Robinson}. Smith met Robinson at the MacDowell Colony when the former was a young, promising poet, and the two remained close friends for the last eleven years of Robinson's life, the period from 1928 to 1935. In fact, Smith was at Robinson's bedside as the poet lay dying. Both Smith's admiration of and reverence for Robinson are everywhere apparent in \textit{Where the Light Falls}.

Smith refers to his study of Robinson as a "portrait." However, it emerges as considerably more than that. The book is divided into

four parts; parts one and four are portraits of the poet based primarily on Smith's personal knowledge of the man; part two is a biographical study in which Smith correlates certain of the poems with events and people in Robinson's life, with particular emphasis on the ways in which Robinson's family, especially his brother Herman and his sister-in-law Emma, find themselves incorporated into the poems; part three is a sound analysis of the major motifs of the poetry. It is part three that is most valuable to students of Robinson's poetry. Smith's study also reveals information concerning the man and his poetry heretofore unknown or unavailable.

While Where the Light Falls is an important contribution to the body of knowledge on Robinson, it is perhaps most significant for rescuing Robinson from the charge of his being a man preoccupied only with death, mental aberrations, and the like. An authority on New England Calvinism, Smith speaks knowingly on Robinson's philosophic positions. However, it is only honest to add that Smith's infrequent evaluative pronouncements seem, at times, to be weak and unsubstantiated. He is a fine scholar but not a good judge of the value of a poem.

Robinson also has received considerable attention in journals and pamphlets and in portions of books. He had to wait, however, as Allen Tate tells us, until 1916 for "wide attention." Tate continues
that with *The Man Against the Sky* in 1916 "Mr. Robinson stepped quickly into the front rank of American poetry." 23

That Robinson during the second decade of the century was beginning to be noticed seriously is attested to by Amy Lowell's devoting some seventy pages to him in her *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*, published in 1917. Her enthusiasm for Robinson's work is close to overwhelming, and it is my impression that she loved but did not really understand Robinson's poetry. In any event, her critical appraisal of him at this time serves at least as an index of Robinson's fate at the hands of the critics:

In reading Mr. Robinson, it is always necessary to note the almost unapproachable technique with which his poems are wrought. He employs the most complete reticence, he permits himself no lapses from straight-forward speech to force a glittering effect. But the effect is never common-place, never even unpoetic. It is indeed, art concealing art. So admirable is his technique, that not only do we get the essence of poetry in these astringent poems *The Children of the Night*, we get drama. . . . They appear simple, these poems; and they are really so immensely difficult. Mr. Robinson has carefully studied that primary condition of all poetry: brevity; and his best effects are those gained with the utmost economy of means. 24

23 Allen Tate, "Edwin Arlington Robinson," *Collected Essays* (Denver, Colorado, 1959), p. 358. This essay appeared first in a slightly different form as "Again O Ye Laurels," *The New Republic*, LXXVI (October 25, 1933), 312-313. Since the only relevant changes involved from the original essay to the one appearing in the *Collected Essays* are minor stylistic ones, I prefer to quote from the *Collected Essays*. The thoughts are exactly the same.

In a 1933 review of Talifer, Tate calls Robinson the "most famous of living American poets," and then offers this pronouncement: "In his early years he wrote some of the finest lyrics of modern times: these are likely to be his permanent claim to fame." Despite this praise of the lyrics, Tate is not convinced that Robinson deserves the rank of major poet, primarily because he "has no epos, myth, or code, no suprahuman truth, to tell him what the terminal points of human conduct are, in this age. . . ."

In 1935, two years after Tate had labeled Robinson as one "who has given us a score of great lyrics. . . .," Robert Frost was asked to contribute the Introduction to Robinson's last volume of original poetry, King Jasper: a Poem. While the Introduction tells the prospective reader nothing about the volume it introduces, it does contain this small bit of praise, which, I think, coming from Robinson great contemporary, is worth reproducing here: "For forty years it was phrase on phrase on phrase with Robinson, and every one the closest delineation of something that is something. Any poet, to resemble him in the

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25 Tate, p. 358.
26 Loc. cit.
27 Ibid., p. 364.
28 Ibid., p. 363.
least, would have to resemble him in that grazing closeness to the spiritual realities." 29

As I mentioned some pages before, the year 1946 is extremely significant in Robinson scholarship. Besides Winters' book, two articles by Richard Crowder appeared concerning the poet's critical reputation. In the most important of the two, Crowder gathers judgments by Robinson's poetic contemporaries in regard to the value of his work. Amy Lowell, Robert Hillyer, Horace Gregory, R. P. Blackmur, Yvor Winters, Mark Van Doren, and John Crowe Ransom are but a few of those who voiced opinions about Robinson's poems. And as can be expected, their criticism is as varied as their critical positions. Crowder concludes that the poet-critics, however, are consistent on this one point: "The poets . . . objected from the beginning to Robinson's circumlocution and to his cold, colorless vocabulary, though they found certain poems to be exceptionally brilliant. In defining his language, they found it to parallel quite closely everyday usage." 30 Crowder seems to overlook Amy Lowell's praise, of Robinson's brevity, which I have quoted.


Crowder summarizes what the poet-critics found lacking in Robinson's poetry:

They called attention . . . to the paucity of concrete imagery in his poems. They regretted, in general, the over-all lack of musicality /Barnard devotes a chapter to "Words and Music"/, the apparent inability to construct a simple sentence, the coldness of diction. The majority found fault with Robinson's obscurity. There was division as to the level of power in his lines, possibly indicating that many of Robinson's concepts were intellectually held but not emotionally experienced, and so lacked the strength of expression that comes of total conviction.31

Despite their objections to Robinson's poetry, Crowder finds that the poet-critics were convinced that Robinson did make positive contributions to "the craft of verse-writing in America":

. . . they were struck by the precision and cleanness of his style, the care with which he stayed near to well-established forms . . . . The poet-critics noted further Robinson's skill in bringing blank verse to perfection; at least until within a very few years of his death. They noted his occasional bursts of lyricism, his tightly-packed quality. Finally, everyone agreed that he had shown American poets the important but difficult paths of austerity, dignity, and complete honesty.32

In his other study of Robinson's reputation published in 1946, Crowder argues that at the end of the nineteenth century "readers of poetry wanted only highly polished verses, no matter how remote and cold. Robinson's poetry /His early poems/, cast in the usual forms, appeared conventional enough to draw only modest notice from most

31Ibid., p. 13.
32Ibid., pp. 13-14.
readers."\(^{33}\) Crowder continues that the critics of the thirties and the first half of the forties "have looked for something besides conventional stanza forms and carefully polished lines: they have found unadorned phrases, candid, sincere expressions of genuine emotion, and intellectual fearlessness upon which the new poetry has been fashioned."\(^{34}\) And for these reasons, Crowder concludes, Robinson's reputation has improved even though, we are led to assume, the quality of his poetry remained the same.

Also writing in 1946, Malcolm Cowley contends that around the year 1912 Robinson "owed a debt . . . to the crusaders for free verse and especially to Amy Lowell, who greatly admired his work."\(^{35}\) Cowley continues that because of this campaigning "the magazines were printing more poems, including Robinson's, and the public was buying more of his books."\(^{36}\) Also, Cowley notes that by the beginning of the third decade of the century the younger poets of the time looked upon Robinson "as a figure to be revered from a distance," primarily

\(^{33}\) Richard Crowder, "The Emergence of E. A. Robinson," *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, XLV (January 1946), 89.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., p. 97.


\(^{36}\) Loc. cit.
because "Robinson was then the only American poet who had achieved not merely success but an integrated career and one that was marked by complete absorption in his art." 37

In a 1954 article which was later to be incorporated, in part, into his fine pamphlet on Robinson, Louis O. Coxe calls attention to what he feels is a decline in the poet's reputation; he remarks bitterly that "nowadays Robinson ekes out a survival in 'anthology pickle' . . . and few readers try to go beyond, for if any poet has been damned by the anthologists it is Robinson." 38 It seems that on this point of Robinson's decline in reputation, which should probably be termed neglect, Coxe is mistaken, for in the period from 1946 to 1954, no less than four book-length studies on the poet were published, along with forty-six articles, including Coxe's. This hardly adds up to neglect, especially since a number of the articles are concerned with explicating some of Robinson's finest shorter poems. Coxe concludes his article by stating that Robinson is the major American poet of our era, with only T. S. Eliot as a peer." 39

The forementioned pamphlet by Coxe is number seventeen in the University of Minnesota series. Published in 1962, it is a critical-

37 Loc. cit.


39 Ibid., p. 266.
biographical study in which Coxe calls Robinson "a late Romantic, a Victorian, a Transcendentalist whose lust after the abstract was inveterate and nearly always, when indulged, destructive." Apart from the rather abstract labeling, Coxe's work is good. One of his valuable contributions is his discussion of Robinson's shorter poems. It is interesting to note here that one of the more recent changes for the better in Robinson scholarship and criticism lies in the fact that less emphasis is being placed on Robinson's longer efforts and measurably more on his shorter. Coxe is impressed mostly by what he calls the "mixed" lyric: "Robinson's greatest triumphs and happiest effects derive from the 'mixed' lyric, the poem rooted in situation which combines narrative, lyrical, and ironic, often humorous, qualities with the intent of creating a more complex emotional state in the reader than that effected by the 'pure' lyric." In the "mixed" lyric genre, Coxe places such Robinson poems as "The House on the Hill," "Veteran Sirens," and "New England," all of which I single out for excellence in my study.


41Ibid., pp. 43-44.

42Ibid., p. 44.

From the preceding tour of Robinson scholarship and criticism, certain conclusions can be drawn. Most of Robinson's readers are in agreement that the poet's forte is the shorter poem. Allen Tate is correct in assuming that "his permanent claim to fame" lies in his lyrical accomplishments. Also, there seems to be a consensus of critical opinion that certain of his shorter poems are brilliant and rank among the finest in the English language. This same consensus also argues that frequently Robinson is difficult to understand— that his "meanings," in a rational content sense, are hard to find. How true this may be is questionable. Robinson is not that difficult; I am convinced that problems concerning interpretation of a number of his poems are due primarily to careless and indolent readings. This situation has been remedied somewhat by scattered interpretive essays in the journals.

Existing book-length studies that purport to be analytical (but not wholly evaluative) treat nearly all, if not all, of Robinson's poetry. And, to date, Robinson scholars and critics have found it necessary to search out categories in which to place the poems, particularly the
shorter efforts, categories based upon motif, subject matter, and/or technique. All too often this kind of approach results in a straining to find these categories, which tends to sacrifice integrity of the individual poem.

My method of examining the poetry of Robinson is new in light of what already has been done on it. I am going to examine the twenty-six shorter poems that I consider to be valuable. My approach is both analytical and evaluative; I try to explain what and how the poems mean and to determine wherein their excellence lies. In effect, then, I present intensive readings of the best of Robinson. I share the critical consensus that Robinson's shorter poems represent his outstanding achievement. But not all of his short poems are significant. The twenty-six poems I have selected are gleaned from the poet's most productive thirty-five years. Only in his last ten years, most of which were devoted to the longer poem, did Robinson fail to produce a short poem that belongs in my study.

I agree with Coxe that "all of Robinson's poetry assumes that one will want to find the paraphrasable element the poet has carefully provided." And I insist that a competent reader must be able to recognize what the poet is trying to say in the poem if the poem is to be of value to him. At times, though, to discover what the poet is

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43 Ibid., p. 31.
trying to say is not a particularly easy task; it may and usually does involve a close examination of the poem. At this point, the findings of scholars and critics can illuminate difficult passages and those that seem, on the surface, right but which, in reality, involve more than what the first response invites.

I insist also that a poem of merit is a complete and concrete whole. What and how the poem means can depend on experiences that the poet has had, on experiences in which he has not been a participant but an observer, and so on. And when these external points of reference are made apparent, the complexion of the poem can change. However, a short poem, above all, is a work of art and should be examined as such. When a reader experiences a poem on the pages of a magazine and does not recognize the poet, he can approach the poem more closely as a work of art than he could if he immediately recognized the author and then made the associations which could, and probably would, affect both his interpretive and evaluative conclusions. I am here asserting only that the poem should be read largely within the confines of the page on which it appears; in the final analysis, this is where judgment ought to rest.

It is impossible, though, to shut one's mind from the associations in the case of a known and established poet—to be objective in the most comprehensive sense.

This being granted, a poem is made by a person who has commitments to the human condition; and this poem is read by persons who have their own commitments. Problems can and frequently do arise when there is a conflict between the attitudes expressed in the poem and those held
by the readers. It is necessary now to ask: What is the role of beliefs and acceptance in the evaluation of poetry? In his study, The Rhetoric of Fiction, Wayne C. Booth acknowledges this problem when he states that when enjoyment of a literary work is concerned, "differences of belief, even in the sense of abstract, speculative systems, are always to some extent relevant, often seriously hampering, and sometimes fatal."44

What Booth says about fiction also applies to poetry: "The implied author of each novel is someone with whose beliefs on all subjects I must largely agree if I am to enjoy his work. . . . It is only as I read that I become the self whose beliefs must coincide with the authors. . . . The most successful reading is one in which the created selves, author and reader, can find complete agreement."45 Two additional statements by Booth strike at the heart of this problem: (1) "... our convictions even about the most purely intellectual matters cannot help fundamentally affecting our literary responses"; (2) "... even the greatest of literature is radically dependent on the concurrence of beliefs of authors and readers."46

To those who argue that objectivity is the only valid critical approach and the only basis for judgment, Booth replies that there is no real way to eliminate human considerations from a work of art. True, he

46Ibid., p. 140.
contains, some values are more important than others, but nevertheless
value in a moral sense cannot help influence even the most objective of
readers: "The problem for the reader is thus really that of discovering
which values are in abeyance and which are genuinely... at work."47

The point of contention here really concerns where value lies in
the poem. Stated another way: Does one judge the poem only as a work
of art, or should he also weigh the value of what is being expressed?
Certainly, the way in which the poem is presented is of major impor-
tance, and no legitimate approach to poetry underplays matters of dic-
tion, rhythm, form, unity, and so forth. And, in addition, attitudes are
not really measurable in any valid sense unless a specific code, moral
or otherwise, is recognized and agreed upon by both the poet and his
readers. However, attitudes vary widely between and among individuals
and peoples. What may be right and good for "x" may be wrong and bad
for "y" because of, say, religious differences. And so on and on. To
find the proper path through this wood is, in the final analysis, perhaps
impossible. No critical theory that talks about beliefs and acceptance
has itself found universal acceptance--another example of attitude
distance.

I do not hold that the reader must believe in or accept the attitude
expressed in the poem; but if a given reader agrees with this attitude,
then all the better at that time for that reader, that poet, and that poem.
Of course, as Booth argues, it is extremely difficult to extricate beliefs

47Ibid., p. 144.
and acceptance from the evaluative process. But if the New Critics go too far in demanding total objectivity (a probable impossibility), they are at least looking in the right direction. This is not to say that a poem should not be a vehicle for attitude development; it is to say that the attitude is there and that its being there is important. Still, evaluation of the poem must not rest on whether the reader is in harmony with the attitude expressed in the poem. The seriousness and significance of the subject matter, its embodiment in terms of artistic quality, and the completeness of the poem as a self-sufficient entity are the proper objects of evaluation. The worth of the theme and the resulting attitude are important but not easily measurable.

I have chosen these twenty-six poems for discussion in my study because they demonstrate the qualities that have made Robinson a major poet. The subjects he treats in these poems are serious and significant, and his themes reflect that he is fully aware of the painful essence of living and of the need for man to try to understand his fellow man and to have compassion for him. Robinson is a perceptive observer who does not pretend to judge the people and the situations that comprise the matter of his poems. I am impressed by what Robinson has to say in these twenty-six poems.

I am impressed also by Robinson's skill as a craftsman. In a number of these poems, Robinson avoids direct statements of his themes. Frequently, he places clues in a poem that the reader must discover and interpret for himself if the poem is to be significant to him. By employing this method, the reader must come himself to the understanding that is a prerequisite for compassion. Once the reader makes the necessary
discoveries, the poem registers powerfully on him and the poet's message is conveyed effectively. At times, understanding comes only at the very end of the poem when the poet ties together what devices he has used to give the poem coherence. Only in isolated incidents does it seem that Robinson perhaps should have included more specific information. And even when this does occur, the poem has other qualities that distinguish it.

Robinson's use of language in these twenty-six poems is consistently good and frequently brilliant. In a number of his other poems (short, middle length, and long length), he tends to be wordy and to rely heavily on abstract language. These deficiencies are noticeably absent in these poems, in which the language is both concrete and appropriate. Robinson has the knack of being able to select just the right word. This is evidenced also in his choice of images drawn from the natural world, which are fresh and exciting and which have the additional value of being integrally related to what the poet is trying to say.

Robinson also ties each poem together neatly so that once the reader experiences the poem he feels that the poet needs to say nothing else. Robinson achieves unity frequently by placing at appropriate places throughout the poem words relating to a single concept, such as to the act of seeing, which seems to be Robinson's favorite pattern of imagery. At times, irony is the device he employs to unite the poem into a complete and concrete whole.

In the three chapters devoted to discussions of the individual poems, I hope to sweep out some of the cobwebs woven in and around
these twenty-six poems. My ultimate purpose is to make them understandable. Although I am taking the poems one by one, I discuss in the concluding chapter some of the consistencies in subject matter, motif, and technique that I find in the poems and that help make Robinson a major poet. Since these poems were composed over a period of some thirty-five years, they represent a continuum of effort and mirror the Robinson method in the shorter poem.

CHAPTER II

THE SHORTER POEMS (1897, 1902, 1910)

"Luke Havergal"

Of all of Robinson's shorter poems, "Luke Havergal"\(^1\) has been the one most widely explicated. Critics agree generally that it is an exceptionally fine poem, despite their inability to identify the speaker and the two characters and their inability to fix upon motifs. Robinson himself never said anything to clear up the critical confusion. Chard Powers Smith, who calls the poem "the only surely great one of Robinson's... Harvard period,"\(^2\) argues that the poet's references to "Luke Havergal" as "a piece of deliberate degeneration" and as "my comfortable abstraction" are misleading in the characteristic Robinson manner.\(^2\) The speaker of the poem does not give any clues to his identity until the beginning of the third stanza when he states: "Out

\(^1\) Edwin Arlington Robinson, *Collected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1937), pp. 74-75: subsequently, after the first mention of each poem treated in this study, page references to the Collected Poems will be placed in brackets in the text.

of a grave I come to tell you this." On the surface, the reader is led to believe that the speaker lives in death's kingdom.

"Luke Havergal" is an address from the speaker to Luke himself. Apparently, Luke has lost a woman (wife or lover) through death and presently is living a kind of death in life. The speaker first tells Luke to "Go to the western gate"; the rest of the poem presents a series of arguments through images to convince Luke of the need for him to commit suicide so that he can join his loved one. The western gate is obviously a symbol of death; the sun sets in the west just as life for Luke will find a setting down. Walter Gierasch reads the western gate as "the goal of faith . . . and trust . . . in the woman Luke seeks." However, on the literal level, Gierash sees the gate as perhaps the gate to "walled property or a walled town." He suggests further that "a large property or a town as symbol of life is not far-fetched, but as a symbol of restless activity it is more potent and fitting here."3 Richard P. Adams takes still another position concerning the gate and the ultimate meaning of the poem: "It may be significant, however, that he is instructed to go to the gate, not through it, and to listen for a call, not to join the caller. There is nothing in the wording of the poem that requires us to regard Luke's death as either imminent or desirable,

3Walter Gierasch, The Explicator, III (October 1944), Item 8.
and I prefer not to."\(^4\) I must disagree heartily with Adams here. In the third line of the poem, the speaker tells Luke to wait in the twilight "for what will come." The end of the day, it seems only logical to assume, should be equated with the end of life as we know it. Also, in the first stanza, the speaker refers to leaves that will whisper to Luke of his lost woman and "some,/ Like flying words will strike you as they fall." A falling leaf is a dead leaf; this supports the death motif introduced by the western gate and reinforced by the twilight. As the poem progresses, the idea of death is given additional impetus. Although Adams does not see Luke's death as "either imminent or desirable," he does admit that the poem is about death: "The most obvious meaning lies in the evident fact that it is an elegy, a poem about death, or, more precisely, about our attitudes toward death."\(^5\)

The second stanza begins with an emphatic "No," as if the speaker


\(^5\)Ibid., p. 132.
were encountering resistance from Luke. From this point on, it seems apparent that the speaker is, in effect, replying to questions that Luke has concerning his situation. The "No" is occasioned probably by Luke's implied question: "Is there nothing more for me to live for?"

The speaker responds:

> there is not a dawn in eastern skies
> To rift the fiery night that's in your eyes,

which I take to mean that there is no way in which Luke can find peace of mind on earth. The speaker continues:

> But there, where western glooms are gathering,
> The dark will end the dark, if anything.

The word "gloom" and the suggestive repetition of "dark" do more than simply imply the death motif. Ellsworth Barnard has this to say concerning the last line quoted: "Here we have what might be called a metaphor of the second degree: 'The dark' means 'death,' but the first death is that of the body (through suicide), which in the disordered mind of the bereaved lover promises to end his deathlike loneliness."6

I take the fifth and sixth lines of the second stanza to be the speaker's rebuttal to the Christian argument against self-destruction:

> God slays Himself with every leaf that flies,
> And hell is more than half of paradise.

In all probability, Luke has offered the Christian argument against suicide. The speaker is saying that God has created everything,

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6Barnard, p. 39.
including the leaves, and that every natural phenomenon is a part of
God, so to speak; consequently, God continually is killing himself.
And the speaker suggests here the paradox that life can come from death.
The life that Luke is forced to lead is worse than what the speaker offers
in what purports to be a life after death. Suicide in conventional
Christian theology can be punished by an eternal life in hell. To this
the speaker answers that either hell is not as bad as it is pictured to be
or that hell is at least better than Luke's present life. In the latter reading, "paradise" could refer to the former life that Luke and his love
shared together. But it is perhaps out of order to offer this interpreta-
tion. It is altogether possible, though, that the speaker's identification
can be gathered from his statement that "hell is more than half of para-
dise." Perhaps the speaker is Satan or, less dramatically, represents
a Satanic point of view. With this in mind, his eagerness to have Luke
commit suicide is thus explainable.

The third stanza begins with the speaker revealing that he has come
out of a grave to talk to Luke. He continues that he has come
to quench the kiss
That flames upon your forehead with a glow
That blinds you to the way that you must go.

This introduces Luke's second implied objection to committing suicide:
"If I kill myself, I will forfeit all sensuous pleasures and experiences
of this world." A. A. Raven's reading of the poem has particular applica-
tion here. His thesis is that Luke "is not contemplating death or suicide;
in fact, he is clinging to life in order to preserve its vivid memory of his love . . . . By his too vivid memory of the kiss on his brow he has been blinded to the way that he should go. In other words, the way to preserve love is not to struggle against time by living in the past, but to submit oneself to the future, i.e., to have faith." Adams takes the above lines "to mean that Luke is not to follow his sweetheart into death, but is to take a different way, which will be a better way to preserve the relationship that death has interrupted . . . . It will be bitter and will require faith." It is Adams' belief that Luke "is being urged not to die but to live, and to keep his love alive by accepting the bitter fact that his love is dead." Despite these arguments, I maintain that Luke is being urged to do away with himself and that the poem is structured by Luke's implied objections to suicide. The speaker substitutes being with the woman for whatever physical pleasure Luke might experience on earth: "Yes, there is yet one way to where she is." The "Yes" indicates again response to another implied question put forth by Luke: "Is there any way that I can be with her?" The next line poses a serious interpretive problem: "Bitter, but one that faith may never miss." The moment of the suicidal act is bitter, but the speaker adds that at least this way is one that "faith," meaning Christianity, would not at all

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8Adams, p. 133.
regret eliminating; this is probably what the enigmatic line means. The
speaker's ironic tone gives impetus to his argument against the conven-
tional Christian point of view.

The concluding stanza is the final stage in the argument for
suicide and against any objections that Luke might have to killing him-
self. The speaker tells Luke:

This is the western gate, Luke Havergal,
There are the crimson leaves upon the wall.
Go, for the winds are tearing them away,—
Nor think to riddle the dead words they say,
Nor any more to feel them as they fall;
But go, and if you trust her she will call.
There is the western gate, Luke Havergal—

Here, the speaker is trying to hurry Luke into the act by reference to the
winds tearing away the leaves and by his injunction not to try to puzzle
the meaning of death or to experience the physical sensation of leaves
as they fall upon his person. Apparently, Luke is just at the ripe
moment for death, and the speaker is concerned that if he does not do
it now, he never will. He is afraid that Luke will intellectualize his
situation (i.e. Christianity frowns upon suicide) or that he will enjoy
the physical (the speaker tries to dissuade Luke from this in the beginning
of the third stanza). He also calls upon Luke's sense of loyalty by using
the word "trust."

There is every reason to suspect that the woman in the poem com-
mitted suicide herself. This would account for the interest of the
speaker in Luke and, more importantly, it would account for the obvious
fact that Luke will go to hell and that his life in hell would not be that bad. This also explains, if the speaker is telling Luke the truth (that he will hear her call), her concurrence in the speaker's argument.

Perhaps the speaker, who is obviously aligned with death and probably with the spirit of hell, is, in reality, the subconscious mind of Luke and perhaps the conflict in the poem is within Luke's mind. His Christian upbringing and his enjoyment of the physical fact of being are on one side clashing with his desire to commit suicide, a desire precipitated by the tremendous sense of grief he feels over the loss of the woman. Whether Robinson wants the reader to believe that the voice "Out of a grave" is death personified, an agent of the devil, the devil himself, or just the manifestation of one layer of Luke's mind, is, in the final analysis, irrelevant. The nature of the arguments offered is not affected by the identity of the speaker. Yvor Winters feels that the speaker is the woman;\(^{9}\) Emery Neff thinks that the speaker is either the woman or "Havergal communing with himself."\(^{10}\) Whoever else, the speaker is certainly not the woman; the context of the poem simply does not afford that reading.

"Luke Havergal" presents the experience of a man contemplating death. Knowledge of whether or not Luke finally does kill himself is


\(^{10}\)Neff, p. 68.
not needed to make the poem any more impressive; what is important is that the poem gives complete knowledge of the factors with which Luke has to contend in this contemplation of death. Unfortunately, this poem has been the object of various misreadings; and despite the arduousness with which Robinson students have approached the poem, "Luke Havergal" at times emerges as anything but the poem which Robinson seems to have intended. Take, for example, this reading offered by Mathilde M. Parlett: "Luke Havergal has been studying the religions of the East. Failing to find there the answers to his questions, he remembers the arguments of a friend, now dead, who, though himself repelled by dogmatic, institutional Christianity, had found assurance in the example and teachings of Christ. In memory, the friend speaks 'out of a grave.' "

Richard Crowder's reading, or perhaps his lack of such, is another case in point: "... this poem should be regarded as an exercise in the manner, say, of the symbolists, not, of course, without serious overtones, but possibly without a great deal of specific meaning." Not as far-fetched as the two above explanations but still far enough astray to deserve mention is Lincoln Fitzell's interpretation of "Luke Havergal": "The theme is that death cannot be conquered, or the conquest of death be decisively attempted through the idle and sorrowful riddling of a mystery.

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11 Mathilde M. Parlett, The Explicator, III (June 1945), Item 57.
Only through abiding faith in the immortality of love can death be set at a distance and creatively understood as trial or interruption."

"Luke Havergal" ranks high in the Robinson canon. Adams admires the technical proficiency of the poem; but even more than that, he likes the poem because

The technical aspects are functional in carrying the quality of feeling that the poet meant to evoke. It is the quality of deep, earnest attention to an almost impossible-to-formulate idea, the reading for something which cannot quite be grasped, but which faith must have in order for life to continue. I doubt if it can be fully explained; but anyone who has experienced the death of a person he loved more than himself will have had the feeling I believe Robinson was reaching for."

The experience of the poem is complete and the poem is structured brilliantly. Robinson gives the poem coherence by the use of a refrain and by the use of a clipped echo in and at the end of each of the four stanzas, by a recurrent pattern of imagery, and by including only that which is absolutely essential to achieving his intended effect: to present an imagined human experience to which a competent reader will respond emotionally. He will recognize and understand the factors working on the protagonist and, consequently, will have compassion for him. I do not think that Robinson is presenting for judgment an attitude toward suicide.

Each of the four stanzas is composed of seven iambic pentameter lines and an eighth line of iambic dimeter. The eighth line repeats the


14Adams, 135.
end of the seventh line, which itself is a repetition of the first line of the stanza:

(1)

Go to the western gate, Luke Havergal--

(2)

No, there is not a dawn in eastern skies--
In eastern skies.

(3)

Out of a grave I come to tell you this--
To tell you this.

(4)

There is the western gate, Luke Havergal--

Through the refrain and clipped echo methods, Robinson gives the poem a movement which is instrumental in reflecting the ripeness of Luke for suicide, if, indeed, he ever does kill himself.

The use of the color red provides a consistent pattern of imagery as does Robinson's use of leaves. In the second line of the poem, the "vines clinging crimson on the wall," suggesting the season of autumn, another figure of death. And in stanza two, Luke's eyes are described in terms of a "fiery night." The color red also suggests blood; and although there is no mention of the way in which Luke would kill himself, the reader has a right to associate blood with death. Red, too, is the conventional color ascribed to hell: "And hell is more than half of paradise." In the third stanza, the speaker has come
to quench the kiss
That flames upon your forehead with a glow
That blinds . . .

Discussing the kiss in terms of "flames" and "glow" provides another illustration of red used in this pattern of imagery. Once again the "crimson leaves" are mentioned in the last stanza, providing the final usage of the color red.

The lines quoted so far testify to the appropriateness and concreteness of the words selected by Robinson. Here, in a poem that assuredly treats death, Robinson uses only the most concrete of words. It is to his credit and to the reader's pleasure that Robinson does not fall into abstractions in discussing death. At this point, it is interesting to note that most of the words in "Luke Havergal" consist of only one or two syllables. As a rule, Robinson's successes are poems in which words of more than two syllables are kept to a minimum.

The attitude expressed by the speaker is certainly not that held by the majority of readers as they experience "Luke Havergal." And perhaps one could argue that this is Robinson's attitude, though I think that this would be an injustice to the poet, not because of what is said, but because the dominant attitude in a poem does not necessarily have to reflect the poet's beliefs. In any event, "Luke Havergal" provides a kind of testing ground for the problem of belief and acceptance. It underscores the point that it is unnecessary for a reader to share the attitude of the poem in order to judge the poem as valuable.
"The House on the Hill"

Nowhere in Robinson is the tone of a poem cleaner than in the villanelle, "The House on the Hill." (81-82). Neff notes that the tune of the French form "helps keep 'The House on the Hill' from sentimentality."\(^{15}\) The speaker in the poem is not identified, but we can assume that it is Robinson who is talking about a house whose residents "are all gone away." The house is shut, still, and in the process of ruin and decay; the speaker says that now "There is nothing more to say" about the people who had lived there. Apparently, in the past they were the objects of gossip and inordinate curiosity, the reasons for which the speaker is not compelled to divulge (the form of the villanelle would not permit this anyway). Even though the house is deserted and what is said about the former residents is nothing but "poor fancy-play," the "we" of the poem (ordinary townspeople and the speaker as well) still "stray/Around the sunken sill."

I suggest that this poem is one in which Robinson is making an assertion on the inability of people to know, in the fullest sense, other people.

The speaker tries consciously to divorce himself from any personal involvement with the situation of the poem. The reader knows nothing about him; he uses the collective "we." In fact, the

\(^{15}\)Neff, p. 71.
reaction of the speaker to the situation of the house on the hill indicates that he is merely voicing the collective curiosity of the town, a curiosity which leads inevitably to conjecture, the conjecture being but shallow and insubstantial analysis.

Part of the effect of the poem is due to Robinson's mastery of technique in this his one experiment with the villanelle. A villanelle is composed of nineteen lines; the poem is divided into five tercets with a final stanza of four lines. In a villanelle, only two rhymes are employed throughout. However it is in Robinson's diction and movement, both of which work together harmoniously, that this little masterpiece of barrenness finds its perfection; the poem approximates the bleakness of the house it is describing and the futility of both the speaker and the townspeople to know the story of the house.

Some of the same elements that combine to make "Luke Havergal" successful are found also in "The House on the Hill." While the former is composed primarily of one- and two-syllable words, the latter is made up exclusively of words of one and two syllables. This makes the lines read quickly and gives them a suggestion of the barren. The fifth line of the poem, which reads, "The winds blow bleak and shrill," exemplifies this technique, as does, to a lesser degree, the line which precedes it: "Through broken walls and gray." The poem also combines judiciously stopped and end stopped lines, which sweep and jolt the reader from line to line, again approximating the movement of the wind
which blows "bleak and shrill." The use of the refrain is an integral
element in the villanelle: the same line is used to form lines one, six,
twelve, and eighteen; another line is used to form lines nine, fifteen,
and nineteen. Of course, this restriction can prove, in the hands of a
novice, to be a serious impediment; but in the hands of Robinson, it
serves well. The two basic rhyme lines are perfect for their melan-
choly and simplicity: (1) "They are all gone away"; (2) "There is
nothing more to say."

The use of two rhymes for a nineteen-line poem is particularly
hazardous (readers are somewhat in awe at Frost's use of only four
rhymes in his sixteen line "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening").
However, as with the refrain, Robinson rises to the task, and the two
rhymes of "—ay" and "—ill" not only unite the poem as they are
supposed to in the villanelle, but they do something in addition: the
sounds which they approximate are the sounds of wind racing around
and about the desolate house.

"Aaron Stark"

Another poem incisively clear is the sonnet "Aaron Stark," (86)
which is as carefully chiseled as the title suggests. It is one of the
relatively few shorter poems in which Robinson concentrates on both
the physical and mental characteristics of an individual. The octave
emphasizes Aaron's facial features:
WITHAL a meagre man was Aaron Stark,
Cursed and unkempt, shrewd, shrivelled, and morose.
A miser was he, with a miser's nose,
And eyes like little dollars in the dark.
His thin, pinched mouth was nothing but a mark;
And when he spoke there came like sullen blows
Through scattered fangs a few snarled words and close,
As if a cur were chary of its bark.

Usually, Robinson is more concerned with the psychological aspects of his characters. But with Aaron Stark, his personality apparently has played no mean part in shaping his physical appearance.

In the sestet, the emphasis shifts from the physical to the psychological. And here, coming into the poem, is a hint of pity for Aaron when the speaker, Robinson himself, calls Aaron a "loveless exile":

Glad for the murmur of his hard renown,
Year after year he shambled through the town,
A loveless exile moving with a staff;
And oftentimes there crept into his ears
A sound of alien pity, touched with tears,—
And then (and only then) did Aaron laugh.

The description of Aaron in the octave is particularly impressive with its precise details; in addition, the lines move with an incessant hardness: "The words in the octave that describe him are as hard as the money he worships." The simile of his eyes compared to "little

16 Barnard, p. 66.
dollars in the dark" not only marks Aaron as a miser but also suggests the aura of personal darkness that surrounds the man. The comparison of Aaron to a dog is made striking in the brilliant line that closes the octave.

After the octave pictures a man thoroughly despicable, the sestet attempts both to reinforce this portrait and to let the reader know subtly that Aaron is also a case for pity. The first line of the sestet calls attention to his "hard renown"; the word "hard" seems to be functionally ambiguous, meaning on one level his heartless quality and on another the personal difficulty that his image holds for him. However, it is with "loveless exile," two words which strike the reader as being moving, that the reader is to feel pity rather than scorn for Aaron, a man who moves with a staff. The staff also suggests that Aaron has a physical affliction, a reading anticipated by the previous line in which the verb "shambled" is employed to refer to Aaron's manner of walking through the town. But the poem ends on a note of hardness that is in keeping with the tone of the octave. It is almost as if the speaker caught himself feeling pity for the miser in perhaps a moment of weakness (or strength). However, the speaker's sarcastic reference to Aaron's laugh, emphasized by the use of parenthesis, demands that the reader at the end is not to feel pity for Aaron.
"The Clerks"

Just six short poems removed from "Aaron Stark" in the Collected Poems is "The Clerks," (90) a sonnet in which Robinson's sense of compassion for his fellow man is nowhere equaled. The speaker, again Robinson, has returned to a place where he had not been for an undisclosed period of time. He meets the same clerks, now firmly implanted in their ways, whom he had known years ago when they were young and when they

    dreamed of when young blood
    Was in their cheeks and women called them fair.

Although the clerks meet him with "an ancient air" and a "shop-worn brotherhood," the speaker claims that

    the men were just as good,
    And just as human as they ever were.

Robinson's preoccupation with the clerks ends with the octave.

The sestet is in the form of prescription and leveled at

    you that ache so much to be sublime,
    And you that feed yourselves with your descent.

The "you," collectively, refers to poets and kings mentioned in the fourth line of the sestet. However, the speaker probably also had in mind any and all in the world who seek out, and have an abstract concept of, greatness. Time emerges as the force with which all men, regardless of station, renown, birth, pretensions, talent, and so forth, have to content: "Poets and kings are but the clerks of Time."

The sestet closes impressively, with all men, from clerks to kings,
Tiering the same dull webs of discontent,
Clipping the same sad alnage of the years.

Up until the last two lines of the sonnet, the reader is unaware of the specific nature of the jobs the clerks hold. He knows only that they work in a shop, a factory of some sort. However metaphorical the closing lines are, the imagery of tiering webs and clipping alnage indicates that the clerks work in a textile mill; this knowledge is instrumental for the reader to recognize the particular brilliance that Robinson himself has woven into the fabric of the poem. Critics have been quick to recognize the value of the poem. For example, Winters calls it a masterpiece but says nothing else about it. Both Neff and Hermann Hagedorn, the poet's biographer, note respectively the poem's "simplicity concealing art" and its "deceptive simplicity" but fail to come to grips totally with "The Clerks" as a self-contained entity.

"The Growth of 'Lorraine'"

In the 1902 edition of Captain Craig, only one of the shorter poems, "The Growth of 'Lorraine,'" (191-192) stands out as a singular achievement. The poem consists of two sonnets concerning a woman

17 Winters, p. 5.
18 Neff, p. 70.
19 Hagedorn, p. 99.
named Lorraine, who was a prostitute or at least promiscuous and who commits suicide. There is a time lapse between the sonnets, the duration of which is unknown, and both are spoken by a man who knew Lorraine and who, it appears, once wanted to marry her.

The first sonnet begins when Lorraine is breaking whatever ties there are between herself and the speaker. Apparently, he has tried, to no avail, to convince Lorraine to give up something (at this point her promiscuity is not known to the reader). She tells him that

"Some creatures are born fortunate, and some
Are born to be found out and overcome,—
Born to be slaves, to let the rest go free;
And if I'm one of them (and I must be)
You may as well forget me and go home."

Lorraine believes firmly that her condition is congenital and that she is a slave to the passion (whatever so far it is). There is a suggestion in these lines that her problem is sexual, but only a suggestion. The antipodal states of slavery and freedom provide an interpretive problem. The phrase, "'to let the rest go free,'" could be read in a sacrificial context; that is, other women are free, in some respect, because she, and others like her, are being sacrificed on the altar of slavery. Or, in a sexual sense, the clause could mean that her body goes free; that is, she, and others like her, submit willingly to men and, consequently, are slaves to the sexual passion and the men that keep them.
In the sestet Lorraine states that "'I should never try to be content'" and that "'I've gone too far; the life would be too slow.'"

It is at this point that the reader becomes aware of the abnormal sexual passions that bind her. She then continues that

"Some could have done it--some girls have the stuff; But I can't do it: I don't know enough."

These seemingly simple lines are really quite problematic. On the surface it appears that Lorraine is admitting that she is so far steeped in this life of sin that she is unable to extricate herself, that perhaps she is ignorant to the point of being unable to do anything else. However, another reading is possible. The third line of the sestet ends with a period; a colon ends the second line, and there is a semicolon pause within the third. One would expect, with this grammatical structure established, that a series of clauses separated by semicolons would follow. Since a period is used, the reader has the right to assume that a new train of thought may emerge. If this is the case then the lines in question could read in paraphrase something like this:

some girls, because of their mental and physical natures, are able to endure (and probably enjoy) a promiscuous life; but Lorraine, because of her make-up, simply cannot take the demands exacted upon her. The clause, "'I don't know enough,'" could mean also that she has an insatiable hunger for sexual knowledge. Read in this way, the sestet, then, portrays a woman who is caught in a situation, the pathos of which rests in her inability to reconcile conflicting tensions--on the
one side, her physical and mental weaknesses, on the other side, her carnal needs. The sestet ends dramatically with Lorraine exclaiming that she is "'going to the devil,'" to which the speaker replies, "And she went."

The substance of the second sonnet concerns a letter that the speaker receives from Lorraine, in which she states that when he finds it, she will already be dead. Her letter, of course, is her suicide note. The speaker admits that neither surprise nor grief took hold of him when he read her note. In the note, she tells that she took, not one, which was sufficient, but five drops of poison; this was no half-hearted attempt at self-destruction.

It is interesting to note that Lorraine addresses the speaker as "friend" twice in the second sonnet, although the extent of their relationship is never made explicitly clear. She knows that the speaker will not mind if she addresses him as friend, "'For I would have you glad that I still keep/ Your memory.'" The fact that he is the recipient of her suicide note indicates certainly that their past relationship was certainly more than just on a purely physical basis.

The last three lines of the second sonnet reveal powerfully Lorraine's emotional and physical states at the time of her death. She was "'Impenitent, sick, shattered'"; however, she could not even then

"curse
The love that flings, for better or for worse,
This worn-out, cast-out flesh of mine to sleep."
So she calls her sexual passions her love and with the expression "'for better or for worse'" even suggests that she was married to these very passions. I think it significant that her death was not occasioned by any sense of remorse, shame, or guilt, but rather by her general degenerate physical condition. Barnard notes in Lorraine's last words "something of the quality of Hamlet's 'the rest is silence'--something of relief that the tempestuous voyage across a sea of troubles at last is ending, and something of certitude that in the undiscovered country beyond there will at last be peace." Neff, I think, completely misses the point in his analysis of Lorraine's mind: "... the memory of her lover's faith in her gives at length the courage which rescues her from degradation." It was Lorraine's time to sleep and she dies impenitent.

To some readers, the meaning of "The Growth of 'Lorraine'" could be obscured by the curious title. The reader asks, and rightly so, "How has Lorraine grown?" and "What is the nature of this growth?" Before these questions can be examined, it is well to keep in mind that the title should be read in light of the speaker; that is to him Lorraine's death by suicide represents growth. He tried to convince her to renounce her life of promiscuity; he was neither surprised nor grieved when he learned of her death; he was not at all sympathetic.

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20 Barnard, p. 67.

21 Neff, p. 121.
toward her way of life, and probably her death by suicide meant to him a conquest by her over the enemy, her abnormality. This would account for her strong statements at the end that she felt no real sense of guilt for her promiscuity and for her remarks in the first sonnet that her passions were beyond her rational control.

"The Growth of 'Lorraine'" is a poignant little drama, in which the reader comprehends more of the situation than the speaker. In his early work on Robinson, Charles Cestre recognizes the power of the double sonnet: "It is marvellous that so much terror, pity and truth can be enclosed in so little space—and expressed so poignantly." In order to interest a reader, a poet must draw him into the poem. Robinson does this by withholding the nature of Lorraine's passions and by letting the reader learn of the situation step by step. The reader also is curious about the ties that bind Lorraine and the speaker; this he comes to learn slowly but he is never told it directly. Neither is he ever told, in so many words, that Lorraine is promiscuous. "The Growth of 'Lorraine'" is not at all obscure, but there is a certain reader pleasure in filling in the parts of the puzzle.

I suggest that this poem is another in the Robinson canon of compassion. He is not preaching either for or against suicide but he is trying to convince the reader that even this particular lowly prostitute

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22 Cestre, p. 15.
demands understanding and compassion. Robinson does this not only through what Lorraine has to say on her own behalf but also through the apparent lack of both understanding and compassion on the part of the speaker. His inability to comprehend underscores Robinson's theme of the necessity of compassion. The tables, in a sense, are turned in this poem; and the reader, if he is in a mood for scorn, condemns the speaker, not Lorraine, for his blindness and resulting indifferent behavior. In the first line of the poem, Robinson has the speaker call himself "discreetly dumb"; and this is the frame of reference in which the reader should take him.

"The Whip"

In *The Town Down the River*, Robinson's 1910 volume, four of the shorter poems are excellent and well worth close examination. The first of these, "The Whip," (338-339) has occasioned much controversy. In 1923 Robinson wrote the following to Carl J. Weber concerning this poem:

I hardly know what to say about "The Whip," except that it is supposed to be a literal and not a figurative instrument. In this poem—not to mention a few others—I may have gone a little too far and given the reader too much to carry. If he refuses to carry it, perhaps I have only myself to blame.  

Identification of the characters mentioned by the speaker and the basic nature of the situation from which the conflict arises have been the chief objects of interpretation. To say the least, the poem has bothered many readers.24 Of "The Whip," Winters says: "The indirection of statement, aided by what one might call a more or less metaphysical tone, results in pretty successful obscurity... The poem actually deals with a brutal melodrama..."25 What Winters has to say further will be discussed later, but in terms of obscurity, Neff is in agreement with Winters.26

24To illustrate the extent to which "The Whip" has confused readers, I include this interpretation, offered obviously in jest, which was included in a letter written by Ben Ray Redman, the author of a 1926 book-length study of Robinson, to William Rose Benét, ed., "The Phoenix Nest," The Saturday Review of Literature, XXVI (February 20, 1943), 18:

The poem relates to the poet's first venture into the Stock Market, shortly after he came to New York. The "ship" is a symbol for "margin"—this is the whip that a broker holds over a customer who is trading on margin. The "she" of the poem is the broker into whose hands Robinson fell. (He explained the substitution of "she" for "he" as "at once a poetic necessity and a neo-Romantic whim.") "She struck the blow, / You but a neck behind. . . ." i.e., The broker sold Robinson out, after he had repeatedly put up more margin, and was in the very act of answering the final call. The "coffin" is bankruptcy; the "clod" is the Civil Service. The "roses" are a dozen American beauties, found by Robinson in an ash-can on 4th Street, and given to him by a girl whom he playfully called "the wave" because she was always happiest following the fleet. . . . The "lover" was the late Anthony Comstock, and the object of his love, unmentioned in the poem, is, obviously, pornography plain and fancy. . . .

25Winters, p. 45.

26Neff, p. 157.
The poem is told by a speaker who has no obvious connection with the drama in which the characters are involved. The reader learns in the first stanza that he is addressing a man who is in a coffin and who is soon to be buried. The first four lines of the poem consist of a catalogue of the injustices that the man had apparently suffered. However, there is no explicit reference given at this point for the reasons for his suffering:

THE doubt you fought so long
The cynic net you cast,
The tyranny, the wrong,
The ruin, they are past.

The remainder of the first stanza informs the reader of the man's present condition. One line suggests, but only suggests, that his torment was caused by his relationship with a woman: "Your blood no longer vexed."

In the second stanza, the speaker tells the man not to fear the clod or "ever doubt the grave." The implication here is that in death the man certainly will have more peace that was his lot in life. This point is picked up in the following two lines, in which, also, the first hint of the means of his death is given:

The roses and the sod
Will not forswear the wave.

By his use of the word "gift," it is obvious in the following two lines that the speaker feels that death was the most favorable solution to the man's problem:

The gift the river gave
Is now but theirs to cover.
And here the apparent means of death is verified. The pronoun "theirs" refers back to "The roses and the sod." In the last two lines of the second stanza, the other characters in this drama are introduced and the situation leading to death is given minimal elucidation:

The mistress and the slave
Are gone now, and the lover.

Questions arise here which demand investigation: Who are the mistress, the slave, and the lover, and what was the relationship of these three people to each other? If the syntax of the last two lines is read in conjunction with that of the first two lines of the third stanza,

You left the two to find
Their own way to the brink,

then a linking of the mistress and slave together seems inevitable. Consequently, the lover must be the man awaiting burial. The point is never settled whether the lover and the mistress were, in fact, married. Winters states that definitely a man and wife relationship existed between the two. The speaker's opening remarks in the poem indicate that the lover had, for a long time, been subject to doubt, tyranny, and so forth; therefore, a marriage reading seems certainly legitimate.

Robinson's choice of labels—the mistress, the slave, and the lover—may seem, at first, to be curious and arbitrary. However, if

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27 Winters, p. 46.
the reader bears in mind that the word "tyranny" is used to describe one of the pressures at work on the lover, Robinson's choice becomes easily understandable. Any man under this particular woman's spell, so to speak, according to the observations of the speaker, is under a tyrannical rule. This explains why the man with whom the woman left is called the slave and why the woman is called the mistress; she is the mistress of body and soul over her man, whoever he may be, whenever it may be. Apparently, the speaker believes that only misfortune can come from association with her: the lover's death and "Their own way to the brink" attest to this.

So far in the poem the reader can only conclude that the lover has committed suicide; there has been no suggestion of any other means of death. And the speaker states, "You left....", which can only be interpreted as an act of volition on the part of the lover. This point is given further validity in the fourth line of the third stanza: "You chose to plunge and sink." However, in the preceding line, the speaker introduces a new attitude: he questions the value of the husband's suicide by stating, "Then—shall I call you blind?" The speaker here seems to be contradicting the attitude he expresses in the second stanza. The remaining lines of the third stanza serve to reinforce the new attitude:

God knows the gall we drink
Is not the mead we cry for,
Nor was it, I should think--
For you—a thing to die for.
This apparent contradiction can be cleared up fairly easily. The attitude that the speaker expresses in the second stanza is, in reality, the one he projects into the lover; that is, this is the way the lover must feel about his own death.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker uses the collective "we" instead of the first person point of view. He asks:

Could we have done the same
Had we been in your place?

And so far the reader has the right only to assume that the question involves just a willful act of death with no extenuating circumstances.

The speaker continues:

This funeral of your name
Throws no light on the case.

The word "case" introduces a new element into the drama, and the speaker picks this up immediately in the following two lines:

Could we have made the chase,
And felt then as you felt?

So now a chase of some sort is related to the triangle of mistress, slave, and lover. The closing lines of this stanza introduce yet another twist to the drama:

But what's this on your face,
Blue, curious, like a welt?

At this point it is well to remember that the title of the poem is "The Whip" and that nothing so far has anything to do with a whip. Although
the whip is the instrument, the reader does not know who administered
the blow.

The final stanza begins with a pair of unusual images:

There were some ropes of sand
Recorded long ago,
But none, I understand,
Of water. Is it so?

These lines have to refer back to the "Blue, curious" mark on the face
of the lover. In his poem "The Collar," George Herbert employs the rope
of sand figure, and perhaps this is the reference the speaker has in
mind. However, the rope, I feel, must be read in conjunction with the
whip; the speaker is asking how could the mark be there? He is willing
to admit that a rope of sand, however theoretical, could presumably
leave a welt, but he knows of no way in which the lover could have
received the mark in the water. I think, too, that the speaker here is
being somewhat ironic. The question interjected in the fourth line of
the stanza, "Is it so?" leads the reader to believe that either the
speaker is being addressed by the dead man (the implied narrator method
of "Luke Havergal") or that the speaker is vocalizing his inductions;
that is, he is putting together what scattered evidence there is about
the drama and forming his own conclusions. Whatever the case may be,
the explicit nature of the tragedy enacted on the water is becoming
clearer and clearer.

The fifth and sixth lines of the final stanza are instrumental in
solving the mystery:
And she--she struck the blow,
You but a neck behind. . .

The chase involved the lover in pursuit on one horse and the mistress
and the slave, either on one horse or on separate ones, fleeing from
him. At this point, in order to exemplify the difficulties that "The
Whip" has presented to Robinson students, I am including several
commentaries on how the poem means. Rhetorically and discursively,
Cestre discusses the genuine need for the reader to approach this poem
without indolence or carelessness. Then, mistakenly, he reads "The
Whip" as a triple suicide--the husband, his wife, and her lover (the
slave). And he sets this question before the reader: "Is not this
mysterious mark like a whip-stroke dealt by some unknown agency? . . .
It was not the welt of a physical blow. Was it a wound inflicted by spirit
on spirit? Pathos and mystery meet in this symbol."28 Winters is the
next critic to take on "The Whip":

We are given a man and wife and the wife's lover. The husband
had long suspected his wife's fidelity, but had fought the sus-
picion. The three are in some fashion tipped out from the boat
in a river, perhaps from the same boat. . . . As the three are
about to emerge to safety, the wife turns and strikes her husband
across the face; and recognizing the certainty of what he had
before suspected, he chooses to sink rather than save himself
and face his tragedy. All of the necessary information is given
us in pretty clear statements; but it is given fragmentarily, and
interspersed with comments which are likely to be misleading,
and in a tone which is misleading.29

28Cestre, pp. 50-52.
29Winters, p. 46.
Henry Pettit, in one of the earliest readings of the poem, has characteristically misinterpreted the situation: "My own guess is that this is a triangle poem in which one of the lovers, having outstripped the other, is speculating on the death of the latter when he is suddenly shocked at the dawning suspicion he himself as the survivor may have won a pyrrhic victory--possibly meant to imply on a universal scale that a lover's conquest is inevitably an enslavement."\(^{30}\) In 1947 William Rose Benét hit on the right interpretation--horses.\(^{31}\)

On his horse the lover was close enough behind the mistress and her slave so that she was able to reach behind herself and lash him across the face with the whip used for urging the horse on. The lover fell off his horse (apparently in the mainstream of the river) and preferred death by drowning rather than facing the hard reality of the situation; consequently, he made no attempt to save himself. It is doubtful that the blow of the whip caused him to lose control of his senses, for the speaker states: "You saw the river flow--." The poem ends with a reiteration of the question: "Still, shall I call you blind?" When the question is first put, the word "Then" instead of "Still" is used. This indicates that the speaker has come to the realization that the lover's suicide was not as simply motivated as it


seemed (no suicidal attempt is simply motivated, but reasons for such may seem clearer in some cases than in others). In this case, the suicide came as a result of not only the inability of facing the terrible reality, but it came at an extreme moment of both emotional and physical frenzy. This knowledge finally clear, or at least clearer, to the speaker, his attitude undergoes somewhat of a metamorphosis. He no longer is as certain as he appears to be in the third stanza when he questions the appropriateness of the lover's death. Barnard remarks that when the speaker "sees upon the drowned man's face the mark... he is disposed no longer to condemn the suicide."\(^{32}\)

"The Whip" is certainly a masterpiece of mystery and subsequent revelation. It is to Robinson's credit that he has both the speaker and the reader come to the realization of what happened to the lover at about the same time. In fact, the reader perhaps learns even earlier since he does have the title upon which to work. On the subtle side, too, the lines of the poem crack like a whip; each line is in iambic tetrameter, and Robinson's choice of words, generally of the one and two syllable variety, helps the lines to achieve their whip-like vitality. Also, the first stanza, with its harsh, uncompromising words like "doubt," "cynic," "wrong," "ruin," "vexed," and "coffin," establishes a hard tone that, while it is not really sustained throughout the poem, shocks

\(^{32}\)Barnard, p. 138.
the reader into immediate attention. The lines already cited testify to the care with which Robinson has selected his rhymes. In Robinson's most successful shorter poems, his rhyme choice is impeccable.

Another in his chain of poems dealing with suicide, "The Whip" works within a typical Robinson thematic concern: the difficulty that people have in knowing accurately the minds of other people. To achieve this end, Robinson has both the speaker and the reader learn at approximately the same time the circumstances surrounding the lover's suicide. By so doing, the reader not only comprehends the situation but he also learns, in effect, that the speaker at the end really is not totally aware; consequently, the motif of "The Whip" is given a two-fold force. I do not think that Robinson is advocating suicide as a valid means of escape from inexorable problems, but he does want the reader to understand the factors that led to the act and, more importantly, the almost total impossibility of total knowledge, particularly where such knowledge is veiled from perception and subsequent comprehension.

"How Annandale Went Out"

"How Annandale Went Out" (346) is a curious sonnet in which Robinson once again deliberately withholds or disguises information for the purpose, not of confusing the reader, but of making the impact of the poem on the reader as powerful as he can. Read in this light, and this, I submit, is how this poem ought to be read, "How Annandale Went Out"
emerges as poignant expression. David S. Nivison, the poet's grand-nephew, has this to say concerning Robinson's method:

What he Robinson often does in creating a poem is to present a few pieces... which could be fitted into a number of different stories—and then to suggest, cautiously and tentatively, the direction our search for an understanding of them should proceed. This is not a detective-story device. It places us in the situation we are in fact always in when we must appraise people and situations.33

The poem is spoken by a man who calls himself "Liar, physician, hypocrite, and friend" to a man called Annandale. The first line of the sonnet seems, on the surface, designed to confuse the reader: "'They called it Annandale—and I was there.'" This, however, is far from the case. The use of the neuter pronoun "it" in reference to Annandale is quite in line with the description of him that follows in the sonnet. In the second line, the speaker continues that he was there "'To flourish, to find words, and to attend.'" These are the proper functions of a doctor called to the side of a person who is seriously ill. He is supposed to flourish (to bring life back into a diseased body), to find words (to talk to the sick person, to comfort those who care about him), and to attend (to be there). The third line of the sonnet, the one in which the speaker flings upon himself such a motley series of titles,

serves to introduce the reader to two things: (1) it contrasts what others think he should do with what he knows he is there to do; (2) it informs the reader that the speaker has no high opinion of himself (we learn later on that others seem to share his self-estimation). In the fourth and fifth lines, the speaker ironically appraises Annandale’s condition:

"I watched him; and the sight was not so fair
As one or two that I have seen elsewhere."

His deliberate underplaying of Annandale’s condition and his avoidance of any diagnosis arouse the reader’s interest and draw him into the poem. The doctor continues that Annandale was "'An apparatus not for me to mend.'" It is at this point that the reason becomes clear for the neuter pronoun of the first line being used instead of the grammatically correct "him." Whatever his ailment, Annandale was in such bad condition that he, in effect, had ceased to be a human and had become a thing, at least in the eyes of the physician. This reading is verified by the following line, in which Annandale is described as "'A wreck, with hell between him and the end.'" The octave closes with this simple understatement: "'I was there.'"

In the sestet, which is in the form of an argument (direct address to a specific audience), the speaker makes clear the circumstances surrounding the situation. His argument takes the form of a defense for something that he did:

"I knew the ruin as I knew the man;
So put the two together, if you can,
Remembering the worst you know of me."
Now view yourself as I was, on the spot—
With a slight kind of engine. Do you see?
Like this . . . You wouldn't hang me? I thought not."

The doctor has committed euthanasia and is pleading his case presumably before a judge. I say judge rather than jury since the singular form "yourself" is used rather than the plural form. His defense is simply that Annandale was in such physical torment, with no hope at all of recovery, that a mercy killing was in order. The fact that Annandale was a personal friend of the speaker obviously weighed in favor of the act. A "slight kind of engine" refers to the instrument of death, a hypodermic needle. From the speaker's attitude at the very end of the sonnet, he must have been acquitted.

The device that makes this poem work successfully is irony—an irony tempered with dry understatement and expressed in the rather flip attitude of the speaker. Here is a situation of the most serious nature, and yet the speaker underplays everything. Tension is generated through this apparent disparity; the reader is compelled to ask: "Why is the doctor pleading his defense in this manner?" The answers seem fairly easy. The doctor does not have an inflated picture of himself; he calls himself a liar and a hypocrite; and he tells the judge to remember the worst he knows of him. Perhaps, then, his attitude is a mask that he wears to protect himself. But I think that there is more to it than that. I read the doctor's use of irony, understatement, and his deliberate self-deprecation as manifestations of his own appraisal of Annandale's
situation as being absurd in its pathos and the situation of the trial as being equally absurd. I think that the doctor feels that what he did was not only justifiable but was so right that it was the only natural and compassionate thing to do.

The power of "How Annandale Went Out" lies in the doctor's method of presentation. Again, it is to Robinson's credit that he includes what he does and excludes all that would be unnecessary. For example, the nature of Annandale's condition is unknown. If it were known, say, that he had cancer or that he had been in an accident of a specific nature, then the reader's attention would necessarily focus more on Annandale than on the doctor. Any shift of emphasis could easily lead to melodrama; the subject matter of the poem has already a dramatic, emotional structure built into it. As it stands, "How Annandale Went Out" (note that even the title seems flip) is a major Robinson triumph.

David Nivison offers a new interpretation of this poem (he himself is not sure that what he has to say "will pass as an interpretation"), which is significant enough to include in this study:

I want now to suggest a way of thinking about this poem which I think will be worth trying. Consider again carefully the lines—"I knew the ruin as I knew the man;/ So put the two together, if you can,/ Remembering the worst you know of me."

Let us try making the physical "ruin" ("They called it Annandale"—but is this the real Annandale?), the (real) "man," and "me" not three persons, nor even two, but one. We would have in the poem the words of a dead man, a physician, who had been fatally ill, justifying his own act of self-destruction. In this poetic apologia, as perhaps psychologically in life also, physician and "wreck" are split apart. Suicide becomes
merely treatment of a case; he did the reasonable, if socially unapprovable, thing to do. We may also guess that something else unnamed—perhaps the nature of the malady, which he found himself (qua physician and qua "man") helpless to control?—constrains him to separate himself as "man," as human character, from himself as powerless in will, as "ruin." Now reread the poem, and notice the Beaudelairian word "hypocrite" in line three.34

In order to offer external evidence to support his thesis, Nivison cites the following from Lawrance Thompson's selection of Robinson's poetry entitled Tilbury Town: "One particular example of 'euthanasia' practiced by a doctor occurred in Robinson's own home; but with an ironic twist, in that it was self-inflicted. Robinson's brother Dean, who was a doctor, apparently used a needle to give himself a lethal 'shot' of morphine, which was believed to have caused his death."35

Nivison recalls an evening in 1953 which he spent with the late psychiatrist and sonneteer, Merrill Moore. In a discussion about the sonnet as a poetic form, Nivison brought up "How Annandale Went Out," to which Moore replied: "'That poem is about your Uncle Dean.'"36 The psychiatrist apparently never said anything else about that sonnet and the personal relationships it might have held for Robinson; however, from what Moore said (and he knew Robinson well;
they had talked about Dean), Robinson's physician brother was in the poet's mind as he conceived the poem.

After discussing the personal involvements behind the sonnet, Nivison says: "And perhaps Robinson intended us to have this multiple possibility of interpretation. He may even have preferred to have us take the obvious choice, of seeing in it simply a doctor's account of his dealing with a patient."  

"Miniver Cheevy"

Another of Robinson's poems in which irony is employed successfully is "Miniver Cheevy," (347-348) his satire of a man who was so inexorably out of tune with himself that he could find solace only by wishing that he were living in medieval times. Ben Ray Redman comments that in "Miniver Cheevy" the poet "has walked the almost invisible and treacherous line that divides sly irony from down-right farce."  

The first stanza of the poem suggests a man totally uncomfortable:

Miniver Cheevy, child of scorn,
Grew lean while he assailed the seasons;
He wept that he was ever born,
And he had reasons.

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37 Ibid., p. 184.
38 Redman, p. 59.
Laurence Perrine, whose study of "Miniver Cheevy" is the most thorough to date, claims that in the first line of the poem the reference to Miniver as "child or scorn" is "deliberately ambiguous":

It means, first, that Miniver, like some of the heroes of whom he reads, has a mythological paternity. His father was Scorn personified, and Miniver is of the first generation, inheriting the attributes of his father. He scorns everything connected with the present: its art, its warfare, its society. He scorns gold, and the materialistic aims of men who seek money rather than glory. And he scorns labor. But the phrase also means that Miniver was the object of scorn, as a child of misfortune is one whom misfortunes happen to. Miniver receives scorn as well as gives it. He is "at outs" with society, but is also outcast from it. . . . The word "child" contributes to this meaning by suggesting his essential immaturity. 39

Perrine notes also that the word "seasons" is particularly telling: "The rotation of the seasons suggests the persistence in time of Miniver's detraction--spring, summer, fall, winter, year in, year out. . . . And when 'seasons' is combined with 'assailed,' the four recurring 's' sounds give us the very hiss of Miniver's attacks." 40

In the second of this eight stanza poem, the reader learns that

Miniver loved the days of old
When swords were bright and steeds were prancing;
The vision of a warrior bold
Would set him dancing.

Of these lines, Perrine says: "This is trite language, but not trite


writing. It suggests the superficiality of Miniver's idealization of the past, an idealization based not on an intimate personal knowledge of the past but on hand-me-down sentiments.\footnote{Loc. cit.}

Although the poem so far is subtly sarcastic, the first obvious notes of sarcasm are introduced in the third stanza:

Miniver sighed for what was not  
And dreamed, and rested from his labors;  
He dreamed of Thebes and Camelot,  
And Priam's neighbors.

Whatever (if anything) Miniver did for a living is not known, but it is apparent that his medieval preoccupation (in effect, an obsession) did hinder his functioning in a normal world. Perrine argues that the reference to Miniver's work "is ironical understatement.\ldots In context it means that he desisted from labors that were probably almost non-existent in the first place."\footnote{Ibid., p. 68.} The use of the verbs "sighed" and "dreamed" further underscores Miniver's alienation from his society.

Stanzas four and five give additional information about Miniver's personality; as the poem develops, the reader learns that the speaker is viewing Miniver more and more with scorn so that the ambiguity that Perrine sees at work in "child of scorn" has yet another application. For example, Miniver was jealous:
Miniver mourned the ripe renown
That made so many a name so fragrant,
and irrationally attracted to the medieval period:

Miniver loved the Medici,
Albeit he had never seen one;
He would have sinned incessantly
Could he have been one.

The reference to sinning in the fifth stanza coupled with the allusion
in the fourth stanza of "Romance, now on the town," prompts Perrine
to suggest that Miniver was interested in "love affairs not always
legitimate."43

However scornful the speaker is toward Miniver, his attitude is
wrapped in humor; he is ridiculing but not destroying the misfit. After
he states that Miniver

cursed the commonplace
And eyed a khaki suit with loathing,

he introduces this brilliant touch of irony:

He missed the medieval grace
Of iron clothing.

Miniver's hypocrisy and self-centeredness are the objects of the
seventh stanza:

Miniver scorned the gold he sought,
But sore annoyed was he without it;
Miniver thought, and thought, and thought,
And thought about it.

43Ibid., p. 69.
A number of readers, including Robert Frost, have commented on the particular effectiveness of the repetition of the word "thought," especially as it is used in the last line of the stanza. Perrine feels that the last "thought" "emphasizes the futility of Miniver's thinking, which gets nowhere, as the repetition emphasizes its repetitiveness."44

The final stanza is a capsulized portrait of the out-of-tune Miniver. Also, Miniver's drinking, heretofore unknown, is revealed as his means of escape from a world into which he cannot fit:

Miniver Cheevey, born too late,
Scratched his head and kept on thinking;
Miniver coughed, and called it fate,
And kept on drinking.

Satire is not a genre in which Robinson actively works; however, in "Miniver Cheevey" he has created a satire, the chief tool being irony, that stands as a little masterpiece. Everything fits together well in this poem; there is enough, but not too much, information given about Miniver's personal traits. The only physical description of him is given in the first stanza--"Grew lean"--which suggests a man growing progressively more ill at ease both with himself and with his society. Also, the reference to Miniver's leanness prepares the reader for the revelation at the end that Miniver has a drinking problem. The sing-song rhythmic quality of the poem and the deliberately trite writing reinforce the irony.

44 Ibid., p. 71.
Most readers agree that the name of the protagonist was selected by Robinson because it sounds as foolish and absurd as Miniver Cheevy was himself. However, Perrine has come up with an interesting bit of research that perhaps makes Robinson's choice more functional than most readers believe:

"Miniver," according to Webster, is "a fur esteemed in the Middle ages /sic/ as a part of costume (from menu small, plus vair a kind of fur)." "Cheevy" is not too distant from "chevalier" and "chivalry"—knights and knighthood. Or, if we search the New English Dictionary, we find chevy, a "chase, pursuit, hunt" or "hunting cry"; or the obsolete cheve—"to do homage to"; or chevesaile—"The collar of a coat, gown, or other garment; in the 14th c. often richly ornamented," a word used in The Romance of the Rose and more recently by Rossetti. Whichever of these words we link it to, Miniver's name, first and last, represents the kind of things he dreamed about, and links him to the middle /sic/ ages.45

Both Smith and Hagedorn see "Miniver Cheevy," to some extent, as a self-satire.46 Perrine, on the other hand, is reluctant to admit that Robinson was really portraying himself and offers the following logic in defense of Robinson the person:

In "Miniver Cheevy" Robinson embodied one side of himself, consciously exaggerated, and perceived with a wry ironic humor. But it was one side only, and the very existence of the poem testifies to the vast difference between that one side and the totality. For the poem testifies to the existence of an insight, a self-knowledge, a grip on reality, and a humorous perception, that Miniver utterly lacked. It is this self-knowledge, this humor, this reality, which reveal Robinson's


central sanity, and completely and forever separate the creator from his creature.

What Nivison has to say about the poem and Robinson personally is, I think, quite illuminating. He insists that "'Miniver Cheevy' is not a character sketch and was never intended to be." This idea was given to Nivison by Ruth Nivison, his mother, and Robinson's niece, perhaps his favorite niece. He argues that in Robinson's poetry compassion is always shown for the characters that the poet invents. Here, however, "Robinson talks about Miniver as he could bring himself to talk about no other man, real or imaginary--except himself."

In short, Nivison contends that so much unqualified fun is poked at poor Miniver that the character must necessarily be the poet himself: "Robinson laughs at him without reserve in every line, and leaves us with no compulsion to take him seriously or to go deeper into his make-up. His faults are lampooned with what we suspect is outrageous exaggeration." Whatever the case may be in relation to the degree, if any, of self-identification, "Miniver Cheevy" is a fine satire, incisively ironic, and bitingly clear.

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47 Perrine, p. 74.

48 Nivison, pp. 171-173.
A poem which has attracted considerable attention is "For a Dead Lady," (355) a lovely elegy about a woman who kept her innermost feelings secret and who remained essentially unknown to the world in which she lived. And by so doing, she achieved an exquisite individuality. This motif is introduced once the opening two lines of poem establish her death and let the reader know the speaker's attitude toward her:

No more with overflowing light
Shall fill the eyes that now are faded,
Nor shall another's fringe with night
Their woman-hidden world as they did.

To the speaker, the way in which the lady hid her personality can never be equaled by any other woman. In the next two lines of the poem, the speaker laments that no more will days witness "The flowing wonder of her ways." He concludes the first stanza by stating that no words can make up for "The shifting and the many-shaded" eyes of the dead lady and, by implication, for the lady herself.

What is known by the speaker about the dead lady is voiced in stanza two. Her "grace" is described as "divine" and "definitive"; her "laugh" is referred to by the curious terminology of one "that love could not forgive." This line has been the object of interest. R. H. Super, apparently, feels that the line should be read as a manifestation of the woman's flirtatious nature, while Edwin S. Fussell argues that

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49R. H. Super, The Explicator, III (June 1945), Item 60: The Explicator, V (June 1947), Item 60.
the "reference here is probably to that slight aspect of possessiveness, coupled with the desire always to be taken seriously, which forms a part of any strong emotional attachment." The interpretation offered by W. H. French is based on the assumption that the lady in question is the poet's mother, a belief that Smith also holds. French's reasoning is as follows: "If . . . we suppose that the love was hers and not his, then everything falls into place, and the line means that occasionally the lady, in spite of herself, was moved to laughter at her family. At such times her own love for them would not let her forgive herself." It is, of course, possible that the laugh was simply a nervous habit that the lady had. I base this, again only possible, reading on the context of the following line in the poem:

"Is hushed, and answers to no calling." Perhaps the "calling" is really a calling down, a censure of her behavior. In any event, all the speaker knows is what he can observe from her behavior—from that which is physically demonstrated. For example, he talks of her "forehead" and "her little ears" that "Have gone where Saturn keeps the years."

Barnard explains the reference to Saturn: " . . . Saturn's Greek name

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50 Edwin S. Fussell, The Explicator, IX (March 1951), Item 33.

51 Smith, pp. 156-157.

52 W. H. French, The Explicator, X (May 1952), Item 51.
is Kronos, which the Greeks themselves confused with 'chronos,' their word for 'time' . . . "53 The last explicit physical reference is to the lady's breast "where roses could not live." Perhaps, the speaker is using an hyperbole here: the rose cannot compete with the soft texture of her breast. However, the rose, conventionally, is used as a symbol of love, and I think that on the figurative level this is the context in which "where roses could not live" must be read. On the literal level, I take the "roses" to refer to corsages. Symbolically, the speaker is saying that the lady was unfortunate in matters of the heart (the "breast" harbors the heart). This reading also accounts for the enigmatic allusion to her laugh "that love could not forgive."

The final stanza of "For a Dead Lady" is divided into two parts, the first four lines concerned with her beauty and the transitory nature of life, the last four with universalizing the transitory motif:

The beauty, shattered by the laws
That have creation in their keeping,
No longer trembles at applause,
Or over children that are sleeping;
And we who delve in beauty's lore
Know all that we have known before
Of what inexorable cause
Makes Time so vicious in his reaping.

After discussing the images in the first and second stanzas in his very thorough study of the poem, Adams comes to this conclusion:

53 Barnard, p. 32.
All of these images and their qualities are then summed up in the word "beauty," which is immediately opposed to the mechanistic image of impersonal "laws." These laws, closely associated or even identified with time, as well as with the "inexorable cause" of the next to last line, have destroyed the lady's beauty and its responses to emotional relationships with admirers and with objects of solicitude such as sleeping children, and no explanation can satisfactorily account for the loss or reconcile lovers and students of beauty to the destruction.54

I think it fairly apparent that the third and fourth lines of the last stanza are not meant to imply any derogatory attitude of the speaker toward the lady. She is not, as some would have it, a proud woman desirous of praise. Barnard feels that she

once trembled at applause because of the fullness of her heart at having made people happy, because of her gratitude for what she felt to be the return of the love for them, the love for life as a whole, that she could not help pouring out; and as she once trembled over sleeping children because her own innocence and purity responded to theirs, and because they wakened her perhaps as yet not wholly conscious need for the fulfillment in motherhood of a life whose opening had been so fair.55

I am not sure that I agree totally with what Barnard has so eloquently offered; I think that she trembled at applause because she was shy and because, for some reason or other, she felt somewhat inadequate. As far as the children are concerned, her trembling may very well have been caused by what Barnard says; however, it is never established in the poem that she had been married. In fact, I venture the guess that

54Adams, 143.

55Barnard, p. 166.
she never did marry; in light of the second stanza, this guess seems more probable than the assumption that she ever was married. Perhaps, then, her trembling over children was the result of regret over never having been a mother (note that the speaker does not say "her" children).

"For a Dead Lady" must be read on two levels: on one as an elegy for an inscrutable lady blessed with much but also deprived of love, on the other as a commentary on the demands that time exacts. These two meanings are unified by the first suggesting to the speaker the second. The poem begins properly with elaboration on whatever details of this mysterious lady are available to the speaker in memory; and it ends with a generalized statement suggested by the state of the lady. It is interesting to note that Robinson's choice of words reflects the inscrutable nature of the lady. He talks of her eyes that are "faded"; he uses the words "fringe" and "night" together, along with "woman-hidden," "shifting," and "many-shaded." It is typical of Robinson in his most successful poems to be careful not to slap the reader in the face with overt meaning, but rather to lead the reader to understanding through carefully placed clues. This is the technique used, to great effect, in both "How Annandale Went Out" and in "For a Dead Lady."

There is another set of images closely related to the pattern just discussed employed by Robinson in the first stanza that leads the reader
to understanding. When the speaker tells that the lady was not one to reveal herself to others, he does so with eye imagery:

Nor shall another's eyes fringe with night
Their woman-hidden world as they did.

The eye imagery is picked up in the last line of the stanza and the two patterns of imagery are joined: "The shifting and the many-shaded."

Used on one level to refer to her eyes, "shifting" and "many-shaded" are also terms used to describe the lady's personality. And it is most appropriate that eyes—instruments of vision, receptacles of light—provide the image pattern selected by Robinson in his treatment of a woman through whom no one could see.

Although Robinson did not win a substantial critical reputation for his poetry in The Children of the Night, Captain Craig, and The Town Down the River, many of the qualities which distinguish him as a major poet and for which critics have come to praise him are represented in the eight poems from these books discussed in this chapter. For example, "In Luke Havergal," "The Growth of 'Lorraine,'" "The Whip," and "How Annandale Went Out," the poet's method of indirection is used to good effect. "Miniver Cheevy," long an anthology piece, is often cited in textbooks for its use of irony, while "For a Dead Lady" proves that Robinson was quite capable of writing a moving lyric. Robinson had to wait until 1916 with the publication of The Man Against the Sky to receive the critical attention he deserved.
CHAPTER III

THE SHORTER POEMS (1916)

"Flammonde"

Robinson's 1916 collection, The Man Against the Sky, contains eight shorter triumphs, more than any other single volume. The speaker of "Flammonde," (3-6) the longest (ninety-six lines) of the shorter poems examined in this study, tells the story of a man who came "from God knows where" to Tilbury Town, and gained the admiration and excited the curiosity of the townspeople. What made Flammonde click was unknown to those in the town; one of the functions of the speaker is to act as the collective voice of Tilbury Town, indeed, a very puzzled collective voice. The ambiguity surrounding the nature of Flammonde is given expression in the very first line of the poem; and as the poem progresses, the reader learns some of the mysterious man's personal traits and what Flammonde did in, and to, Tilbury Town. But, at the end of the poem, Flammonde is still an enigmatic man.

The speaker begins by giving a thumbnail sketch of Flammonde as he first appeared to the people of Tilbury Town:
The man Flammonde, from God knows where,
With firm address and foreign air,
With news of nations in his talk
And something royal in his walk,
With glint of iron in his eyes,
But never doubt, nor yet surprise,
Appeared, and stayed, and held his head
As one by kings accredited.

Since one of the obvious areas of inquiry in this poem is the identity of Flammonde, the way in which the clause, "from God knows where," is read is germane to any interpretation of his character. From what follows in the remaining eighty-eight lines of the poem, the reader learns that the speaker, while perceiving that not all was as it seemed with Flammonde, does not know the nature of the man. If the phrase in question is read as simply an expression of helplessness with a strong accent on "God," then there is no real interpretive problem; however, and I think there is some justification for this, if the clause is an expression of earnestness with only a weak accent on "God," then the reader must face the fact that the speaker perhaps does believe that only God does have knowledge about Flammonde. Later in the poem, the speaker alludes to the "small satanic sort of kink" in Flammonde's brain. It is possible, of course, that the mention of God and the satanic kink are more coincidental than conscious. However, despite the fact that Robinson is prolific, he is cautiously prolific; he is not one to throw words about carelessly.

In the second stanza, the speaker continues to list additional
personal traits of the man: Flammonde was erect, alert, and he dressed fashionably; he "Paraded neither want nor waste";

And what he needed for his fee
To live, he borrowed graciously.

The word "fee" suggests that Flammonde was, in effect, paid to live; in conjunction with "fee," the word "borrowed" suggests that Flammonde, indeed, paid back somehow for whatever he received.

The doubt surrounding the "man Flammonde" gains voice in the first four lines of the third stanza:

He never told us what he was,
Or what mischance, or other cause,
Had banished him from better days
To play the Prince of Castaways.

The speaker continues that Flammonde acted out his part with ease, a task which for most people was "unplayable." Then the speaker confides:

In fine, one pauses, half afraid
To say for certain that he played.

This inability to know whether or not Flammonde was playing a part is reiterated at the beginning of the fourth stanza, after which the speaker asserts:

Nor can I say just how intense
Would then have been the difference
To several, who, having striven
In vain to get what he was given,
Would see the stranger taken on
By friends not easy to be won.
Flammonde had a way about him of finding something good in everyone and bringing that good out into the open after it had appeared to the townspeople that the good was non-existent within the particular individual. Soothing and courteous, "His mien distinguished any crowd," and the speaker says that his courtesy beguiled and foiled Suspicion that his years were soiled.

The reader is not surprised that

women, young and old, were fond Of looking at the man Flammonde.

In stanzas six, seven, and eight, the speaker relates three specific instances (there were many more) in which Flammonde demonstrated his uncanny ability to penetrate into the core of people and there to see something admirable. He befriended a woman "On whom the fashion was to frown." In her Flammonde found nothing of what the townspeople did and concluded that it was due to their "littleness" that they were unable to understand the woman. Then "for a little gold" Flammonde found out why a bright boy

Had shut within him the rare seed Of learning.

Once Flammonde learned whatever was to be learned, "A flowered future was unrolled" for the boy. Were this remarkable man not there, this boy assuredly would have permanently entombed his abilities. Of course, Flammonde charged for his service; whether the speaker here is only recording the matter of gold factually or whether his tone is deliberately
sarcastic, I cannot say for certain—and perhaps neither could the speaker. It must be remembered that the speaker numbers himself among the residents of Tilbury Town. This being the case, it seems only natural that he would resent Flammonde. The third incident related by the speaker concerns

> two citizens who fought  
> For years and years, and over nought,

and who

> made life awkward for their friends,  
> And shortened their own dividends.

Flammonde analyzed the situation, "said what was wrong," and the men were again in line,  
> And had each other in to dine.

After these incidents are related, the speaker turns toward Flammonde and attempts to find

> What small satanic sort of kink  
> Was in his brain? What broken link  
> Withheld him from the destinies  
> That came so near to being his?

The tenth stanza picks up this question method; the speaker wonders why the townspeople held reservations about the man when Flammonde apparently seemed to be a near Christ-incarnate figure:

> What was it that we never caught?  
> What was he, and what was he not?

There are, of course, no answers forthcoming, the speaker readily admits; all he can say is:

> Rarely at once will nature give  
> The power to be Flammonde and live.
The final stanza universalizes the situation created by the appearance of Flammonde and his remarkable powers:

We cannot know how much we learn
From those who never will return,
Until a flash of unforeseen
Remembrance falls on what has been.
We've each a darkening hill to climb;
And this is why, from time to time
In Tilbury Town, we look beyond
Horizons for the man Flammonde.

Any attempt to talk definitively about the "man Flammonde" must necessarily lead only to conjecture. It certainly is not Robinson's intention to have the reader know any more than he does from what the speaker has to say. In order for this poem to work, Flammonde's identity has to be obscured. The reader may, if he so desires, call Flammonde a Judas figure, a Christ figure, a combination of the two, ad infinitum.

Robinson, in his letters, has only this to say of the man: "Flammonde is the man who sees but cannot do for himself, 'others he saved,' etc."¹

The fact is that the reader simply cannot know who Flammonde is or what Flammonde is supposed to represent; this is not within Robinson's design.

What is within the poet's design, however, is clearer. The inability to know Flammonde probably reflects a major concern of Robinson: one can never really know anyone else. In order to poetize

this theme, Robinson picks as the protagonist of the poem an unreal figure, one who, in reality, could never exist. And Robinson adds mystery to him by not making knowledge of his past available to the speaker or to anyone else, with the possible exception of God ("from God knows where"). Barnard has two relevant comments concerning Flammonde’s mortality:

"Flammonde" could be the name of no ordinary mortal; it strikes the ear with overtones of the remote and heroic, irreconcilably alien to the life of Main Street--or Tilbury Town--yet undisturbedly superior to any material environment.¹

In speaking repeatedly of "the man Flammonde," Robinson gradually builds up the impression of his hero’s uniqueness; of Flammonde’s isolation from his fellows not because of any eccentricity but because of so much more humanity, so much more of what men ought to be, than they have.²

Winters, who does not care for this poem, reads it as praise of "an individual whom one might characterize as the sensitive parasite or as the literary or academic sponge."³ I cannot follow his reasoning here.

On the evaluative scale, Winters objects to not only the motif but to the language as well. He feels that the language employed in lines twenty through twenty-three and twenty-eight through thirty on page four of the Collected Poems and lines thirteen and fourteen on

²Barnard, p. 57.
³Ibid., p. 89.
⁴Winters, p. 51.
page six "is reminiscent of the worst sentimentalism of the nineties." ⁵

To this indictment, Barnard replies: "My own feeling is that some passages (including the one [sic] that Winters dislikes the most) show Robinson at his best, while others do not rise much above mediocrity." ⁶

Winters continues that "The classicism, the precision, of Robinson's great work is not in this poem; there is nothing here of it but an empty mannerism. The substance as a whole and phrase by phrase is repulsively sentimental." ⁷ I am impressed by the incessant movement of the lines; this seems to me to reflect the almost mechanical movement of Flammonde through Tilbury Town as he performed his miracles. And, of course, Robinson needs a number of lines in which to build up the enigmatic character of the man and in which to focus on the three central incidents of his powers at work on the citizens of Tilbury Town. It should not be forgotten too that these specific incidents not only show Flammonde at work; they also serve to underscore the basic motif of the poem. Just as the townspeople could not understand Flammonde, they could not understand the woman, the boy, and the problem or problems that separated the two men. For that matter, neither could the men. Even though Flammonde, the man of understanding and compassion, is but an ideal, Robinson seems to be asserting that one

⁵Ibid., pp. 51-52.
⁶Barnard, p. 278.
⁷Winters, p. 52.
(everyone) ought to try to be understanding and compassionate, despite the inexorable fact that an ideal state remains but an ideal state.

Thematically, "Flammonde" is solidly in the main stream of Robinson's thought. It differs only in that it has for a protagonist a man of unreal proportions. Robinson's characters are usually very real.

"The Gift of God"

In "The Gift of God," (6-8) Robinson discusses ostensibly a mother's love for her only son; this is the conventional interpretation of the poem. In a 1917 letter to L. N. Chase, Robinson writes:

Whatever merit my work may or may not possess, I fancy that it will always be a waste of time for any reader who has not a fairly well developed sense of humor—which, as someone has said before, is a very serious thing—to bother with it. When I tell you that my poem called "The Gift of God" (in The Man Against the Sky) has been interpreted as a touching tribute to our Saviour, you will require no further comment upon this point. 8

Apparently, Robinson critics and scholars have heretofore taken what the poet has said as the final word; that is, they are content to believe that the poem does not have any religious implications. I see no reason for explicitly believing Robinson here. There is too much internal evidence to follow blindly what the poet has said in the letter or at least not to close the door on the possibility that there is more to it than what he implies. It is well here to bear in mind Smith's remark about Robinson's characteristically misleading comments about his own poems.

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8Selected Letters, p. 102.
The first two stanzas of this six stanza poem, read in conjunction with the title, seem to be about the Virgin Mary. These stanzas are important enough for an understanding of how the poem really works to be reproduced here in full:

BLESSED with a joy that only she
Of all alive shall ever know,
She wears a proud humility
For what it was that willed it so,—
That her degree should be so great
Among the favored of the Lord
That she may scarcely bear the weight
Of her bewildering reward.

As one apart, immune, alone,
Or featured for the shining ones,
And like to none that she has known
Of other women's other sons,—
The firm fruition of her need,
He shines annointed; and he blurs
Her vision, till it seems indeed
A sacrilege to call him hers.

The third stanza reinforces the meaning implied in the first two.

However, the son becomes a bit more personified, and the reader here begins to doubt his initial reading. For example, the woman thinks of the best for her son and

hardly dares
To think of him as one to touch
With aches, indignities, and cares.

The reader is then brought back sharply to the Mary-Christ motif in the last four lines of the stanza:

She sees him rather at the goal,
Still shining; and her dream foretells
The proper shining of a soul
Where nothing ordinary dwells.
In the beginning of the fourth stanza, more doubts arise in the reader's mind concerning the validity of his initial reading. The speaker relates that perhaps if the townspeople were canvassed for appraisals of the youth in question, they would reply that he was "far from flags and shouts"; in addition, they "Would havoc strangely with his worth." There is still the possibility, though, that Christ in his youth is the subject in question. In keeping with the story of Christ, not all His contemporaries recognized that He was the Saviour, and He certainly had His doubters. Despite these unflattering, hypothetical responses to the value of her son, the mother remains undaunted and

with innocence unwrung,
Would read his name around the earth.

The next stanza begins with what appears to be an explicit reference to the Apostles and those others who suffered for their beliefs in Christ:

And others, knowing how this youth
Would shine, if love could make him great,
When caught and tortured for the truth
Would only writhe and hesitate.

The clause, "if love could make him great," should make the reader pause. Certainly the word "love" could refer to the love of God; however, read in the context of the poem, "love" ought to refer to the mother. Perhaps Robinson here is being deliberately ambiguous. That those

caught and tortured for the truth
Would only writhe and hesitate
provides another pausing point, unless, of course, they were only play-
mates. Despite the behavior of the outside world, the woman,

arranging for his days
What centuries could not fulfill,
Transmutes him with her faith and praise,
And has him shining where she will.

In these lines it seems apparent that the woman simply has too over-
blown an image of her son, the implication being that he is not made of
the metal she thinks—that he is just an ordinary human being. And yet,
the possibility lingers that Robinson is saying that the world has not
fulfilled the promise of Christianity—that the mission of Christ has
been, indeed, unable to be filled.

The sixth stanza begins with a reiteration of the mother's hope of
fulfillment and promise. In the brilliant final lines of the poem,

Robinson's purpose emerges clearly:

And should the gift of God be less
In him than in her motherhood,
His fame, though vague, will not be small,
As upward through her dream he fares,
Half clouded with a crimson fall
Of roses thrown on marble stairs.

All along, Robinson has not been picturing Mary and Christ; his subjects
are a mother who is very much enveloped in the glory of her son and a
boy who probably is not much different from any other boy. But this is
not to say that the reading of Mary and Christ into the poem is invalid,
for Robinson certainly does have them very much in mind, but they are
not the subjects of "The Gift of God." To the speaker the woman acts
as if she were Mary and her son Christ. However, she does not probably think of herself and her son in just those terms; it is the speaker who interprets her situation as such.

Robinson has taken great care to insure that the reader will make the necessary connection between the mother and Mary and between the son and Christ; much of the pleasure in reading "The Gift of God" comes from making these indispensable connections and in realizing that a real mother and her son are involved. For example, the words "shine," "shines," and "shining" are used a total of six times in the poem. Just as Christ brought light to the world, so the mother appropriately thinks of her son as shining. Barnard argues that "the recurrence of 'shining' or 'shine' suggests both the brightness and the insubstantiality of the mother's mirage." Words with religious denotations are interspersed throughout the poem: "humility," "annointed," "sacriilege," and "faith," for example. The image of the boy's fame through her dreams moving upward is a crowning touch to the poem. What it means is, of course, that she will forever think of him as achieving greatness, even though it is more than likely that his fame will be ordinary. The woman is referred to as thinking figuratively of the crucifixion and subsequent ascension of Christ into heaven. And Robinson notes that her vision is "half clouded." "Crimson" and

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9Barnard, p. 89.
"roses" allude to the blood of Christ, and the "marble stairs" signify the ascension. Although Neff praises the ending of "The Gift of God," he misses the point: "Decoration gains force by sparseness, as in the unexpected touch of color at the close of 'The Gift of God."10

"The Gift of God" is structured brilliantly; understanding comes slowly but when it does, the reader is shocked into awareness. Robinson is not, as Barnard would have it, simply picturing a pathetic mother who sees too much in her son: "the theme of mother love blind to a son's shortcomings is so trite that it could have been made into poetry only by a union of pathos and irony and irresistible music such as nothing but genius could command..."11 Robinson wants his readers to have compassion for her, to realize, naturally, that she is deluding herself, but at the same time to realize the intensity of her delusion. Such a woman is not to be mocked; we are to feel compassion for her. A word here about the Robinson method of revelation is in order. In "The Gift of God," as in other Robinson successes, the reader is not certain what to think about the character(s), situation(s), and so forth until the end of the poem. Logically, the reader believes throughout most of the poem (that is, he should believe, despite what the poet says in his letter) that Mary and Christ are the subjects and,

10 Neff, p. 179.

11 Barnard, p. 27.
for some reason or other, that they are disguised subjects. It is not until the closing image in the last three lines of "The Gift of God" that Robinson's intention is made manifest.

"Cassandra"

"Cassandra" (11-12) is one of the few poems in the Robinson canon in which materialism, more particularly American materialism, is attacked. Neff states that "we count it among the best of our patriotic literature; for he who loves, chastens. A shudder at disaster narrowly missed and at perils still to be mingles with our admiration of the lapidary form of stanzas baring the faults of the American mind."\(^{12}\) And Fussell has this to say: "With a keen sense of decorum he allowed the symbol of Cassandra to control his attack on American complacency; the prophetess cursed with neglect and disbelief seemed to Robinson the most compelling emblem of the satiric function in society."\(^{13}\)

The method of the poem is an oration related by a speaker who introduces and concludes the poem but who does not deliver the oration. The title "Cassandra" lets the reader know that a prophet or prophetess (the sex of the orator remains unknown) who is not to be believed is the subject of the poem, and that the prophecy will be an evil one. The

\(^{12}\) Neff, p. 172.

\(^{13}\) Fussell, p. 148.
reader is never told, in so many words, who or what the prophet is; from the gist of the first two stanzas and from the reaction of the audience, a good case can be made for calling the orator an evangelist. Fussell notes that Robinson employs "allusional irony" in the figure of Cassandra. This irony, he continues, "methodically contributes a secondary structure that constantly presses a striking ethical incongruity upon the reader's attention." 14

The first word uttered by the orator is "Verily," which, coming at the beginning of the poem, suggests that the subject of the address will be religious in nature. The orator then puts forth the question: "What word have I for children here?" The use of "word" and "children" implies, again, a religious context. This is reinforced and the antimaterialism motif introduced in the last two lines of the first stanza:

"Your Dollar is your only Word, 
The wrath of it your only fear."

That both "dollar" and "Word" have the initial letter in upper case suggests that money has taken the place of religion to the audience. The "you" of the poem, the audience, does not seem to refer only to those in the crowd about the orator; the implication is that "you" means collectively all America, the relatively young country.

In the second stanza, the orator or evangelist (I use the terms interchangeably) introduces the motif of the spiritual blindness of America; the use of the word "altars" seems to suggest that in America "altars" are built for "it" (Dollar) that are both physically and

14 Ibid., p. 159.
metaphorically large enough to permit vision of the truth, whatever that may be. However, the possibility exists that "altars" refer to churches and that in America there are enough churches dispensing the real Word but that the sight of young America is narrowly restricted. By the syntactical pattern of the second stanza, "it" must necessarily refer to "Dollar"; and consequently, the referents to "altars" must be structures that promote or exhibit materialism. This does not, however, invalidate the suggestion of churches; as the reader experiences this stanza, he connects in his mind religion and materialism:

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

In quatrains three through five, Americans' misgivings are catalogued by the evangelist: they ignore reason, are spiritually blind (whatever knowledge they possess they keep "dark as ingots in a chest"), have no conception of the future, and are heading for an era of darkness because of their pride.

That the future is not as assured as Americans would like to believe is the substance of the sixth stanza:

"What long eclipse of history,  
What bivouac of the marching stars,  
Has given the sign for you to see  
Millenniums and last great wars?"

In other words, Americans must be blind to the facts of history. The meaning of "What bivouac of the marching stars" is elusive. It could:
mean that time, symbolically represented by stars continually in
orbital motion, has never been metaphorically encamped and never will.
Or the line could refer to the permanent encampment of the military,
symbolized by the "marching stars." Whatever this particular line
means specifically, it means generally that time will not conveniently
stop for America to insure a continual present. There is no reason to
discount the possibility that Robinson has both ideas in mind.

The seventh stanza echoes the general meaning of the sixth. The
evangelist, again employing the question method, asks the crowd:

What unrecorded overthrow
Of all the world has ever known,
Or ever been, has made itself
So plain to you, and you alone?"

In the next stanza, he reminds his audience that it has substituted
a material conception of itself ("Dollar, Dove and Eagle") for the Holy
Trinity and that America honors more its new trinity than it does itself.
Fussell claims that the irony in this stanza "is dependent upon implicit
reference to the Lord's Prayer." And this stanza takes the reader back
to "Your Dollar is your only Word" of the first stanza. America is
substituting the material for the spiritual and at the same time is
worshipping the material as a deity. The following stanza continues
in the same line but adds a twist: a materialistic conception of America

15Ibid., pp. 159-160.
is, in effect, consuming America because the country is feeding on itself. Also, the orator contends that America is simply unaware of what is happening to itself:

"And though your very flesh and blood
   Be what your Eagle eats and drinks,
   You'll praise him for the best of birds,
   Not knowing what the Eagle thinks."

The element of evil in the universe and the inability of America to recognize it are the subjects of the tenth and eleventh stanzas. The use of conventional ophidian imagery is fresh and exciting in these stanzas:

"The power is yours, but not the sight;
   You see not upon what you tread;
   You have the ages for your guide,
   But not the wisdom to be led.

"Think you to tread forever down
   The merciless old verities?
   And are you never to have eyes
   To see the world for what it is?"

The evangelist here is alluding to the 1775 "Navy Jack" flag on which is written, DON'T TREAD ON ME, below the figure of a snake. Repetition of the word "tread" indicates that snake imagery is to continue. The "merciless old verities" refer to universal evil, represented by Satan in the guise of a snake. The meaning of all this is that America is unwilling to acknowledge the existence of evil, which the evangelist feels is an inherent part of the nature of the universe. Again, it is because of spiritual blindness that America is unwilling and unable to recognize the presence of evil, according to the evangelist.
The last question put forth to America by him has deadly implications:

"Are you to pay for what you have
  With all you are?"

Apparently at this point, the evangelist's audience, laughing and unattentive, moved on to other business. The speaker of the poem identifies himself with the "laughing crowd" and appraises the situation in these the final lines of the poem:

No other word
We caught, but with a laughing crowd
Moved on. None heeded, and few heard.

In "Cassandra" Robinson presents a man obsessed with the belief that America, through spiritual blindness and through material worship, is destroying itself. The concept of spiritual blindness underscores the entire poem and provides one of the basic patterns of imagery that helps to make "Cassandra" a tightly knit poem. There are eight allusions to sight and blindness throughout the poem. Another unifying device consists of images based on symbols indigenous to American history and to the American way of life. The Eagle, the figure used to represent America, the Dove, the American symbol of peace, and the Dollar, the basic unit of the American monetary system—all combine to form the American substitute for the Holy Trinity. And the "Navy Jack" flag provides the symbolic pattern for the evangelist's discussion of evil and the American compulsion to dismiss evil as non-existent.
By identifying himself with the audience, the speaker extricates himself from expressing any attitude. The very fact of his relating the story of the evangelist in the man's own words is perhaps indicative that he was at least somewhat affected by what the evangelist had to say. By using the clause, "None heeded," coupled with his total group identification, the speaker leads the reader to believe that to him the orator was but a matter of curiosity. Of course, for artistic purposes, Robinson has chosen to assign only a minimal role to the speaker. To go beyond flimsy conjecture concerning the speaker and his attitude can reveal nothing valid.

The use of quatrains with a basic abcb rhyme scheme is particularly suited to a poem of this sort. It enables the poet to approximate an exhortation rhythmically, while at the same time, only one rhyme per quatrain lessens the possibility of the lines reading too smoothly.

"Hillcrest"

Written for Mrs. Edward Macdowell, at whose colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire, Robinson was an annual guest for many years, "Hillcrest" (15-17) praises the contemplative life guaranteed a resident of the colony, not as a means of escape from a world which bruises man, but as a meaningful state in which a man may learn a "little more than what he knew."
In "Hillcrest" there is little doubt that anyone but Robinson is the speaker. The poem begins impressively, and at once the atmosphere needed for contemplation is established:

No sound of any storm that shakes
Old island walls with older seas
Comes here where now September makes
An island in a sea of trees.

In his poetry Robinson is usually stingy in his use of description; he is not a poet who draws his images abundantly from the natural world. To him, it appears, description ought to further other ends. In the four lines quoted above, the picture given is one of fluid serenity. To achieve this effect, Robinson employs words whose sounds suggest peace. He uses, for example, the "o" sound in "No sound," "Old," "Comes," and "now" and the long "e" sound in "seas," "sea" and "trees." The first line sets in opposition the softness of "No sound" to the harshness of "storm and shakes." Here is a stanza deliberately planned to achieve an individual effect; it is one of Robinson's finest descriptive efforts.

The second stanza, which is slightly less effective lyrically, tells the reader that at MacDowell,

Between the sunlight and the shade
A man may learn till he forgets
The roaring of a world remade,
And all his ruins and regrets.

Here, away from the growing pains that America is suffering and away
from a man's personal past, an individual has time to forget what mistakes he has made.

In stanzas three through five, Robinson employs parallel structure in presenting a series of hypothetical "If's" that may happen to an artist who comes to MacDowell with a particularly bad set of memories, and who feels that "a planet out of tune" is responsible for "his jarred harmony," and/or who comes prepared "to unroll/His index of adagios," then "be given to console/Humanity with what he knows." Of this type of man, the malcontent artist, Robinson says:

He may by contemplation learn
A little more than what he knew,
And even see great oaks return
To acorns out of which they grew.

In addition,

He may, if he but listen well,
Through twilight and the silence here,
Be told what there are none may tell
To vanity's impatient ear.

And, Robinson continues, this man may never again be quite as certain as he was of what the future holds for him or as certain of

What sunlit labyrinth of pain
He may not enter and endure.

In effect, the artist will learn, if he is receptive, humility and the courage that so often accompanies humility. These he will gain from being allowed simply to contemplate in the most ideal of environments for the artist, the MacDowell Colony.
In the ninth, tenth, and eleventh stanzas, Robinson again employs parallel structure. Each stanza begins with "Who" followed by a verb and each is, in a sense, prescriptive. Stanza nine tells that through understanding, presumably both of one's self and of the world in which he lives, one "May learn to count no thing too strange," and concludes with this assertion:

Love builds of what Time takes away,
Till Death itself is less than Change.

The tenth stanza maintains that if an individual (Robinson, I am sure, is concerned in "Hillcrest" with the individual whose life is dedicated to artistic purposes—i.e., the poet, painter, et cetera) learns enough "in his duress," he "May go as far as dreams have gone." This stanza concludes with the converse of the above:

Who sees a little may do less
Than many who are blind have done.

And the eleventh stanza picks up the negative note on which the preceding stanza ends.

Both the last two stanzas of "Hillcrest" reiterate this negative perspective. In the twelfth Robinson sees "Far journeys and hard wandering" for the artist who keeps the world distant from himself; the poet is arguing here for the necessity of coming to grips with the world; he is denying romantic escape. Winters, I feel, has some rather interesting comments on the "statement of principles" inherent in "Hillcrest":
the poem represents a pretty explicit negation of the essential ideas of the romantic movement, especially as that movement has been represented by the Emersonian tradition: it tells us that life is a very trying experience, to be endured only with pain and to be understood only with difficulty; that easy solutions are misleading; that all solutions must be scrutinized; and that understanding is necessary. It is a poem on the tragedy of human life and on the value of contemplation; it expresses neither despair nor triumph, but rather recognition and evaluation.  

"Hillcrest" concludes with a particularly fine stanza:

And all his wisdom is unfound,  
Or like a web that error weaves  
On airy looms that have a sound  
No louder now than falling leaves.

There is little doubt that "Hillcrest" is a poem in which the abstract is exploited; the little description employed (first, second, and last stanzas) is functional and non-decorative. The abstract concept of contemplation is given tonal expression at the beginning of the poem, and through the unifying device of parallel structure, contemplation remains Robinson's main concern. Basically, he is praising the MacDowell Colony because it gives the artist a chance to examine both himself and the world from a favorable vantage point, one away from the pressures and demands that the daily business of living exacts. At MacDowell this man can contemplate, but Robinson does not give blanket praise to such; the value of the MacDowell experience (and

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16Winters, pp. 31-32.
by implication any comparable experience) ultimately rests with the individual. Depending upon his inward ability to grow, he may or may not be a better human being.

A philosophical poem such as "Hillcrest" can be subject to excesses. The abstract can dominate to such an extent that meaning is only relevant in a personal and private sense, or the abstract can lead, as it so often does, to unjustifiable prescription or blanket morality. I think that Robinson in "Hillcrest" has deftly avoided these pitfalls. By continual use of the hypothetical "if" and "may" and by no particular man singled out as the recipient of the MacDowell experience, he renders prescription and judgment on a minimal level. Still, though, the implications are in no way lessened. And by the crispness of the stanzas, the use of a standard abab rhyme scheme, and the fine but sharply controlled and functional description, Robinson always is on top of the abstract. Winters, too, feels that Robinson's management of subject and his quality of writing are quite good in "Hillcrest": "In these stanzas seven through nine and those following, Robinson's style is at something near its greatest." He continues that in the eighth stanza "the visual image" and in the ninth "the abstract statement of the last two lines, are equally impressive." Winters also comments that the writing in the last stanzas "has great strength, and the sensory image of
the final stanza has not only extraordinary descriptive beauty but great power of summary."17

"Eros Turannos"

If not the best of Robinson's lyrics, "Eros Turannos" ("Love, the Tyrant") (32-33) surely ranks as one of his best two or three, and it stands very high among lyrics in the English language. To Adams, whose study of the poem is one of the most complete to date, "Eros Turannos" reflects the major purposes of poetry in the romantic tradition: "to affirm, demonstrate, and embody in concrete symbolic emotional terms the value of life and the reality of immediate personal experience."18

The identity of the speaker is unknown; all the reader knows is that he is from the harbor community in which the protagonist of the poem resides. The poem is about a woman who, fearful of living alone, remains with a man who apparently has treated her quite badly. The nature of his offenses is never made explicitly clear. In the first stanza, the speaker tells why the woman will never give up the man:

SHE fears him, and will always ask
What fated her to choose him;
She meets in his engaging mask
All reasons to refuse him;

17Ibid., pp. 30-31.

18Adams, 151.
But what she meets and what she fears
Are less than are the downward years,
Drawn slowly to the foamless weirs
Of age, were she to lose him.

I think that it is reasonable to assume that the man and woman of the poem are married. It appears that there is a discrepancy between the appearance the man gives to her and his behavior toward, or at least in regard to, her. Already in the poem, the reader is led to believe that the woman is insecure; whether this insecurity has been caused by her husband or whether it is a product of her youth is unknown; I prefer to think that before she met him she was insecure. To the woman, the prospect of facing old age alone is worse than living with this man. The "foamless weirs/ Of age" is a curious but appropriate image. I take it to mean that when a person is old he is no longer able to obstruct and divert the streams of experience that flow upon him. The entity of old age is so ineffectual that it is even unable to create foam; in a steady, unrelenting stream, the water moves upon and over the old.

The second stanza begins with the speaker's observation that the wife once could understand her husband; she was once able to see beneath his mask. However, the speaker calls attention to her "blurred sagacity," which perhaps suggests that she is not particularly intelligent. The word "Love" appears in an unusual context in the third line of this stanza:

Between a blurred sagacity
That once had power to sound him,
And Love, that will not let him be
The Judas that she found him.

When she first met him, she must have been aware of his shortcomings
and probably tried to make him into someone else. Caught between her
"blurred sagacity" and the force of her love for him, both of which have
been and now are failing her, she turns to her pride:

Her pride assuages her almost,
As if it were alone the cost.

She will not let him go, not only because she fears the "downward
years," but also because of her pride. The line, "As if it were alone
the cost," seems to be an ironical appraisal by the speaker. She may
be fooling herself, or at least "almost" fooling herself, but her husband
is well aware of her emotions:

He sees that he will not be lost,
And waits and looks around him.

Why he is waiting and looking, what he is waiting for and looking
at, and why he is doing nothing about what he is waiting for and looking
at, provide the subject matter for the first four lines of the third stanza:

A sense of ocean and old trees
    Envelops and allures him;
    Tradition, touching all he sees,
    Beguiles and reassures him.

The speaker's attitude seems to be that the man is deceived by "tradi-
tion"; if this is the case, the reader should ask whether or not the
speaker feels that the man is justified in wanting to sever his relation-
ship with the woman. There are indications in the poem that the woman
is not normal and adjusted; and Robinson seems always to believe that there are two sides to every story.

The third stanza concludes with these lines:

And all her doubts of what he says
Are dimmed with what she knows of days--
Till even prejudice delays
And fades, and she secures him.

The wife does not believe what her husband with his "engaging mask" tells her; however, what she knows of loneliness forbids her leaving him. The last two lines of the stanza are puzzling; I think the speaker is trying to indicate a passage of time and to say that finally she gives up in her battle with herself over what to do and accepts him for what he is. Neff's interpretation of the situation seems to be somewhat wrong: "A woman of intellect, taste, and wealth who has sorely blundered in marriage holds to her Judas husband out of pride and out of fear of lonely old age."\(^{19}\) There is no evidence in the text to justify calling her "A woman of intellect, taste, and wealth." Perrine makes the same assumption when he states that she "is the patrician daughter of an old aristocratic family who occupies a large house on an estate overlooking the sea . . . ."\(^{20}\)

There is a passage of time between the first three and the last three stanzas. I take the first three as establishing and resolving both

\(^{19}\)Neff, p. 181.

\(^{20}\)Laurence Perrine, The Explicator, VIII (December 1949), Item 20.
the wife's and husband's individual problems. She has decided to stay with him; he has decided to stay with her. There is no mention of the husband in any of the last three stanzas, and the wife is said to be living alone. Not only do these support the thesis that time, probably a considerable period, has passed, but they reinforce the reading that the wife is now in a changed mental state. In the first three stanzas, despite her insecurity, the speaker talks of her as being somewhat rational; however, in the first four lines of the fourth stanza, the reader meets her this way:

The falling leaf inaugurates
The reign of her confusion;
The pounding wave reverberates
The dirge of her illusion.

The time of year is autumn (symbolically, perhaps the wife is either in, or rapidly approaching, old age); and she is suffering from some kind of collapse in her mental faculties. The "pounding wave" repeats the same song: her husband's dirge. I read the word "illusion" as referring to the speaker's conception of the light in which the wife regarded her husband. He is now dead, and her fears of the "downward years" have materialized. Of course, the husband simply could have left; but the third stanza ends with such finality that I am compelled to believe that he is dead. It is altogether possible, and even probable, that her breakdown was caused by her husband's passing away; the speaker makes it fairly clear at the beginning of the poem that the woman is
insecure and dependent on her husband for emotional sustenance, despite his failings. The last four lines of this stanza also suggest that he is dead:

And home, where passion lived and died,
Becomes a place where she can hide,
While all the town and harbor side
Vibrate with her seclusion.

The last two lines introduce actively into the poem the people of the community. The wife, living alone and hiding from the world, has become an object of curiosity. I am compelled to disagree with Barnard's reading that the man left his wife and that she has to be a woman of culture, and so forth.

It has always seemed to me... that the story is brought to a climax by the husband's desertion of the wife. Stanza 3 suggests that he has been a footloose character whom "tradition" (and the flattering passion shown for him by an intelligent, cultured, and presumably wealthy woman) "beguiles" into accepting marriage and respectability, but who, after the novelty has worn off, becomes bored and moves on. Furthermore, only some such dramatic happening would make the town "vibrate" with excited gossip; and "hide" suggests (to me) a refuge where she can be alone...21

At the beginning of the fifth stanza, the speaker, who in a typically Robinson way identifies himself with the collective entity of the town, ironically comments on the inability of people to know other people and on the penchant that people share for gossiping:

21Barnard, p. 278.
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.

At this point in "Eros Turannos," the reader is sharply reminded of
"The House on the Hill," in which the townspeople are said to exhibit
similar behavior. The speaker continues in this same vein of irony
for the last four lines of the stanza:

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.

The use of "veil" and "visions" reinforces the illusory nature of the
wife's image of her husband. In the same way, perhaps, that she sees
him, the people in the town are mistaken in their appraisal of the
"home, where passion lived and died" and in their conjectures of the
characters who enacted the drama. The point that Robinson pounds here
is that no one can know anyone else. I am not sure that I concur with
Adams' reading of the man as emotionally dry: "The house may be a
place where passion has died, as the neighbors believe, but passion
has lived with her as it seems not to have done with them. . . . From
what we know of him, he appears incapable of any intense emotion,
whether of pain or of ecstasy. . . ."22 Perrine is right when he states

22 Adams, 147.
that the townspeople's stories "show incomplete understanding of psychological subtleties and incomplete compassion for human frailty..."23

In the first four lines of the sixth and final stanza, the speaker tells us that the speculations of the townspeople can do the wife no harm,

That with a god have striven,
Not hearing much of what we say,
Take what the god has given.

The god referred to here I take to mean the god of love; this is the only possible reading in light of the context, and "Love" personified in the third line of the second stanza adds support to this reading. The wife is oblivious to what anyone says about her; she made the commitment and is taking the consequences.

The last four lines of "Eros Turannos" are a brilliant imagistic portrayal of just "what the god has given":

Though like waves breaking it may be,
Or like a changed familiar tree,
Or like a stairway to the sea
Where down the blind are driven.

By the very fact that "it" has several possible referents, the speaker is admitting that it is impossible for anyone to know exactly what the

23Perrine, The Explicator (December 1949).
woman's emotional reactions are, but he is making the effort to go inside her mind, so to speak, to discover them. Before I give what I think is a probable, if not the correct, reading of the three images, I think it important that I reproduce here the interpretations offered by Perrine and Adams. Perrine argues that "The last three images characterize the life that Love has brought: it is mournful, monotonous, and destructive, like the sea; it has changed for her all the scenes of her earlier happiness; it is despotic and cruel and whips her like a slave toward death and destruction." 24 Here is Adam's extended reading:

The images of blindness and downward progress and forces beyond human power to resist or control are there, in the final position, and they may well be regarded as conclusive. But there are still alternatives, with somewhat different meanings and interpretations, and there is still the gift. The "waves breaking" have to do with time, in one of the two aspects under which it is presented in the poem: that of monotony or unchangingness, which has been previously suggested by "the foamless weirs/ Of age," by the man's "sense of ocean" linked with comfortable "tradition," and by "The pounding wave" which, in the townspeople's view of the lady, "reverberates/ The dirge of her illusion. . . ." In this aspect, "the downward years" and "what she knows of days"--the endless, unprofitable tomorrow and tomorrow--are the alternative to her defeat and enslavement by the god of love; and she not unreasonably prefers to be overcome by an ecstasy of passion rather than by mere attrition, even though the ecstasy may be short and the attrition may go on anyhow. The image of "a changed familiar tree" indicates other possibilities. For the man "old trees" combine with "ocean" to assure him of the comfort and safety he expects to find in the lady's house; but for the lady herself the gift of love may change these old familiar trees--and any change may be better than none. To her, at least, since life is change, the trees are alive, whereas to the

24 Loc. cit.
man they appear to represent mere security; and the only real security, the only sure refuge from the uncountable ills of life, is in death; or better yet, in never having lived at all. . . . We should . . . consider the last four lines of the poem as being probably ironic, as again referring at least partly to the town's point of view, which is explicitly said to be inadequate, rather than to the truer view the speaker hints at in his mention of "what the god has given". . . . 25

I cannot agree that the last four lines are ironic or that they refer to the town's point of view. The speaker here is sincerely trying to understand the woman, even though, as is so often the case in Robinson, he identifies himself with the townspeople. My belief is that the last three images are symbolic representations of death; that is, the god has given to this woman death, 26 though the speaker realizes that he is unable to interpret exactly the way in which this death is being manifested to her. When waves break, they are over--through--dead. At the beginning of the fourth stanza, the time of the year suggested by the "falling leaf" is autumn, so "a changed familiar tree" is a tree in autumn when the leaves have fallen and the tree is bare. The bareness of the tree with its leaves fallen again is a symbolic representation of the cessation of life. The "stairway to the sea/ Where down the blind are driven" suggests the "downward years" of the first stanza, and should be read once more as a symbol of death. Blindly driven by the god of love, the woman herself is being driven to death.

25Adams, 148-149.

26This reading was suggested to me by Karen Iehle, a former student.
Winters says that "Eros Turannos" is "one of the greatest short poems in the language." Unfortunately Winters, with whose appraisal I heartily concur, does not offer any substantial analysis or reasons for his favorable evaluation, except for this statement: "... this piece has the substance of a short novel or a tragic drama, yet its brevity has resulted in no poverty--its brevity has resulted, rather, in a concentration of meaning and power." 

Robinson unifies this little drama brilliantly through two basic patterns of imagery. In order to put across to the reader the motif of impossible total knowledge of one person of another, Robinson employs words relating to vision and sight. Not only can the townspeople never really know what went on between the husband and the wife, but even the wife never really could see through her husband, although in the beginning of their relationship her powers were stronger than they ever were again. Words signifying vision and sight are laced throughout the six stanzas and certainly bind the poem together: (1) "mask"; (2) "blurred," "sees," "looks"; (3) "sees," "dimmed"; (4) "illusion"; (5) "veil," "vision," "seen"; (6) "blind." Louis O. Coxe notes that Robinson's use of "waves, trees, stairs leading down" are integrally related to meaning in the poem: "Throughout, these symbols control and provide a center for the meanings possible to the poem, and from

\[27\text{Winters, p. 11.}\]

\[28\text{Ibid., p. 32.}\]
the mention of 'downward years' and foamless weirs' in the first stanza to the triple vision of the last four lines these elements recur, the same but altered.  

The second pattern of imagery, as I see it, is not functionally related to a motif, but it does assist greatly in unifying the context. The setting of this little drama is in a harbor community; consequently, the dominant natural image would logically be water. In the first stanza, there is mention of the "foamless weirs." The reader learns in the second line of the second stanza that the wife "once had power to sound him." In nautical usage, "to sound" means variously to measure the depth of water, to examine the floor of the ocean, and so forth. The third stanza begins with the speaker relating that "A sense of ocean . . . Envelops and allures" the husband. In the fourth stanza, "The pounding wave" produces in the mind of the wife "The dirge of her illusion." And in the imagistic conclusion to the poem, two of the three images are drawn directly from the sea: "Though like waves breaking" and "like a stairway to the sea." The other image, that of "a changed familiar tree," might be said to be what Coxe and Perrine contend is a third pattern of imagery: trees and leaves. Besides "A sense of ocean," the husband in the beginning of the third stanza is


30Perrine, The Explicator (December 1949).
enveloped and allured by "old trees"; and the speaker refers in the beginning of the fourth stanza to "The falling leaf" which "inaugurates/The reign of her confusion."

I think that the lines quoted from "Eros Turannos" in the above discussion testify to the extremely appropriate selection of language on the part of Robinson. Apart from the patterns of imagery, attention also should be paid to the way in which this poem is structured. Not only is there a time lapse between the first three and the last three stanzas, but the poem's two divisions have different yet related focuses. In the first three Robinson dwells upon the respective conflicts of the two characters; this leads up to the resolutions of the third stanza: the husband and wife will stay together. The last three stanzas, with the husband conspicuously absent, focus rightly on the wife's emotional state in her "downward years," and introduce one of Robinson's favorite motifs: knowledge of people. Generally, when Robinson is working within the context of people knowing other people, he has a further objective in mind: that of developing in the reader an attitude of compassion which comes to him through a sincere attempt at understanding the character or characters in question and through realizing that each character (everyman by implication) is unique. This is so in "Eros Turannos"; it finds its most poignant expression through the use of irony in the fifth stanza. The reader is aware of the woman's insecurity and her fears. He understands why she is compelled to
remain with a man whom she both fears and doubts. It is interesting to note that there is no explicit condemnation of the husband by the speaker; he too has his problems. With the fourth stanza, the reader is immediately shocked into the reality of the wife's emotional state.

Robinson saves this poem from slipping into melodrama by having the speaker remark in the last stanza that the wife takes "what the god has given." "Eros Turannos" is a moving lyric, unified through patterns of imagery and through a consistent use of the present tense, and structured logically. Through a close examination of the poem, the reader learns what Robinson is trying to do and is himself enriched in the process.

"Veteran Sirens"

Winters claims that "Veteran Sirens" (40) is about "old prostitutes," and I think that his reading is correct: "'Veteran Sirens' is an expression of pity for old prostitutes who must continue as best they are able at their trade. . . . Robinson's poem is a simple expression of pity at evident suffering, but is stated in the most admirable language."31 Almost every Robinson critic, scholar, and student argues that this poem is most definitely not about prostitutes and most definitely about old ladies who are trying in vain to keep whatever

31Winters, pp. 33-34.
charm and beauty they once had from the inexorable ravages of time. Barnard, for example, maintains that Winters' reading overlooks the "obviously whimsical tone. Robinson's theme is the traditional one--treated with unique lightness and forbearance--of the super-annuated flirt."32 It is Perrine, however, who objects most strongly to the veteran sirens being prostitutes. He has this to say in reply to Winters' reading, which he calls "a serious misinterpretation": "The poem deals rather, in my opinion, with middle-aged or elderly spinsters who refuse to accept either their age or their spinsterhood gracefully, but continue to invoke rouge, lipstick, nail paint, hair dye, bright clothes, and artificial gaiety in an effort to simulate youth and attract men."33

Perrine then maintains that the probability of "Veteran Sirens" being about prostitutes is quite remote when one considers Robinson's life and his attitudes:

There is no evidence that he had any sympathy for commercialized love. One looks in vain in his work for any glorification of the "poor little prostitute". . . . Robinson's puritan heritage was lightened both by his intelligence and charity, but nothing in his life or writing makes it seem less than ludicrous that he should hold out to prostitutes the possibility of the "far comelier diadem" that age offers, or suggest that by ceasing to deceive themselves they might crown their lives with dignity and respectability.34

32Barnard, p. 295.
34Loc. cit.
In Where the Light Falls, Smith tells of a series of letters written by Robinson to Harry De Forest Smith in 1892 while the poet was attending Harvard University. Unfortunately, those who now have control of release of Robinson's hitherto unpublished letters refused Smith permission to quote either in full or in part from this particular series of letters. One of the letters in question, dated March 6, is of more than just passing interest, particularly in light of what Perrine says concerning Robinson's sensibilities. Of his own account of the March 6 letter, Smith has this to say: "The account of the controverted letter given here is an objective summary of its pertinent contents, being neither quotation nor paraphrase, and failing therefore to reproduce Robinson's eloquence or otherwise to record his strong feelings in the premises."  

In this letter he recalled having visited, during the past month, thirty or forty of Boston's "houses of seclusion," as he calls them elsewhere. He said that the experience had given him—presumably for the first time—a real understanding of women, and in consequence full realization of the horror of prostitution. He declared his contempt for men who thus debased women for pleasure only; and from the depths of his characteristic humility he even dared value himself above such men (!)36  

So Robinson certainly did know prostitutes. Smith records that, as far as anyone knows, Robinson never himself partook of their services.

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35 Smith, p. 395.

36 Ibid., p. 116.
Despite the fact that now we know that Robinson learned first hand the psyche of the prostitute, this knowledge only reinforces the reading that the subjects of "Veteran Sirens" come from the brothel; the real evidence is in the poem itself.

There is no explicit mention by the speaker of the poem that the women in question are prostitutes, but there are clues enough which add up to this conclusion. It is typical of Robinson in his best poems to be more indirect than direct; and I believe this to be one of his strongest virtues and certainly to be at work in "Veteran Sirens." By making the reader go through the process of arriving at the correct reading from a variety of possible readings, Robinson allows the reader to become intimately involved with the poem and also allows him the pleasure of playing a little mind game. Robinson's deliberately cloaking of meaning is functional; once the reader does arrive at the right interpretation, the impact of the poem is intensified.

"Veteran Sirens" begins with the speaker, an unidentified observer but seemingly the poet himself, stating that

The ghost of Ninon would be sorry now
To laugh at them, were she to see them here.

Ninon (1620-1705) was a French courtesan known for her wit and for retaining her beauty and charms to an advanced age. The use of the word "here" indicates that the women in question are at a particular place. The speaker continues:
So brave and so alert for learning how
To fence with reason for another year.

Apparently, these women are intent upon being able to function for another year, in some capacity or another, even though their very functioning seems against the laws of reason.

The second stanza begins with this prescription: Age offers a far comelier diadem / Than theirs. " According to the speaker, the women would be better off to retire, as it were, and to grow old gracefully. The next clause in the stanza seems to offer striking evidence that the ladies are prostitutes, not just "superannuated flirts": "but anguish has no eye for grace." "Anguish" refers to the forces that prompt men to brothels. These men care little or nothing for "grace"; they are searching only for release. The third and fourth lines of the second stanza speak the physical necessities that work against the women in their profession:

When time's malicious mercy cautions them
To think a while of number and of space.

I take the word "number" to refer literally to the number of men that these women have to entertain, and the word "space" to refer to the time intervals between each appointment. At this point in "Veteran Sirens," I think the reader has every right to assume, or at least to begin to assume, that the poem is about prostitutes.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker uses the catalogue method to list the practical factors that demand that the prostitutes retire:
The burning hope, the worn expectancy,
The martyred humor, and the maimed allure,
Cry out for time to end his levity,
And age to soften its investiture.

"The burning hope" refers to what the men approaching the experience are looking for, while "the worn expectancy" is all that the prostitutes really have to offer. At this point in their lives, these sirens are unable to work with fervor enough, as once perhaps they were, to meet the demands of the men. In fact, the only fervor that they are able to generate is likened to a "martyred humor" (they must feign good spirits) and their "allure" is now "maimed."

In the next stanza, the speaker states that while other women "fade and are still fair," the prostitutes, on the other hand, defy such "fairness and are unsubdued." Unintimidated by the world of normal women, a world which praises the ability to take on age with grace and charm, the prostitutes are insistent on maintaining this way of life. And in the last two lines of the stanza, the speaker relates that although the prostitutes suffer,

they may not forswear
The patient ardor of the unpursued.

That is, they must always act the part.

"Veteran Sirens" ends with the speaker expressing pity for the old prostitutes, a pity, however, tinged with irony that finds voice in his method of presentation:

Poor flesh, to fight the calendar so long;
Poor vanity, so quaint and yet so brave;
Poor folly, so deceived and yet so strong,
So far from Ninon and so near the grave.

The allusion to Ninon in the last line of the poem is appropriate and provides the most natural conclusion possible.

Robinson's choice of rhythms, end stopped stanzas, and his precise selection of words contribute to the success of "Veteran Sirens."
And, of course, so does the title, with its suggestion that these women are old campaigners, having been through the wars. It is certainly to Robinson's credit that he never once mentions that the women are prostitutes (he never states that 'Lorraine' in "The Growth of 'Lorraine'" is a prostitute either). By so doing, he allows the reader to make the metaphorical leap from ladies of ill-repute to women who, though old and tired, vain and foolish, still try to retain whatever beauty and allure they once may have possessed.

It is important to read this poem first as "an expression of pity for old prostitutes" and then secondly, by implication, as an expression of pity for "superannuated flirts." The speaker, of course, cannot help make mild ridicule of these women. The ludicrous nature of their behavior demands ridicule; but it also demands, and receives, pity on the part of the speaker, and subsequently, pity on the part of the reader. Largely contributing to the success of "Veteran Sirens" is the universality suggested by the particular situation involved--from prostitution to aging flirts.
"Another Dark Lady"

"Another Dark Lady" (41-42) is a sonnet in which the speaker addresses a woman with whom he was in love but who now has left him. In the octave, the speaker makes it perfectly clear that the lady of the title is totally evil. He begins that although he wonders where she fled, he would not "lift a pin" to see her; he continues that she may be "prowling anywhere" as long as she does not show to him her "little head." The speaker's attitude, which while suggested in the first four lines of the octave, is firmly established in the next four:

No dark and evil story of the dead  
Would leave you less pernicious or less fair—  
Not even Lilith, with her famous hair;  
And Lilith was the devil, I have read.

With the use of "dark," "evil," "pernicious," "dead," "devil," and the reference to Lilith, the speaker leaves little doubt that the lady in question is comparable to a female Satan.

So far in the poem, the reader is not made aware of the reason(s) for the speaker's intense feelings. The first line of the sestet clarifies the situation somewhat: "I cannot hate you, for I loved you then." In a typical Robinson fashion, the speaker is, in effect, deliberately qualifying his emotions; and despite the fact that his attitude toward the lady never really alters to the end of the poem, the reader learns that he must have seen something attractive in her. The sarcastic reference to her "little head" does throw some light on why he was
attracted to her: a small head traditionally is a sign of beauty (one is reminded here of the "little ears" of the lovely lady in "For a Dead Lady"). Couple this with the allusion to her as "fair" in the fifth line of the octave, and the reader begins to see this dark lady as quite attractive. The use of the word "fair" is particularly telling since "fair" is in opposition to "pernicious." Here is a lady whose wickedness and beauty are both paramount. And here, also, is the first indication of the dual pattern of imagery that is the basic unifying device of the sonnet.

In the title, the adjective "Dark" is used to describe the "Lady." The legend of Lilith identifies her as the lady of darkness. It is possible that Robinson has Shakespeare's famous and mysterious "dark lady" of the sonnets in mind. If this is the case, and if so it is only on the most obvious of levels, then Robinson only wants the reader to associate her with the element of darkness. Shakespeare's lady, who is known for her dark hair and complexion, is not evil in the sense that Lilith is or in the sense that the lady of this poem is. The above cited words in the octave—"dark," "evil," "pernicious," "dead," and "devil"—provide a contrast which works actively against the allusions to the lady in question as "fair" and to Lilith's "famous hair." The time of the year to which the speaker refers in the sestet, the time when he and the lady achieved a harmonious relationship, was autumn: "The woods were golden then." What Robinson is doing is to correlate
passions with dark and light imagery. When the speaker loved the lady, the leaves on the trees made the woods golden; he fell in love with her, we now know, because of her physical beauty, her "fair"ness. Now he can think of her only as a wicked "Dark Lady"; he is no longer literally blinded by her.

"Another Dark Lady" concludes with writing that achieves brilliance. It is colloquial and, at the same time, moving, as if the speaker, aware of being betrayed and having now gained knowledge, still laments his loss and retains an afterglow of light from the initial golden experience:

There was a road
Through beeches; and I said their smooth feet showed
Like yours. Truth must have heard me from afar,
For I shall never have to learn again
That yours are cloven as no beech's are.

I am most impressed by the fluid movement from line to line, the easy but not facile manner in which "road" leads to "Through" and by the way "smooth feet showed/ Like yours" gains momentum and then abruptly stops. The metaphorical use of the lady's cloven feet and the feet of the beeches draws together nicely the satanic suggestion of the lady and reiterates by suggestion the light-dark pattern of imagery. In conjunction with this, the legend of Lilith deserves some mention since Robinson uses it functionally to give the poem unity through this dual pattern of imagery. Depending upon her mood, Lilith could make herself into an incredibly beautiful woman or a hideous beast. Robinson,
or course, is working within the former context. Lilith is also known for her beautiful golden hair. Consequently, the allusion to the golden woods in the sestet not only means the season of the year; the autumn gold is enhanced by the color of the lady's hair. The speaker was taken in by the time and the place, both of which combined to cast a spell over him, so to speak, and to blind him to the evil (whatever it was) that was, in essence, the lady. It might be worth noting at this point that "Another Dark Lady" fits into Robinson's thematic concern of the difficulty, if not impossibility, of total knowledge of people.

Smith tells of a young lady, a "birthright member of Boston Brahmin society at its most intellectual," with whom the poet used to take woodland walks: "She was of a golden blondness and frequently, perhaps habitually, wore white. Her features were small and of patrician fineness, her eyes blue-gray and large, her expression tense, concerned, and consecrated, her bearing highbred in delicacy and grace." Although there may be no relationship whatsoever between the poet's personal life and the sonnet in question, Smith feels that "Another Dark Lady" is "Suggestive in its piquancy" of such a relationship and he contends that the "title would be a typical Robinsonian disguise for this blonde girl."38

37 Ibid., p. 179.
38 Ibid., p. 181.
If there is an accurate correlation between the life of the poet and the sonnet, then the vagueness of the lady's evil might very well be explained by the deliberate cloud of obscurity that Robinson kept over his relationship with this young lady. Smith speculates interestingly on just what might have happened between them. He first conjectures that perhaps Robinson felt that he had led the girl on, that he had become "a dangerous flirt and philanderer, one who incited love in a woman without any purpose beyond pleasantly beguiling the time!"

Smith continues:

By combined inference from observations from four disconnected sources--of varying degrees of credibility--it seems likely that something of the kind occurred between Robinson and his companion of the woodland walks. One credible comment has it that he made her a declaration of love, less than a proposal of marriage, to which she was unable to respond in kind. Another report that is no better than gossip has it that she was in love with him. A better source, speaking long after the event, says that when Robinson was charged with this he replied that she was "very fanciful," meaning that she tended to romanticize her feelings beyond actuality. An interesting general comment on Robinson, made by one who knew both parties but without specific reference to their experience together, is that he "wanted to do all the loving," that the moment he felt any current returning he retreated. The same source said that "anything like personal contact was repugnant to him."39

I am intrigued by all of the above because there is nothing in the poem to pinpoint the evil quality of the "Dark Lady." It is not unusual for Robinson to withhold specific information of this sort in his poetry.

Almost all of Robinson's triumphs in the range of the shorter poem are replete with the elusive. The reader must analyze carefully and sometimes read long in order to extract from the poem certain specific information. Such is the case with "The Poor Relation," (45-47) a poem about a woman who has lost something and who is waiting for death. About this poem Barnard states: "Critics agree, with a rare approach to unanimity, that this is one of Robinson's finest short poems."^40

Winters contends that the poem "describes an old woman";^41 Barnard argues that "much of the pathos depends on the assumption that the traditional afflictions of old age have come upon her while still relatively young." He admits that certain of the speaker's remarks seem to indicate that the woman in question is not so young, but he cites other remarks that reinforce the opposite. I must agree with Barnard to the extent that the woman is not in old age and that the speaker, who is outside the poem enough to be Robinson himself, pictures her as being old for her age, whatever that is.

^40Barnard, p. 290.
^41Winters, p. 34.
^42Barnard, p. 284.
That she is ill is suggested in the opening lines of the poem:

No longer torn by what she knows
And sees within the eyes of others,
Her doubts are when the daylight goes,
Her fears are for the few she bothers.

The tone of selflessness established in these lines is never altered throughout the poem. In the next four lines, the illness motif is again suggested:

She tells them it is wholly wrong
Of her to stay alive so long;
And when she smiles her forehead shows
A crinkle that had been her mother's.

It is not until the beginning of the second stanza that the reader learns that the woman is ill when the speaker comments that she is still beautiful but made pale by pain: "Beneath her beauty, blanched with pain." Barnard thinks it significant that Robinson uses "pain" instead of "age," which would be the natural word choice if the woman were old. However, illness, the nature of which is withheld from the reader, is not the only cross for this noble lady to bear. The speaker relates that she is "wistful yet for being cheated." At this point, the reader remembers the title of the poem, "The Poor Relation," and makes the right connection that somewhere along the way she was deprived of something that was lawfully hers. He begins to feel even more admiration for her, knowing that the world has obviously mistreated her. He is to feel even more this way as he progresses through the stanza:

43Loc. cit.
Beneath her beauty, blanched with pain,
And wistful yet for being cheated,
A child would seem to ask again
A question many times repeated;
But no rebellion has betrayed
Her wonder at what she has paid
For memories that have no stain,
For triumph born to be defeated.

Here is a woman who has not fought against a wrong or wrongs externally imposed upon her. In her past she had done nothing to justify what happened to her. Perhaps, in the last line of the stanza there is a suggestion of fate at work, but I prefer to take the line literally rather than figuratively. The illness that now has hold of her, I see as a condition about which nothing can be done. I think it is significant that nowhere in this poem is there any mention of remedies, medications, or treatments for whatever it is the woman has. Apparently, though, and this is to be given strong support throughout the poem, she had everything going favorably for her at birth: looks, wealth, position, and so forth. One could argue at this point in the poem that the woman had not been cheated of any fortune, but rather, had been cheated of her health. It is my belief, and there is support later in the poem for this, that the woman suffers from both, and therein lies much of the pathos of her situation.

Only a few people, the reader learns in the third stanza, have remained loyal to the lady, despite her adversities, and "come for what she was." Apparently, she lives alone and is, for all practical purposes, secluded from the world because, the speaker relates, those loyal to her
"know where to find her." And she clings to them, "for they are all she has," and she goes along with them,

when they remind her,
As heretofore, of what they know
Of roses that are still to blow
By ways where not so much as grass
Remains of what she sees behind her.

The speaker is, of course, using irony here to put across the point that perhaps her friends do believe that she eventually will get well and that her life in general will someday bloom. From what the speaker says concerning the optimism of her visitors, it is logical to assume that they are young people, perhaps even children.

The fourth stanza opens with a pair of curious lines:

They stay a while, and having done
What penance or the past requires.

The implication here again is that her adversities (illness must necessarily be excluded here) are not of her own doing. It is never made clear whether or not her visitors are members of her family. If they are, then the references to penance and to her past seem natural. If they are not, and in this context this seems to be the proper reading, then the lines are puzzling, except if they are read in the broadest of humanistic terms; that is, one man shares the guilt for another's externally imposed hardships. As the visitors leave, "Her lip shakes" and

yet she would not have them stay;
She knows as well as anyone
That Pity, having played, soon tires.
In the fifth stanza, the speaker repeats that she has led a guiltless past; she is not afraid to call up the "good ghost" of her past, while she wears and mends
The poor relation's odds and ends,

who is

Her truant from a tomb of years—
Her power of youth so early taken.

The last line quoted tells the reader that her adversities came upon her early. Read in conjunction with the line that precedes it, the reader gathers that her only consistent pleasure in life comes from the metaphorical visitations of her "good ghost," her memories.

The first four lines of the sixth stanza use the woman's slender laugh to illustrate again that she is basically alone in the world. The third and fourth lines, with the alliterative "s" and "b" sounds, are particularly appropriate in the finality of their movement:

Poor laugh, more slender than her song
It seems; and there are none to hear it
With even the stopped ears of the strong
For breaking heart or broken spirit.

The insistent rhythm of the last two lines saves the sentiment from sinking into bathos. In the second four lines of this stanza, the speaker indicates that here is a woman who, for her position and beauty, once was the object of vicious envy:

The friends who clamored for her place,
And would have scratched her for her face,
Have lost her laughter for so long
That none would care enough to fear it.
The speaker consciously focuses on the lady's laughter; it is mentioned in both stanzas five and six. It is interesting to note also that he refers to her smile in stanzas one and three. In all probability, these allusions to particulars in her behavior are intended to keep the reader continually aware of her pleasant personality and good humor, both before and after the adversities took hold of her.

The seventh stanza begins with these two biting lines:

None live who need fear anything
From her, whose losses are their pleasure.

It is Robinson's method not to give the reader an inclusive picture of the situation involved in a given poem. While this often enriches the effect of a Robinson poem, it can at times, as in "The Poor Relation," be a weakness. For example, who have and are deriving pleasure from the condition of the lady in the poem? The remainder of the seventh stanza reiterates her present condition and the fact that she finds pleasure only in "foraging/ For bits of childhood song . . . ." Certainly, one of Robinson's intentions in "The Poor Relation" is to arouse in the reader compassion for the lady. Yet the reader has the right to ask: "How can I have compassion for one whose circumstances are adverse through no fault of her own if I do not know what the motivating factors behind these circumstances are?"

I argue that this lack of specific information is a fault but I still feel that the poem, by and large, is a success, just as I agree somewhat with Winters when he claims that the poem at times tends to be
redundant. I subscribe also to Winters' assertion that the woman's "vision of the city / stanza eight/" is "one of the greatest triumphs of Robinson's rhetoric. 44 This stanza deserves full reproduction, not only for the power of the language, but also for the simile drawn between "a giant harp" and the "City":

And like a giant harp that hums  
On always, and is always blending  
The coming of what never comes  
With what has past and had an ending,  
The City trembles, throbs, and pounds  
Outside, and through a thousand sounds  
The small intolerable drums  
Of Time are like slow drops descending.

Of the simile in the last two lines, Winters argues that it "is one of the few successful comparisons in literature between the visual and the auditory, the success being made possible by the fact that the two items have a common ground for comparison in the rhythm of their movements." 45 The choice of rhymes throughout this stanza is impeccable; the words alternate between insistence ("hums," "comes," "pounds," "sounds," and "drums") and reverberation ("blending," "ending," and "descending"). Also, Robinson's use of alliteration and assonance blends perfectly in these expressions: "trembles, throbs, and pounds"; "through a thousand sounds"; and "slow drops descending."

44 Winters, p. 34.

There is little doubt that the eighth stanza of "The Poor Relation" is one of Robinson's most successful stanzas.

And the concluding stanza of the poem is very impressive. It begins with the speaker reiterating the plight of the woman; there is nothing she can do to lessen "the lonely changelessness of dying."
The last four lines of this stanza contain another simile, again well-done and excitingly appropriate:

Unsought, unthought-of, and unheard,
She sings and watches like a bird,
Safe in a comfortable cage
From which there will be no more flying.

Unobtrusively, Robinson has woven into the fabric of the last four stanzas of the poem allusions to music, which find their culmination in the closing simile.

As I have mentioned, compassion for the lady seems to be Robinson's major concern in "The Poor Relation." And since understanding is a prerequisite for compassion, perhaps Robinson thought that repetition of the lady's plight rather than specific knowledge of circumstances surrounding it would be more appropriate for leading the reader to understanding. I quibble with this, but the poem still works.

There is also in "The Poor Relation" the Robinson idea that total understanding of one person by another is indeed a difficult, if not impossible, process. However, if only partial understanding is achieved, the effort is worth the work, for compassion to Robinson seems to be the wellspring of his poetry.
Even though *The Man Against the Sky* contains more shorter poems of superior quality than any other volume, I think that it is a mistake to argue that Robinson was beginning to write better shorter poems. Certainly, the critical public apparently thought so, for it began to notice Robinson with increasing regularity. However, I do not think that one can say that "The Gift of God," for example, is superior to either "The Whip" or "For a Dead Lady," both of which appeared in the 1910 volume, *The Town Down the River*. The point I am trying to stress here is that in his shorter poems Robinson maintains a level of excellence throughout his poetic career. And the same subject matters, motifs, and techniques that are present in the best poems of his first volume, *The Children of the Night*, are found also in those poems from *The Man Against the Sky* under consideration in this chapter. He stresses the need for compassion and understanding in "Luke Havergal" as he does in "Flammonde," "The Gift of God," "Veteran Sirens" and "The Poor Relation." For another example, take the similarity of attitudes expressed towards the townspeople in both "The House on the Hill" and "Eros Turannos."
CHAPTER IV

THE SHORTER POEMS (1920, 1921, 1925)

"The Mill"

In 1920 Robinson published two volumes of poetry: Lancelot, the second of his Arthurian poems, and The Three Taverns, which includes twenty-four shorter poems. Of them, I find only two, "The Mill" and "The Dark Hills," to be superior. Controlled, dispassionate, and understated, "The Mill" (460-461) treats the double suicide of a miller and his wife. The poem provides no interpretive problems; in fact, of Robinson's finest achievements in the shorter poem, "The Mill" assuredly is one of the easiest to understand in terms of rational content. However, Robinson's early critics found the poem to be more than just puzzling. Redman writes that "The Mill" "is a perfect example of the technique that has won its author a reputation for obscurity..."\(^1\) He calls attention to the "indirect method that we owe the drama and the haunting atmosphere which pervades the whole."\(^2\) Cestre claims that the poem exhibits the poet's "inferential" method, but he carries things

\(^1\) Redman, p. 40.

\(^2\) Ibid., p. 41.
a bit too far when he argues first that the miller was "running a small mill in the New England country" and second that the Miller "has lost all hope, as we make out, of competing with the big industrial plants of the West." This material simply is not within the context of the poem. Even Winters, an astute reader, suggests that this poem approaches the obscure; he uses it to introduce a section of his book given over to obscurity in the poetry of Robinson.

In the first stanza, the reader learns that the miller's wife waited into the night for her husband to return from work. She had a feeling that something was wrong since as her husband left, he said: "There are no millers any more," and "he had lingered at the door." The speaker of "The Mill" remains unidentified; he is only the narrator of a little drama.

In the second of this three-stanza poem, the speaker relates that the miller hanged himself from a beam in the mill. As his wife entered the mill, her intuition told her that something was wrong:

Sick with a fear that had no form
She knew that she was there at last;
And in the mill there was a warm
And mealy fragrance of the past.

The description of the smell of the mill is handled well by Robinson, as

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3Cestre, pp. 145-146.

4Winters, pp. 44-45.
is the entire last stanza, in which the wife's suicide is described delicately:

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

The "it" in the first line of the stanza refers to the body of her husband hanging from a beam.

In what Neff calls "twenty-four perfect lines," there are two deaths by suicide. In the hands of a craftsman less skilled than Robinson, the subject of "The Mill" could easily be treated overemotionally. But there is a classic crispness and an austere rhythmic control at work in this poem that underplay the emotion and reduce the chances to a minimum of slippage into the sentimental. Perhaps this technique of underplaying the emotion is nowhere better illustrated in "The Mill" than in the last four lines. There is a calmness, a serenity, in the scene described, as if in her death the wife has finally achieved peace: "... the final note is not of tormented conflict between doubt and desire but rather of yearning for release and oblivion." In these final lines, Robinson eases the tension that is built up previously in

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5 Neff, p. 197.

6 Barnard, p. 59.
the poem through words that have a feminine touch—"smooth," "starry velvet," and "ruffled"—and through the soft rhyming of "weir" and "appear."

"The Dark Hills"

A favorite with anthologizers and the shortest of Robinson's triumphs, "The Dark Hills" (461) ostensibly describes the fading of hills at sunset:

DARK hills at evening in the west,
Where sunset hovers like a sound
Of golden horns that sang to rest
Old bones of warriors under ground,
Far now from all the banded ways
Where flash the legions of the sun,
You fade—as if the last of days
Were fading, and all wars were done.

Cestre reads perhaps too much into the poem:

It is an after-war piece. The poet stands in sight of a row of hills, fronting the west, where men fought and were buried. It is sunset time. The splendor of the sky seems to sound a flourish in honor of the dead. They sleep. With the passing of the last afterglow, the earth also goes to sleep. Is it the hour of rest for the world, and the end of wars?7

Barnard claims that nature "is described for its own sake."8 I think that both of these readings of "The Dark Hills" miss the point of the poem. Cestre takes literally what is a simile. The speaker of the poem only

7 Cestre, p. 32.
8 Barnard, p. 209.
says that the "sunset hovers like a sound/ Of golden horns." The sight he sees before him suggests the simile, out of which he draws the analogy at the end in hypothetical terms. Also, there is no reason why the reader has to believe that the speaker (Cestre's "poet") is looking at hills "where men fought and were buried." And the poem does not employ nature for its own sake, although the description is certainly lovely. Rather, it generates through the image of the hills silhouetted against the setting sun a melancholy tone—melancholy for a world in which there is never the finality of peace such as represented in this place at this time.

"The Dark Hills" is a tight poem; perhaps it is Robinson's tightest. Not a word is wasted; each is functional. Through one sentence the lines of iambic tetrameter beat steadily, and the movement is helped by the rhyme scheme, in which the rhymes of the first four lines are picked up in the near rhymes of the last four lines: "sound," "ground," "sun," "done," and "west," "rest," "ways," "days." At the end of the fourth line, there is a slight change of emphasis, even though there is no break as such in thought. The one simile in the poem provides a comparison through which the poem is developed; Robinson's method of introducing the simile deserves special mention. He likens the hovering of the sunset to "a sound/ Of golden horns." He is, of course, mixing his sense apprehensions, but the effect is splendid. It is easy to understand why this poignant poem finds its way into numerous
anthologies and why both Neff and Barnard quote it in its entirety in their respective book-length studies of Robinson and why Winters numbers it among his favorites.

"Mr. Flood's Party"

In Robinson's 1924 volume, *Aven's Harvest*, three poems, two of which are sonnets, I find to be outstanding. The other poem, "Mr. Flood's Party," (573-575) like "The Dam Hills," is frequently anthologized. It is a little narrative about an old man who one night drinks from a jug and talks to himself as he is climbing:

Over the hill between the town below
And the forsaken upland hermitage
That held as much as he should ever know
On earth again of home...

Eben Flood is returning to his hermitage on the hill after having been to Tilbury Town where he went, presumably, to fill his jug with water.

There is a suggestion in this poem that this is Eben's last trip home; he is probably on the brink of suicide, his situation is very bad, his friends dead, and the prospect of nothing but loneliness remains for him in the future. Innumerable that weave in and out of the narrative provide evidence for supporting the impending death motif.

James L. Allen, Jr. notes that Eben Flood's name is significant:

"... In giving the name Eben Flood to his protagonist, Robinson created

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"Winters, p. 60."
a sort of symbolic pen, which may be read either edly and Flood or
selfing Flood." Allen prefers the former reading. Whatever the signi-
ificance of his name, Eden has two definite sides to his character: the
one the man who is approaching death, the other his inner self. The
dialogue between the two concerns the outcome of Eden's life and the
joy that the poet will give to both of them. It is Mr. Flood's inner self
who starts the conversation at the beginning of the second stanza:

"Well, Mr. Flood, we have the harvest near;
Again, and we may not have many more;
The bird is on the wing, the poet says.
And you and I have said it here before.
Drink to the bird."

So Mr. Flood has drank alone before.

The speaker, whose identity remains unknown, emerges from
the narrative in the third and fourth stanzas, which provide reasons for
Eden's depression and which strike a sad note at a world bereft of
which the protagonist has been excluded. The subject matter for the
simile in the third stanza is curious but appropriate:

Alone, as it endures to the end
A valiant armor of scarred hopes outworn.
He stood there in the middle of the road
Like Roland's ghost winding a silent horn.

Of course, Mr. Flood is no Roland, and perhaps there is some truth to the
reading that irony is being directed at Mr. Flood by the use of such an

17 James L. Allen, Jr., "Symbol and Theme in 'Mr. Flood's Party,'" Mississippi Quarterly, XV (Fall 1962), 139-140.
absurd comparison. However, I prefer to read this as a comparison of
failures, however each is degrees apart. Like Roland, Mr. Flood
is a failure; he had his hopes, which now are "outworn." The picture
of a mandiminishing, perhaps for the last time, is certainly pathetic;
however, with the image of the departed and defeated Roland called
to mind, the pathetic of Mr. Flood's condition is made all the more
pathetic and, at the same time, more permanent. E. Sydner Ownbey
notes that the meaning of the simile ("Whatever...there is")
brings honor to the poem, thus saving it from sentimentality. Ownbey,
however, sees the simile as more functional than simply for humorous
purposes:

Roland sounds his horn to summon Charlemagne and his army
from the valley below, to call his friends back to his old
Mr. Flood takes a drink from the jug for the same purpose,
to summon out of the past his friends who lie "below him, in
the town among the trees." ... When Charlemagne hears
Roland's horn, he orders all his host to sound their horns.
"Sixty thousand of them blow their horns so loudly there
the mountains resound and the valleys echo (Chanson de Roland,
ed. by Joseph Bedier, Paris, 1937). ... And the sound carries
to the pass where Roland stands." From the town below Mr.
Flood

A phantom salutation of the dead
Rang thinly till old Eden's eyes were dim. III

These lines quoted by Ownbey conclude the third stanza and suggest that
soon Mr. Flood will join his friends, who in Tillyar Town once "had
honored him."

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1 E. Sydner Ownbey, *The Explicator*, VIII (April 1950), Item 47.
Mr. Flood's pathos grows in the fourth stanza with the analogy drawn between a mother and her child and Mr. Flood and his jug:

Then, as a mother lays her sleeping child
Down tenderly, fearing it may awake,
He set the jug down slowly at his feet
With trembling care, knowing that most things break;
And only when assured that on firm earth
It stood, as the uncertain lives of men
Assuredly did not, he paced away,
And with his hand extended paused again.

From this point on, the narrative picks up in momentum with Eben's inner self telling that much had elapsed since the two of them "had a drop together." It is obvious from this that Eben is no habitual drunkard.

Contradicting tones dominate the next to last stanza. For some time now, Mr. Flood has been tipping the jug and is beginning to feel the exhilarating effects of the liquor. The stanza begins quietly and solemnly:

"Only a very little, Mr. Flood--
For auld lang syne. No more, sir; that will do."
So, for the time, apparently it did,
And Eben evidently thought so too.

However, as he becomes progressively more under the influence of the contents of the jug, there is a discernible change in his attitude:

For soon amid the silver loneliness
Of night he lifted up his voice and sang,
Secure, with only two moons listening,
Until the whole harmonious landscape rang---

"For auld lang syne."
It is perhaps appropriate to call "Auld Lang Syne" Mr. Flood's swan song. The image of the "two moons" is interesting; I think it probably means that Eben here, under the influence of liquor, is seeing double.

In any event, there is nothing puzzling about the final stanza; the tone shifts from a strained enthusiasm to the solemnity which opens the preceding stanza. Mr. Flood's "weary throat gave out," his "last word wavered," he "raised the jug regretfully," "shook his head," (the jug being empty) and "was again alone." The poem closes on a note of pathos, the implication being that Mr. Flood, in his loneliness, with no good prospects ahead, will commit suicide:

There was not much that was ahead of him,
And there was nothing in the town below--
Where strangers would have shut the many doors
That many friends had opened long ago.

The limpness of these closing lines suggests Mr. Flood's desolate state. Barnard feels that in these "few seemingly effortless concluding lines" Robinson's "gift for compressing . . . the mood and theme of the whole" is exemplified. 12

I call "Mr. Flood's Party" a statement of pathos and a plea for compassion. There are indications in the poem that Eben Flood was an individual who has never accomplished anything extraordinary, even though he was honored by "friends of other days" and apparently in his

12 Barnard, p. 103.
community was a man of some proportions; the rest still ever, that Mr. Flood was just Mr. Flood, an ordinary man.

Yet herein lie the significance and the reason behind the selection of a protagonist. A victim of time, as so many of Robinson's characters are, old Eben has outlived his usefulness and is community's dead weight, to which the past two lines testify. The selection of a man of but ordinary proportions more appropriate to put across Robinson's motif than one of some observable character traits or lack of them. The world alien to him. But Eben Flood has done nothing, which he has no control has control of him. "Eben Flood's Party" this meaning: "the theme at the center motif of the passage of time, of the coming and going of the waxing and waning of life's moon, the rising and setting of the song." 13

Chard Powers Smith records that Robinson said Mr. Flood is the best thing that I have done. 14 This indicates that art is perfect in unobtrusiveness. In fiction, the poem is accessible to the most unsophisticated reader.

to illustrate that Robinson's language is selected

13 Allen, 143.

14 Smith, p. 405.

15 Neff, p. 199.
Barnard has examined closely the third star
and notes a suggestive metaphorical language make 'Mr. F'.
Barnard's most successful short pieces.' I find
choice of similes (Roland's ghost and the mother and he
Here is Barnard's selective analysis of the
'Flood's Party':
In this passage we may pause for a brief analysis of some
devices by which they are secured. Of these, the dominant
tones and alliteration: the placing of similar syllables in which the same or similar
vowel sounds occur in conjunction with different consonant
sounds and the spacing at close intervals of stressed syllables
with the same or similar consonant sounds follow
vowel sounds. Something halfway between these
is the use of differing vowel sounds at the beginning of
stressed syllables. Further, the use of the same consonant
vowels at the end or in the middle, as well as at the beginning
of stressed words is not without effect.

In the stanza quoted, we find instances of assonance
such as "valiant," "armor," and "scarred"; "r
"ghost," "below" and "town"; "winding" and ":
"salutation," and "rang." Alliteration occurs
"scared," "stood," and "silent"; and more
in "town" and "trees." Different vowels at the begin
of stressed syllables are found in "end," "armor," and "out
"end" and "honored"; and in "old" and "eyes." The mo
repetition of a consonant, leaving aside alliteration
such as "end," "scarred," "stood," "middle," "ro
"honored," "aead," and "old"; but the repetition of
contributes to the total effect.
a certain evenness of manner throughout, with the emphasis being on creating an atmosphere in which pathos reigns and out of which compassion arises.

"Lost Anchors"

It is necessary to reproduce here in its entirety Robinson's fascinating sonnet, "Lost Anchors," (577-588) so that the reader can refer to it easily as the discussion progresses:

Like a dry fish flung inland far from shore,
There lived a sailor, warped and ocean-browed,
Who told of an old vessel, harbor-drowned
And out of mind a century before,
Where divers, on descending to explore
A legend that had lived its way around
The world of ships, in the dark hulk had found
Anchors, which had been seized and seen no more.

Improving a dry leisure to invest
Their misadventure with a manifest
Analogy that he may read who runs,
The sailor made it old as ocean grass—
Telling of much that once had come to pass
With him, whose mother should have had no sons.

Winters is the first critic who takes notice of the poem. Although I think his interpretation of the poem is incorrect, I find his evaluation of it as "wholly admirable" and the very fact that he paid attention to the poem as valuable in themselves. He argues that the poem "is a commentary on the conversation of an old sailor; the sailor is not of great importance in himself, but he is made a symbol of the
immeasurable antiquity of the sea and of its ruins." 18 Next, Barnard
takes the poem to task for being one in the Robinson canon which is
unable to be explained. For some reason or other, Barnard is unable to
read the poem—to make the connections that are there to be made in
the poem. To top off his personal misadventure with "Lost Anchors,"
Barnard, in reproducing the poem in his critical study of Robinson,
quotes wrongly the last line of the octave. He shifts tenses from
"had been seized" to "have been seized." 19 And apparently, Celeste
Turner Wright in her Explicator note on the poem did not consult the
Collected Poems, for she tries to explain why Robinson shifts his
tenses. In any event, her reading of the poem is, in part, correct. 20

Problematic in "Lost Anchors" are the legend mentioned, the
meaning of the word "seized," the antecedent to the pronoun "their,"
and the allusion to the sailor's mother in the last line. A number of
possible readings certainly present themselves. Barnard questions
the relevance of almost everything in the sonnet, and Wright tries to
answer him. She maintains that "the legend is that anchors dropped in
a certain harbor were often mysteriously lost" and continues that the
word "seized" is used to explain how the anchors were lost; they were

18 Winters, p. 39.

19 Barnard, pp. 41-42

20 Celeste Turner Wright, The Explicator, XI (June 1953), Item 57.
caught on a submerged ship. Wright argues that the pronoun "their" has to refer to the anchors, "whose misadventure it was to be fouled and lost." Wright's analysis concludes with this, to which I must take exception: "The wrecked ship represents the sailor. The anchor is an emblem of faith. Friends or loving women once trusted this man; but their confidence was misplaced (their anchors were lost). And the analogy is 'old as ocean grass,' for seafaring men have long been considered unreliable." There is no evidence in the poem to support the trust and confidence, "friends or loving women" motif.

Ralph E. Jenkins presents, to date, the most comprehensive reading of "Lost Anchors":

The old sailor, flung ashore after a wasted life, is making an analogy between his own misadventures and those of the divers who descended to explore the legendary ship, which apparently, as old ships do, had acquired a reputation for containing a valuable cargo. The divers went down expecting treasure and found only rusted anchors; this was their "misadventure." The third line of the sestet indicates the clarity of the analogy; he who runs may read it. That is, it can be perceived at great speed, at a glance. The sailor tells of "much that had come to pass with him," of his own misadventures that had left him warped and thrown ashore like a dry fish. He, like the divers, had gone off expecting to find something valuable and had found nothing worthwhile; like them he looked for gold and found only rusted iron. The sailor, too, had lost his anchor when he left home to begin his misadventures. And the analogy is as "old as ocean grass"--from time immemorial ships have sunk and legends have grown up around them, just as sons have always left home to go to sea. The final line is an ironic comment on the sailor's failure: it would have been better for him and for his mother if she had had no sons.

21 Loc. cit.
22 Ralph E. Jenkins, The Explicator, XXIII (April 1965), Item 64.
I agree thematically with what Jenkins says; however, there are instances in which I think Jenkins wrong. I will call attention to these in my reading of "Lost Anchors."

The sailor lived far inland—far away from the sea, his natural or acquired habitat. In effect, then, he is physically lost; already, the "Lost" of the title bears significant application to the sailor. The speaker makes an appropriate comparison when he likens the sailor to a "dry fish." "Flung inland" suggests failure. The vessel mentioned by the sailor sank in the harbor a century prior to the experience described in the second four lines of the octave. "Out of mind" suggests that, for some reason, the sunken ship was forgotten. It seems hardly credible to assign treasure to the ship. However, something or things happened which caused a legend to be built up, but this legend does not necessarily have to have been built up around a ship. And it is significant that the legend, which was associated with the harbor, "lived its way around/ The world of ships." If the legend were built up around sunken treasure, then it would have lived, I am sure, also around the world of men and not only ships. From the way in which the sailor related the legend and the attempt to clear it up, it seems logical to suppose that the divers were searching for the mysterious reason why when ships lowered their anchors, the anchors were lost. I cannot agree with Jenkins that the "legendary ship . . . had acquired a reputation for containing a valuable cargo" and that "divers were searching for
gold or treasure." The divers, hired probably by ship owners, found that the anchors were lost in the dark hulk of a ship, a ship that had sunk a century ago and had been forgotten; it was this ship that had "seized" the anchors. So Wright, at least in this instance, is right in her interpretation.

The meaning of the sestet depends upon the ways in which "Their misadventure" and "analogy" are interpreted. Wright is correct in her assumption that the pronoun refers to the anchors and that the misadventure was theirs. Jenkins is incorrect in his assumption that "manifest/Analogy" is related to the misadventures of the divers, but he is correct in his reading that the sailor metaphorically lost his anchor. Before entering into an explication of the sestet, I should like to call attention to the adjective "dry" which modifies the sailor's "leisure." By so doing, Robinson is reinforcing the alienation of the sailor and the sea; the word brings the reader right back to the first line of the sonnet where the sailor is compared to a "dry fish."

It was the sailor's purpose to fashion the story of the lost anchors in the dark hulk of a ship into an analogy based upon his own life for the end result, perhaps, of warning others who may find themselves heading into a situation that paralleled his own: The exact nature of what "once had come to pass/With him" is irrelevant; the result of the situation is relevant. The sailor could be aligning himself with the anchors, whose misadventure it was to have been lost.
Again, it is important to bear in mind the title of the sonnet. Like the anchors, which here must be talked of as roots—with belonging, with holding to—, the sailor was lost. Or more properly, perhaps, the analogy ought to be drawn between the ships, which really did the losing, and the sailor, who lost whatever it was that gave him security, solidity, a sense of belonging. That is, he lived on land, not on the sea; something happened to him which seized his anchor. Not only was his life a failure because like a "dry fish" he was "flung inland far from shore," but it apparently was doomed to failure because, in the first place, he should never have been born, "whose mother should have had no sons." I think that it is interesting here that the plural "sons" rather than the singular "son" is used; it would have been just as easy for Robinson to have used "son." This would have involved only having the end of the third line of the sestet read, "they may read who run," instead of "he may read who runs." The plural form suggests that what happened to the sailor happened also to his brothers in some way or another; the tragedy, therefore, seems not to rest in the person of the sailor alone, but in the condition of his youth. I agree with Jenkins that the last line of the sestet carries irony in it. The line, "The sailor made it old as ocean grass," I read as his attempt to make his analogy as clear as possible; that is, the older the clichéic comparison, the easier it is to understand, so easy in fact that one can grasp it, as Jenkins states, "at a glance."
The sailor, therefore, was explaining his failure. No longer did he have any roots, if indeed he ever had any, the implication being that from his childhood he was doomed to insecurity—to failure. He tried a life at sea, from which he became "warped" and "ocean-browned." But his attempt for security at sea ended inevitably in failure, for he told his tale "far from shore." Apparently, realization came late to him that an individual can never find security by imposing the external; security is something gained early, not late. This then was the purpose for his fashioning the "manifest/Analogy."

"Lost Anchors" is a packed sonnet, one that demands an intensely close reading, but the clues are there for understanding. The reader must, however, as is so often the case with Robinson, read more than just carefully. There is an appropriateness in this sonnet that is uncanny. Despite his failure at sea, the sailor knew only the sea, out of which come the imagery and the analogy. Read properly, the sonnet clicks, as perhaps none of Robinson's other sonnets do. From the fish simile at the beginning, I think that the sailor worked on a fishing boat, although, of course, this is highly speculative; but speculation, if recognized as such, is not harmful and perhaps even beneficial.

There is not a wrong word or a bad line in this poem, and there are many triumphs, chief among them being the imagery and the analogy, both of which have been talked about enough. The manner in which the
legend is described deserves special mention; it has a rightness to it that could in no other way be there. All in all, "Lost Anchors" is brilliant achievement.

"The Long Race"

One of Robinson's most attractive qualities in the shorter poems is his ability to create a poignant atmosphere without ever stating that such an atmosphere exists. Such is the case in "The Long Race," a sonnet which tells of two men meeting after a fifty year interval. In the octave the speaker, who is unidentified and not involved in the situation of the poem, focuses on the man who was to make the visit. He was: climbing "Up the old hill to the old house again" where the other man, his friend of fifty years ago,

should be waiting somewhere there among Old things that least remembered most remain.

As the visitor approached the house, he thought, "with a pleasure that was pain,"

how soon asunder would be flung The curtain half a century had hung Between the two ambitions they had slain.

As usual, Robinson leaves out the "whys" and "whats." Why, for example, was this fifty year curtain hung in the first place, what were the ambitions "they had slain," and why are the two of them getting together? In light of the octave, these questions are unanswerable, and there is no reason to suspect that they should be.
In the sestet the focus is on the actual meeting where the dual point of the poem is made manifest: the emotional state of the man making the visit and the emotional nature of the visit itself. Here is the sestet:

They dredged an hour for words, and then were done. "Good bye! . . . You have the same old weather-vane-- Your little horse that's always on the run." And all the way down back to the next train, Down the old hill to the old road again, It seemed as if the little horse had won.

Although there is little explicit information in the sestet that helps the reader to understand all the "whys" and "whats" of "The Long Race," there is emotional information in the diction and rhythms of the poem that makes meaningful speculation unavoidable. As I see it, something happened about fifty years prior to the events described in the sonnet that had significance to both of the men. The tense form "had slain" indicates that whatever did happen had an adverse effect on their ambitions, singly or dually, and, consequently, made achievement impossible. In the octave the reader learns that the man making the visit "toiled on with a pleasure that was pain"; he was happy to see his former friend but felt uncomfortable at the same time because the fifty-year old curtain finally was to be lifted. It seems reasonable to assume that this is their first meeting after the unknown event(s) took place. The visitor stayed only an hour after making the trip by train; as soon as the visit was over, he returned immediately to the station to take
the next train back. There is something suggestive here of a dutiful visit, as if, perhaps, the man who lived in the house on the hill were dying, and both men desired a final meeting. That this was a dutiful visit is suggested in the first line of the sestet: the men "dredged" for words; there was nothing that they really had to say to each other.

There seems to be little doubt that the fact of failure in life is the major motif in the poem and that this motif is expressed through the emotional structure of the poem. The title bears the failure motif out as does the analogy of the "little horse that's always on the run" on the weather-vane. The implication here, of course, is that man is like the little horse that never will be able to go anywhere. The fact of failure is evidenced also in the technique of the sonnet; everything contributes well to creating an atmosphere of futility and failure.

In effect, Robinson uses only two rhymes throughout the sonnet: "--ain" and "ounge." The "done" and "run" in the sestet are near enough in sound to "young," "among," "flung" and "hung" to classify them in the same pattern of rhyme. This insistent repetition, which is a deviation from the standard Italian sonnet rhyme scheme, coupled with the solemnity of sounds, gives to the sonnet a sense of the melancholy. The movement of the sonnet is deliberately slow and cumbersome, except for that of the closing lines in which the analogy of the little horse is developed. The third and fourth lines of the octave are particularly noticeable for their heaviness:
Who should be waiting somewhere there among Old things that least remembered most remain.

This sense of weight is further evidenced in the number of polysyllabic words and in Robinson's choice of words: he uses "old" five times and refers to the man toiling up the hill and to the men dredging for words.

Even though the word "old" appears twice in the thirteenth line, there is an obvious change in tone when the men finished their talk and the visitor started on his journey down the hill home. It is as if relief that the ordeal was over was experienced by the visitor. "Good-by!" was spoken with exhilaration, and there is a quickened, clipped movement to the last four lines of the sonnet.

The mystery surrounding the past of these two men contributes to the effectiveness of this poem. And by not particularizing the men, either by giving them names or by giving their individual characteristics, Robinson gives to "The Long Race" a universality; that is, no matter who or what you are, the reality of being does not measure up to your dreams. And there could be no better way of expressing this than by the two subjects of "The Long Race."

The publication in 1925 of Dionysus in Doubt marks the appearance of the last of Robinson's superior shorter poems. In the years that remained to his death in 1935, he concentrated primarily on the longer poem. Nicodemus, published in 1932, contains a few shorter efforts, but none approach in quality his earlier productions. It is interesting
to note that, through the better part of his career, Robinson remained with the sonnet; the four poems of superior quality in the 1925 collection are all sonnets.

"The Sheaves"

Winters calls "The Sheaves" (870-871) one "among the greatest" of Robinson's poems and says that this sonnet "employs a descriptive technique to symbolize the impenetrable mystery of the physical universe as seen at any moment and the mystery of the fact of change." 23

In light of the first four lines of the octave, I have no quibble with "The Sheaves" being read as treating the "mystery of the fact of change"; the suggestion is there that the metamorphosis is indeed enigmatic:

Where long the shadows of the wind had rolled,
Green wheat was yielding to the change assigned;
And as by some vast magic undivined
The world was turning slowly into gold.

However, this is as far as I can go with Winters' reading. The second four lines of the octave introduce the human element into the poem; and from this point on, the reader should make the parallel between the maturing of the wheat and the maturing of an individual:

Like nothing that was ever bought or sold
It waited there, the body and the mind;

23 Winters, p. 39 and pp. 41-42.
And with a mighty meaning of a kind
That tells the more the more it is not told.

I take the first line of the above quatrain to mean that the maturation process of the wheat (and by implication the human) is not something that can be forced, purchased, and so forth; it will come someday by itself. Grammatically, the seventh and eighth lines of the octave are problematic because of the semicolon placed at the end of the seventh line. If a comma were there, then the green wheat would be doing the waiting with "a mighty meaning"; however, since a semicolon is there, I suggest that Robinson is reiterating the fact that nothing can make the wheat mature and that, in terms of an individual, the more he is left to grow up by himself, the more valuable will his life be as a result.

The idea of maturing into value dominates the sestet, in which a definite analogy to the human condition is drawn:

So in a land where all days are not fair,
Fair days went on till on another day
A thousand golden sheaves were lying there,
Shining and still, but not for long to stay—
As if a thousand girls with golden hair
Might rise from where they slept and go away.

On the literal level, the first three and a half lines of the sestet mean that the weather is not always sunny and that wheat needs the sun to mature. On the suggestive level, these lines mean that no man's life is figuratively full of sunshine, and that man, if he is to mature to value, needs his good days, or else his potential will never be allowed to develop.
Once the wheat turns to gold, it will not stay that way for long. It will be mowed and then bundled; there are uses to which it must be put; it must become functional. So man, when he matures to a point where he becomes valuable, must put whatever value he has to work; he, too, must become functional. The "thousand golden sheaves" and "shining" suggest maturity and value. The image of the "thousand girls with golden hair" rising and going away is striking and reinforces the motif of functioning once the maturation to value has been achieved.

Probably nowhere in Robinson is there a better blending of the natural and human conditions than in "The Sheaves." For a man who has not made his poetic career out of exploiting the natural world, Robinson certainly has achieved a remarkable accomplishment in this poem. The structure of the sonnet is interesting. The first quatrain of the octave emphasizes the natural and introduces the maturation; the second quatrain stresses the importance of undisturbed maturation and brings in the human element, which is to provide the basis for the extended metaphor. The first four lines of the sestet join the natural and human, describe the dual maturation, and suggest that the beginning of value has been reached. The closing image suggests that the value must be functional.

Along with the harmonious fusion of the physical and the natural both structurally and thematically, the quality of writing in "The Sheaves" is particularly fine. Take, for example, the first line of the
octave in which the round "o" and the liquid "l" sounds introduce the reader to a wheat field turning golden, and the last four lines of the sestet with the perfect repetition of "golden" and "thousand." Although the interpretation offered by Winters is inconclusive, his evaluation of "The Sheaves" certainly cannot be disputed.

"Karma"

Placed right after "The Sheaves" in the *Collected Poems* is a hard, brittle sonnet entitled "Karma," (871) in which, unlike any other of the shorter poems discussed in this study, Robinson displays no compassion for the subject of his poem. The word "karma," which comes from the Hindu and Buddhist philosophies, means essentially that there is a cause and effect relationship between man's behavior on earth and the kind of life that he will lead after death. The poem following "Karma" in the *Collected Poems* is "Maya," and perhaps the two are related in motif; however, "Maya" is a rather weak effort to which I prefer not to give space.

Unlike most of Robinson's better efforts, "Karma" presents no real interpretive problems and does give the reader a fairly complete knowledge of the situation involved. The time is the Christmas season, the protagonist a man who is financially successful but who is a bit puzzled about a "few confusing flaws/ In divers of God's images." The air of Christmas and the sight of
a slowly freezing Santa Clause
Upon the corner, with his beard and bell,

bring back in his mind an incident that happened in his past. The subject of the poem was responsible for "the axe that fell" upon an associate some time ago, which, it seems, led to the other man's committing suicide. At least this seems to be the inference that Robinson wants the reader to draw in the light of both the title and the context of the poem. The man of the poem, a businessman (Barnard calls him a "stock-market operator");\(^{24}\) felt some pangs of guilt or perhaps just a mild twinge of conscience for the other man's financial ruin and subsequent death.

The speaker, who is unidentified, uses irony to express his bitterness toward the businessman and his act of penance in the sestet:

Acknowledging an improvident surprise,
He magnified a fancy that he wished
The friend whom he had wrecked were here again.
Not sure of that, he found a compromise;
And from the fulness of his heart he fished
A dime for Jesus who had died for men.

Loosely interpreted, the title means fate; and the businessman, who can wheel and deal in fortunes and men's lives, was unable to account for religion in the world; that is, he preferred not to think of it because thinking only tended to cause him discomfort. So, in order to extricate himself from himself, he fell into the comfortable position of blaming fate and put a dime into the world's kitty.

\(^{24}\)Barnard, p. 31.
I am impressed by the way in which Robinson can express utter
disgust without turning me away from the poem. It takes a consummate
skill to be able to express any emotion intensely without having that
emotion so dominate the poem that the poem becomes repulsive. And
it is through Robinson's skillful use of irony that "Karma" is an unquali-
ified success. There seems to be no subject that Robinson cannot treat
admiringly within the limitations of the sonnet. Side by side, "The
Sheaves" and "Karma" reveal the breadth in treatment of which
Robinson is capable.

"En Passant"

It is necessary to reproduce the fascinating sonnet "En Passant"
(886-887) so that the reader can follow the critical commentaries it has
occasioned:

I should have glanced and passed him, naturally,
But his designs and mine were opposite;
He spoke, and having temporized a bit,
He said that he was going to the sea:
"I've watched on highways for so long," said he,
"That I'll go down there to be sure of it."
And all at once his famished eyes were lit
With a wrong light—or so it was to me.

That evening there was talk along the shore
Of one who shot a stranger, saying first:
"You should have come when called. This afternoon
A gentleman unknown to me before,
With deference always due to souls accurst,
Came out of his own grave—and not too soon."
I do not see this poem as presenting any difficulties that cannot be solved by a careful reading. It seems to me that the situation of the poem is relatively easy to grasp once the reader understands what the final line means. "En Passant" fits perfectly into the Robinson canon of understanding—compassion poems.

This poem, however, has given Robinson students considerable trouble. Winters says that he is "unable to offer an explanation" for the sonnet but he suspects it to be a "highly successful experiment" in obscurity.25 Completely taking "En Passant" off the page where it belongs and putting it solidly into the poet's personal life, Smith offers this explanation:

Emma put it in the Legend that the gruesome sonnet En Passant referred to Herman during the years "1906-1909." But it suits so nicely Win's Robinson coming "out of his . . . grave" at this time to take care of Herman, that it is tempting to attribute the basis of it to the events of late '04 and the first half of '05. . . . Here, as elsewhere, is Herman's fiendish "kink". . . . 26

My reading of "En Passant" resembles closely that offered sensibly by Earle F. Walbridge.27 In fact, Barnard, after stating that the sonnet has been "unpenetrable to many readers (including me)," quotes all of

25Winters, p. 46.

26Smith, pp. 402-403.

what Walbridge has to say about the poem. Before I undertake to explain it, I think that it is appropriate to point out that in "En Passant," like "The Growth of 'Lorraine,'" the reader is more aware of the significance of the experience at the end of the poem than the speaker is.

In the opening lines of the sonnet, the speaker indicates that he is interested in the human condition; there was something so different about the "he" of the poem that the speaker was compelled to stop. This man, whom Walbridge claims is either mad "or an Ancient Mariner type," wanted to talk to the speaker; he "temporized a bit." Walbridge feels that the man's dialogue in the octave signifies that he "has been watching the highways and now intends to watch the sea, for some reason, probably an enemy, whom he is expecting." Walbridge continues that "Everyone he sees may be this enemy, and has to be stopped and interrogated." I do not think that the man is looking necessarily for an "enemy"; neither does Bernice Slote, who argues that he is searching for "something beyond, in the sea of unknown eternities." She sees the man as one who is possessed, "one whose

28 Barnard, p. 293.
29 Walbridge, p. 48.
30 Loc. cit.
31 Loc. cit.
32 Bernice Slote, The Explicator, XV (February 1957), Item 27.
intensity of being has, in the search, led him to the brink beyond ordinary life."\(^{33}\) That the man is mad is beyond doubt; the speaker, a perceptive individual, states as much when he talks of "famished eyes" that "were lit/ With a wrong light." Being insane, the man does not really have to be searching for anything in a rational manner.

In the seestet, the speaker, who has not seen the man since their daytime encounter, relates that the man shot a stranger because the latter did not "'come when called.'" Before he shot the stranger, the man related that he met the speaker,

"A gentleman unknown to me before," who paid him "'deference always due to souls accurst;'" and consequently,

"Came out of his own grave--and not too soon."

It is this last line that has caused readers so many interpretive problems. Walbridge is half right in his paraphrase of the line: "if he had ignored the madman when the latter spoke to him, he would have been instantly killed."\(^{34}\) I think, as does Slote, that the line in question can be validly read in two ways: one follows Walbridge; the other is that the speaker came out of the grave of spiritual, self-isolation in which most of mankind finds itself.\(^{35}\) The speaker, even though he has no

\(^{33}\text{Loc. cit.}\)

\(^{34}\text{Walbridge, p. 48.}\)

\(^{35}\text{Slote, Item 27.}\)
reason to, listened to the man, showed respect to him because he
realized that the man was tormented, and by so doing, saved himself
both physically and spiritually. "En Passant" belongs, therefore,
with those Robinson poems that stress the necessity of understanding
and subsequent compassion. Slote puts it this way: "Robinson pre-
sents his most typical concern: the problem of human communication
and understanding that must relieve the essential isolation and loneli-
ness of man."36

"En Passant" is a well-structured poem. Slote argues that the
sonnet is developed along the lines of the chess situation to which
the title refers. Hers is an interesting analogy, but I am not too sure
that it is totally justified.37 The title means literally "in passing,"

36Loc. cit.

37Here is Slote's reading of the significance of the title:
    The title, "En Passant," has a double meaning: generally,
    "in passing" or "on the way"; and specifically, a move in chess.
    (For another Robinson poem based on chess, see "Atherton's
    Gambit.") In chess, a pawn can be taken en passant when it does
    not stop in the first square, where it is liable to capture, but moves
    on to the second square (a permissible first play). Here, the pawn
    is still open to capture, and, if the adversary takes him, it is said
to be done en passant.
    Robinson's sonnet is a drama in two scenes, the second reported
indirectly in the stetet. Both scenes focus primarily on the act
described in the octave. The poem has three major characters,
whom I shall call A, B, and C. A is the narrator, the "I" of the
first scene and also the "gentleman" spoken of in the second
scene. B is the "him" of the first scene and the "one" of the
second, who shoots C, the stranger. In the story, A meets B on
the road, and against his first inclination to pass on, does stop to
talk when B speaks to him. It is reported later along the shore that
B has shot C because C, unlike A, did not come when called. The
(continued)
and this is what I think Robinson intends. In any event, the sonnet is self-contained, with the protagonist and basic situation introduced in the octave and with the situation interpreted and concluded in the sestet. The instances of dialogue in the poem serve to identify well the protagonist and provide the key words for a necessary understanding of the poem. In "En Passant," Robinson makes the reader work for meaning; and, of course, the reader is forced into this circumstance, for the speaker does not comprehend the situation as the reader does. An awareness of this makes this interesting sonnet all the more effective.

The last of Robinson's shorter poems under consideration in this study is the biting sonnet "New England." (900-901) Neff claims that the sonnet caricatures the disdain displayed by "a younger generation of writers bent on displaying emancipation from Puritanism."38 He discusses some interesting conditions surrounding publication of "New England".

When published in The Gardiner Journal (Gardiner, Maine) for January 31, 1924, it wounded the local patriotism of a subscriber, who retorted with a letter and with a poem charging Robinson with infidelity to his birthplace. Grieved

37Continued.

chess analogy is that B, the enemy pawn, did not take A when A stopped in the first square, even though A was vulnerable, but when C in his turn passed on to the second square without stopping, B took him en passant. Although the references to chess are overtones in the poem, they mirror the larger play of human movements plotted with friend and enemy; of human needs and their fulfillment; of human chances taken, and chances won or lost.

38Neff, p. 221.
by the misinterpretation, the poet wrote to the editor that he had intended "an oblique attack upon all those who are forever throwing dead cats at New England for its alleged emotional and moral frigidity." In republishing the sonnet in *Dionysus in Doubt* he made his meaning obvious by removing a word of personal reference "born," and substituting "We're told" /sic/ for "it seems" /sic/. Such are the trials of an ironist among the literal-minded American people, who blindly ridicule other peoples for their deficiency in humor.39

"New England"

The success of "New England" as a poem rests upon the skill with which it is written in terms of diction, movement, and the literary devices of hyperbole and irony, the latter splendidly employed and particularly evident in the sestet, surely the only one of its kind in the canon of Robinson's sonnets. Here is "New England":

Here where the wind is always north-north-east
All 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 solace 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.

39 Loc. cit.
The octave consists of one sentence, whose rhythms are so insistent that they pound—pound ironically the conception that New Englanders surely must envy those who live in physical and spiritual climates more conducive to warmth and its accompanying good times.

Of course, Robinson, the obvious speaker of the poem, has his tongue highly and firmly planted in his cheek. This becomes evident in the hyperbole of the first two lines. To a New Englander, the wind from the north-north-east brings snow and the coldest air, but certainly this wind is not "always" blowing. And children certainly do not "learn to walk on frozen toes."

Irony begins forcibly in the fourth and fifth lines of the octave in the "boil"—"lyric yeast/Of love" sequence. The reader cannot help chuckle at the bloating yeast image; neither can he at the feast being described at which even "demons would appeal for some repose."

Robinson works hyperboles nicely into his ironic tone. Another tool of irony is the cliche, which finds total expression in the sestet, but which is also used in the octave. I am thinking of the "my cup runneth over" suggestion in "chalice overflows": "The religious word 'chalice,' or grail, is terribly ironical, for it is here a devil's cup, sacred to the pagans who insatiably drink their yeasty communion beer of love from it."40 The last line of the octave also is ironical in that those feasters who are least drunk cry the wildest.

40Richard E. Amacher, The Explicator, X (March 1952), Item 33.
The personifications of the sestet are both what the New England puritans supposedly despised and admired the most: "Passion," "Love," and "Joy" are set in opposition to "Conscience" and "Care."
The "We're told" of the second line of the sestet reinforces the irony implicit in the suggestion that the yeast-boilers are such fine and authoritative commentators on the New England mind. It is, however, Robinson's use of clichés that gives the sestet distinction and that provides the fountainhead for his irony. Robinson is well aware of the damning quality of clichés; his work in the best of his shorter poems evidences a conscious avoidance of the ordinary word and expression. Yet in the sestet of "New England" the trite is exploited blatantly and with impunity: "Love" is said to be "a cross for them to bear," while "The first cat that was ever killed by Care" is relished by "Conscience."
Just as New England is thought of in clichés by her critics, Robinson's treatment of such is in just those terms. This is a masterstroke by Robinson.

Of the twenty-six poems discussed in this study, ten are sonnets, and one, "The Growth of 'Lorraine,'" is a double sonnet. Six of these sonnets come from the last two volumes under consideration, *Avon's Harvest* (1921) and *Dionysus in Doubt* (1925), the latter volume containing the last of Robinson's published sonnets. For the better part of his poetic career, Robinson remained with the sonnet, and as the years passed, he became more proficient in the art of this form. Although his
early sonnets, such as "Aaron Stark" and "The Clerks" from The Children of the Night (1890-1897), "The Growth of 'Lorraine'" from Captain Craig (1902), and "How Annandale Went Out" from The Town Down the River (1910), are fine achievements, the sonnets discussed in this chapter are more polished.

In the last ten years of his life, from 1925 to 1935, Robinson produced a considerable amount of poetry. In the Collected Poems, it amounts to 661 pages, most of which are devoted to his long poems such as Tristram (1927), Talifer (1933), and King Jasper (1935). I regret that Robinson all but ceased to write short poems in his last years. Sonnets such as "The Sheaves," "Karma," "En Passant," and "New England" from Dionysus in Doubt indicate that he was able to write good short poems as he grew older. There are few critics now who deem as valuable much of the poetry that Robinson published in his last ten years. Assuredly, this would not be the case if he had continued to write sonnets and other brief poems.
CHAPTER V

IN CLOSING

The method of my study insists that the examination of each poem is really a conclusion itself; therefore, it would perhaps seem that no conclusion is really needed. Yet, in the twenty-six poems treated, I have found certain consistencies in thematic and stylistic matters. While these by no means are the only characteristics in Robinson's poetry, they are significant enough to justify brief discussion here. Of course, no one motif is so dominant that it manifests itself in every poem; and by the same token, no one technique is everywhere at work. However, Robinson does work regularly with one theme: above all, man needs to have compassion toward his fellow man; and in order to be compassionate, man needs first to understand. This thought possessed Robinson through all of his poetic career under consideration in this study. From The Children of the Night (1890-1897) to Dionysus in Doubt (1925), understanding and subsequent compassion for man provide thematic concerns for "Luke Havergal," "The Clerks," "The Growth of 'Lorraine,'" "The Whip," "How Annandale Went Out," "Flammonde," "The Gift of God," "Veteran Sirens," "Eros Turannos," "The Poor Relation," "Mr. Flood's Party," and "En Passant."
To express this understanding-compassion motif, Robinson uses a wide range of subjects. In "Luke Havergal," "The Growth of 'Lorraine,'" "The Whip," and by implication in "Mr. Flood's Party," suicide or impending suicide provides the subject matter, as it does perhaps in "How Annandale Went Out," if the reader is willing to accept Nivison's interpretation. In "Luke Havergal," the reader learns of the terrible forces working on the man and should feel compassion for him, as Luke considers killing himself. And in "Mr. Flood's Party," as in "Luke Havergal," the protagonist does not do away with himself in the poem proper, but the reader is given sufficient clues to make the valid assumption that Eben is on the veritable brink of self-inflicted death. The reader is made fully aware, through both the speaker's appraisal of the situation and through the dialogue in the poem, that Eben is so alone that death seems only humane. The protagonist of "The Whip" also was in a situation in which death was made to seem humane; that is, he was so despondent after having been struck with a whip by the "mistress" that he chose death to life.

The suicide of a prostitute is the subject of "The Growth of 'Lorraine.'" Misunderstood by the speaker of the poem, her body unable to withstand the pressures exacted by her chosen way of life, Lorraine kills herself, not out of any sense of guilt or remorse, but because there was nothing else for her to do. Although the speaker does not understand and is unable to feel compassion for Lorraine, the reader understands the
situation and consequently feels compassion for her. It is interesting to note that in "Another Dark Lady" and in "En Passant," as in "The Growth of 'Lorraine,'" the reader, as each poem progresses, becomes more cognizant of the real nature of the problems confronting the characters than the speaker. By use of such a technique, Robinson makes the impact of the poem more clearly felt.

"Veteran Sirens," like "The Growth of 'Lorraine,'" concerns illicit love, but compassion here is for those prostitutes who are unwilling to admit that Time is the inexorable ruler and who, year after year, try vainly to retain whatever allure they once had. Time, the ruler, also is shown working against those of the "shop-worn brotherhood" in "The Clerks." The analogy between the two poems can be drawn even closer when the reader realizes that he is to feel compassion for the respective characters in the poems because they are all attempting to maintain a sense of dignity. Robinson understands that an individual, whether a prostitute or a clerk in a textile mill, deserves our attention—our understanding and our compassion.

Women are the objects of compassion in "The Gift of God," "Eros Turannos," and "The Poor Relation." Absurd as she may appear because of the misdirected vision she holds of her son, the reader understands that the mother in "The Gift of God" is a woman obsessed and consequently he can have only compassion for her. This is also the case with the wife in "Eros Turannos." Like the mother in "The Gift of God," the
woman holds firmly to a false vision until she is broken at the end and loses control of her mental faculties. Despite the respective shortcomings of these two women, the reader understands that the mother and the wife demand our attention. The woman in "The Poor Relation" is another story. Apparently through no fault of her own, she has come to desperate times. The very fact of her obvious impunity draws the reader to her; he understands the pathos of her condition and feels compassion for her.

The remaining two poems which I place in the understanding-compassion category—"Flammonde" and "En Passant"—are unique respectively in that they resemble no other Robinson poem except in motif. The theme of understanding and its subsequent emotion in "Flammonde" does not come out of the character of the protagonist himself; but rather, it emerges from the way in which Flammonde was able to understand the troubled and disturbed people of Tilbury Town. And in "En Passant," the speaker, who himself does not comprehend the enormity of his near experience with death, relates only the facts as he knows them. It is left entirely up to the reader to come to the conclusion that the theme of "En Passant" fits solidly into the poet's main body of thought.

Closely related to the understanding-compassion motif is the belief that, in the final analysis, no man can ever totally understand another man. In light of my conclusions so far in this chapter, that statement
sounds paradoxical; but, in fact, it is not, for Robinson believes that the very act of trying to understand is important in itself and that, at times, total knowledge is simply impossible. Take the case of the "man Flammonde," for example. No one, except perhaps God, knew the man behind the "man Flammonde"; however, Flammonde made the people of Tilbury Town realize that, because of their unwillingness even to try to understand their fellow citizens, they were perpetuating blindness to the point of public and private harm. In both "The House on the Hill" and "Eros Turannos," the speaker remarks that the townspeople simply could not understand the respective situations involved. This led them to engage in conjecture that, while not really harmful, was rather senseless; and if it did anything, such conjecture merely compounded misinformation on misinformation.

The speakers in "The Growth of 'Lorraine,'" "The Whip," and "For a Dead Lady" represent the difficulties involved in the process of one person understanding another. The speaker in "The Growth of 'Lorraine'" never does understand Lorraine, and it appears that he never really puts forth the total effort necessary. In "The Whip," however, the speaker does finally come to the realization that the man was not metaphorically blind because he preferred death over life. The way in which the speaker comes to this knowledge underscores the necessity of total effort. Perhaps the best example of Robinson's awareness that total knowledge is difficult, if, indeed, impossible, is in "For a Dead Lady,"
in which the speaker tells us that the lady in question never revealed anything personal of herself to the world. Her own world was "woman-hidden," and her personality, what little there was known of it, was like her eyes, "shifting" and "many-shaded."

In terms of technique, I find three areas of inquiry worth investigating: imagery, irony, and Robinson's method of withholding information in a poem to make the impact of the poem all the more effective. Robinson has been accused, time and time again, of being overly stingy in his use of imagery from the natural world. And it is certainly true that he is sparse in his use of such images. When he draws upon nature for images, his drawing is functional in that it serves a specific end or ends in the poem, apart from the purely decorative. The first stanza of "Hillcrest," for example, contains some splendid description of the setting of the MacDowell Colony; but the images of the storm that never comes and the "island in a sea of trees" serve to establish the atmosphere of serenity that is essential, according to Robinson, if one is to meditate meaningfully. And the image of the dark hills in the poem of that name is drawn not simply to present the beauty of the hills outlived at sunset but rather to suggest that ideal peace can never be fulfilled in this world. In the sestet of "Another Dark Lady," the autumn wood with its golden leaves, coupled with the woman's golden hair, contributes to the false vision that the speaker had of the enigmatic lady of the poem.
When Robinson does rely somewhat heavily on images from the natural world, he usually does so with symbolic significance in mind. Such is the case of the leaves in "Luke Havergal" and the trees and the sea in "Eros Turannos." In the latter poem, the images are unified symbolically in the dramatically moving final stanza. It is, however, in the remarkable sonnet, "The Sheaves," that Robinson's use of the image in a symbolic manner finds its most complete expression. The maturation of the wheat symbolizes the maturation of a human being. The image of the "thousand girls with golden hair" at the end of the sonnet is employed to illustrate the poet's belief that once an individual matures he must put his value to use—he must function. I might also add that in terms of just the purely descriptive "The Sheaves" is splendid accomplishment.

In seven of the twenty-six poems under consideration in this study, Robinson uses irony. The purposes for which he uses it are usually more than of just an incidental nature. In "How Annandale Went Out," for instance, the doctor-speaker deliberately understates everything, as if he believes that his action was so right since Annandale had been reduced to the neuter, that it is nothing less than absurd that he even be put on trial. Sarcasm is given more overt expression in both "The House on the Hill" and "Eros Turannos." In both cases irony is directed at the people of Tilbury Town, who, without concrete, substantiated knowledge of the person or persons involved, speculate unwisely on circumstances,
events, and personalities. Irony through mild sarcasm is the chief method of satire in "Miniver Cheevy," while in "Cassandra," irony through Biblical allusions provides some of the satiric thrusts. Though in the above six poems, Robinson's use of irony is effective, it is nowhere better exemplified than in "New England," particularly in the sestet of the sonnet. I have already covered this point extensively in my discussion of the poem.

I reply an emphatic no to the charge that Robinson's poetry is often so obscure that it defies explication. Nothing, I argue, could be further from the truth. One of the purposes of my study is to demonstrate that it is necessary to read Robinson closely. In a number of his superior shorter efforts, Robinson deliberately withholds information from the reader; he does this not because he is a deficient poet who fails to provide the necessary guideposts for understanding, but because he realizes that, if the competent reader works actively toward understanding, this reader will be proportionately rewarded; that is, the poem will strike him as all the more effective if he has to work at it. A case in point is "The Whip," a poem which, for years, had been condemned for its obscurity. In this poem, Robinson has both the speaker and the reader understand at approximately the same time the circumstances surrounding the death of the protagonist; consequently, both the speaker and the reader are less likely to condemn the protagonist for his decision to let the river take him and more likely to understand why he chose death.
In both "The Growth of 'Lorraine'" and "Veteran Sirens,"
Robinson never uses the word prostitute or any other word which sug-
gests that Lorraine and the sirens are women of ill-repute. In the
former poem, even though Lorraine's condition is never spelled out,
the reader, as the poem progresses, becomes increasingly more aware
of the circumstances that precipitated her suicide. In fact, at the end
of the poem, the reader is more competent than the speaker to appraise
the woman's situation. The controversy surrounding "Veteran Sirens"
concerning whether the ladies in question are prostitutes or just
"superannuated flirts," testifies to the extent to which Robinson's
method of guarding information can lead to misreadings. However, the
clues for the right reading are in the poem; Robinson simply prefers to
have his readers work.

Until near the end of "The Gift of God," the reader is not sure
whether the poem is rightly about Mary and Christ or about a mother
and her son. By not permitting the reader certainty of his interpretation,
Robinson forces him to keep in mind the possible alternatives until the
brilliant image of ascension at the end dramatically clarifies the subject
matter. In a similar fashion, one is not totally certain until the end of
"How Annandale Went Out" what the sonnet is about. Robinson's use
of the neuter pronoun "it" in the first line of the octave seems deliberately
intended to throw the reader off guard; however, the pronoun has its
referent in the noun "apparatus," and the selection of words is more than
just appropriate.
The sonnet, "Lost Anchors," has provided students of Robinson with more interpretive problems than any other of the twenty-six poems under consideration in this study. In 1946 while arguing that the poem is one of Robinson's greatest, Winters partially misreads it. Desperation must have led Barnard in 1952 to exclaim that he could find no clues to the meaning of "Lost Anchors." It was not until Wright's and Jenkins' respective *Explicator* notes in 1953 and 1965 that criticism of the poem became meaningful. And I feel that their respective interpretations leave things to be desired. It is true, certainly, that "Lost Anchors" is one of Robinson's more difficult puzzles; but he has provided keys for understanding in the poem. The only real problem lies in finding the proper locks for these keys, and the locks most certainly are there.

Even though I prefer some of these twenty-six poems over others, I am not going to state here which are my particular favorites. I hope that I have made it as clear as possible that I deem each of the twenty-six an outstanding accomplishment and consequently as particularly valuable.
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VITA

Ronald Wesson Moran, Jr. was born on September 9, 1936, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He was graduated from the New Britain Senior High School in New Britain, Connecticut in June, 1954; and in the fall of that year, he began his studies at Colby College in Waterville, Maine where he received his B.A. in 1958. After working for a bank and for a manufacturing concern in Connecticut, he entered the Graduate School of The Louisiana State University in 1960 and received his M.A. in 1962 from that institution. After having been a teaching assistant in the Department of English at The Louisiana State University from 1960 to 1963, he took an instructorship in that department in 1963, a position that he presently holds. He is married to the former Jane Edith Hetzler and is the father of five year old boy-girl twins, Sally Jane and Ronald Wesson, III. His criticism and poetry have appeared in the Colby Library Quarterly, Commonweal, the Southern Review, Voices, and in a number of other journals. A collection of his poetry entitled So Simply Means the Rain was issued in 1965.
Candidate: Ronald Wesson Moran, Jr.

Major Field: English


Approved:

Donald G. Stanford
Major Professor and Chairman

Dean of the Graduate School

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

Nicholas Canaday, Jr.

Lawrence G. Seter

Thomas A. King

Paula Duke

Date of Examination:

May 3, 1966