

A STUDY OF CERTAIN ASSUMPTIONS IN THE
POETRY OF EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

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By

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TO

My Husband who has been patient, kind,
and helpful in the preparation of
this thesis

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to make a study of the poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson, and to determine the ideas concerning life which he takes for granted.

Critics say there is much of the man Robinson in his works. His books tell all one needs to know of the author, writes Alfred Kreymborg, for Robinson is one of the principal characters in his poems.¹ Louis V. Ledoux, Robinson's literary executor and one of his closest friends, says:

To write about the man E. A. is to write at the same time about the poet, for in the case of Mr. Robinson the artist and his work were one. He did not put into his verse merely the best side of him--all he could never be--nor yet the worst side, but his entire self.... In his works as in his life there was a perfect sincerity....there was a rare unity about E. A. and what his verse reflects is the whole man...²

Amy Lowell also finds much of Robinson in his poetry:

To the end, Mr. Robinson never succeeded in completely omitting the writer from the thing written, even in intentionally objective and dramatic piece...³

Robinson himself admitted that his works were autobiographical.

During an interview with Nancy Evans he remarked:

What can I say? People want to know what has happened to me, and there is nothing to tell.

¹ "The Wise Music of Robinson", The History of American Poetry, (N. Y. Macmillan Co., 1934) pp. 297, 299.

² "Psychologist of New England", Saturday Review of Literature, XII (Oct. 19, 1935) p. 4.

³ "Edwin Arlington Robinson", Tendencies in Modern American Poetry, (N. Y. Macmillan Co., 1919), p. 35.

You see my poetry is my life.¹

/ If a reader searches Robinson's poetry for clearly formulated assumptions, he will not always find them. They are not conspicuous; however, they are there. In determining his assumptions one must study the ideas repeatedly spoken by his characters together with the subtleties found in the author's own words. The poet lets his characters speak at great length. Since these people repeat over and over the same ideas, these ideas are undeniable Robinson's. Critics say that he speaks his message to the world through his characters.¹ Among these critics is Mr. Charles Gestre, who writes: *6m3*

He makes men and women talk, act, live, before us and, through a skillful handling of their behavior and speech, he imitates his own interpretation of character and conduct.²

The assumptions Robinson makes in his own words are partially hidden by his subtle phraseology. One critic writes that his real subtleties require many readings before they begin to unfold to the reader, and some of them never unfold.³ Those who have read Robinson closely must admit the truth of this statement.

¹ "Edwin Arlington Robinson", The Bookman, LXXV (Nov., 1932), p. 675.

² An Introduction to Edwin Arlington Robinson, (N. Y. Macmillan Co., 1930), p. 15.

³ Chard Powers Smith, "Personal Tributes", Saturday Review of Literature, XI (Feb. 23., 1935), 508.

With a careful study of Robinson's poetry one will discover definite assumptions on such subjects as success, failure, love, marriage, women, death, eternity, God, and religion, which are treated in the following chapters.

Chapter 11

Success and Failure

Robinson's poetry represents the conflicts of people trying to live with their ideals and their mistakes. His favorite character is the man who fails while trying to fulfill his ideals. The poet finds it "more interesting to write about failure than success".¹ Like Timberlake in Matthias at the Door the failures are rich in gold that is not "negotiable".¹ One cannot read the poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson without feeling the warm sympathy he has for the "inferior wraiths". His collected volume is crowded with tributes to the "beloved of none, forgotten by many". Often he has referred to himself as an "insane optimist", because he could see the good in thwarted lives that seemed wholly evil to others.²

A reviewer of his first volume wrote in The Bookman that the world to Mr. Robinson was not beautiful but a "prison-house"; to this Mr. Robinson made the reply:

The world is not a 'prison-house', but a kind of spiritual kindergarden where millions of bewildered infants are trying to spell God with the wrong blocks.³

Robinson's poetry reveals that his interest lies in the failures and misfortunes of life. He accepts the fact that

¹ Quoted by Nancy Evans, Op. cit., p. 677.

² Quoted by Ledoux, Op. cit., p. 4.

³ Quoted by Mark Van Doren, Edwin Arlington Robinson, (N. Y. The Literary Guild of America, 1927), p. 25.

life is full of disappointments and sorrows for the "bewildered infants" trying to find happiness. Mr. Ledoux remarks that Robinson presents life as he sees it existing about him; and if he seems a bit skeptic at times, the reason is that our civilization tends in that direction. A typescript of one of the poet's poems was returned to him with the remark that certain other writers from the time of the Peloponnesian Wars down found the world going to the devil in their day; to this Mr. Robinson replied: "Maybe they were right."¹

Mr. Robinson accepts failure as an experience which is unavoidable; he insists, writes Mr. Kreymborg, that "triumph is temporal and final defeat inevitable." A reader will recognize Mr. Kreymborg's authority in such lines as these:

No matter what we are, or what we sing,
Time finds a withered leaf in every laurel.²

The conviction that success is followed by failure appears so frequently in Robinson's poetry that it becomes a common theme in his longer poems and a common expression in his shorter ones. Always,

The dark is at the end of every day,
And silence is the end of every song.³

Robinson admires the old woman in "The Poor Relation" as she

1 "Psychologist of New England", Saturday Review of Literature, XI (Oct. 19, 1935), 3, 16..

2 "Three Quatrains", Collected Poems, (N.Y. Macmillan Co., 1934), p. 76.

3 "The Woman and the Wife", Collected Poems, p. 194.

accepts the change from her youth to old age as

...triumph born to be defeated.¹

In the following lines Robinson presents a picture of undisciplined mankind wondering about without an aim.

Tumultuously void of a clean scheme
Whereon to build, whereof to formulate,
The legion life that riots in mankind
Goes ever plunging upward, up and down,
Most like some crazy regiment at arms,
Undisciplined of aught but Ignorance,
And ever led resourcelessly along
To brainless carnage by drunk trumpeters.²

He assumes that the world "drilled in error" is lost to truth and usefulness:

While we are drilled in error, we are lost
Alike to truth and usefulness. We think
We are great warriors now, and we can brag
Like Titans; but the world is growing young,
And we, the fools of time, are growing with it:-
We do not fight to-day, we only die;
We are too proud of death, and too ashamed
Of God, to know enough to be alive.³

The world is lacking in courage to advance beyond tradition:

We lack the courage to be where we are:-
We love too much to travel on old roads,
To triumph on old fields; we love too much
To consecrate the magic of dead things,
And yieldingly to linger by long walls
Of ruin, where the ruinous moonlight
That sheds a lying glory on old stones
Befriends us with a wizard's enmity.⁴

Although he sees all the miseries and failures in life,

¹ Collected Poems, p. 45.

² "Octaves", Collected Poems, p. 101.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p. 105.

one is not to conclude, that Robinson finds nothing worth while. On the contrary, he finds life very interesting, enjoyable, and worth living in spite of its failures. In "Captain Craig" Robinson says:

I live convinced that I regret
This enterprised no more than I regret
My life; and I am glad that I was born.¹

In another poem the author insists that:

Life is a game that must be played:
This truth at least, good friends, we know;
So live and laugh, nor be dismayed
As one by one the phantoms go.²

omit It is Mark Van Doren who best presents Mr. Robinson's view of life with its defeat when he says that the poet observes life from two angles at the same time. He sees ^{life} it realistically and at the same time ideally. He looks beyond the evil in the failures of life and finds the good. Mr. Robinson is aware that the world is a dark place "to the eye," but he is far from being a pessimist, one who has no hope or faith in anything pertaining to life. Mr. Robinson's poetry expresses a profound faith in man, God, and a definite plan for the future. He does not pretend, however, to know about this future plan. He gives "expression to as radiant and sinewy a set of speculations" as any of the modern writers, being far from the "cheaper varieties of gloom."²

The conflict between hope and despair of life in Robinson's

¹ Collected Poems, p. 120.

² "Ballade by the Fire", Collected Poems, p. 77.

mind is "crystal clear", writes Ben Ray Redman:

The clash arises from the measureless discrepancy between life experienced and life desired; the forces involved are chilling reason and warm faith, each impotent to conquer wholly, each incapable of complete surrender. This interplay, everywhere in Robinson's works demands serious attention...¹

Mr. Redman further states that Robinson includes in his view of life the tragedy, the pity, the humor, and the doubt which exist about him.²

Other critics also find that Robinson presents a true picture of life as he sees it in his twofold attitude.

Charles Cestre insists:

He is a realist as well as a visionary. His strength lies in the truthfulness of his observance, not in sensational exaggerations....There is a largeness in his outlook on life, when he indulges in cheerful abandon, that takes in all that is beautiful in nature and all that is gentle in man.³

Mr. Kreymborg says also that Robinson's numerous failures result from his candid picture of life as he sees it.

Robinson

...faces the facts, states them for what they are...
he ...neither accepts nor opposes anyone.⁴

Mr. Robinson accepts life with little complaint and assumes it is not wholly evil in spite of its agony and dis-

¹ Edwin Arlington Robinson, (N. Y. Robert McBride & Co., 1926), p. 17.

² Op. cit., p. 33.

³ An Introduction to Edwin Arlington Robinson, p.154,158.

⁴ "The Wise Music of Robinson", The History of American Poetry, p. 302.

appointment. As Mark Van Doren has stated, he finds life fairly well balanced between good and evil, between darkness and light, between music and noise, between beauty and deformity. The two lines meet for Mr. Robinson in the lives of people; he enjoys studying in them the struggle between sun and shadow.¹

Critics often speak of Robinson's motto, "success through failure". The most successful people in Robinson's mind are those who fail materially: they have spiritual and mental strength worth more than riches to them. They will not be found as Matthias,

A man with nothing left but money and pride,
Neither of which was worth his living for,
If there was nothing else.²

Robinson possesses no illusions of life. His poetry reflects no illusions of the possibilities of permanent happiness or success, but as one critic says, to those who "seek truth and keep their courage" Robinson advocates that time brings a spiritual reward worth more than power, distinction, or material possessions:

There's more to be known of his harvesting
When Time the thrasher unbinds the sheaves.³

There is opportunity for contentment in sorrow if only mankind were able to see that gold is not the only possession

¹ Op. Cit., p. 33.

² Matthias at the Door, (N.Y. Macmillan Co., 1931), p. 84.

³ Cestre, Op. cit., p. 64.

for which to strive:

To curse the chilled insistence of the dawn
Because the free gleam lingers; to defraud
The constant opportunity that lives
Unchallenged in all sorrow; to forget
For this long prodigality of gold
That longer generosity of thought, --
These are the fleshy clogs of human greed,
The fundamental blunders of mankind.¹

Whether or not man seems to be of any value to the world,
he possesses self esteem which makes him of value in his own
mind. Ferguson in 'Tasker Norcross' makes this point clear:

"You have known
All round you, all your days, men who are nothing--
Nothing, I mean, so far as time tells yet
Of any other need it has of them
Than to make sextons hardy--but no less
Are to themselves incalculable something,
And therefore to be cherished."²

Since man is valuable in his way of thinking, Robinson
says he is to be cherished not for his material wealth, but
for his spiritual contribution. He will have man nourish
his mental and spiritual growth in addition to his material
growth. Cestre and other critics refer to Mr. Robinson as
the apostle of the American gospel of spiritual strenuousness,
without which life is not worth living. The author under con-
sideration does not adhere to any definite creed although he
proclaims the need of a higher aim for man than merely veg-
etative growth. He feels that every man must have a principle
or lower himself to a brute. Whether it be in religion, morals,
or art, he must have a touch of the human divine.

¹ "Octaves", Collected Poems, p. 107.

² Collected Poems, p. 503.

Honor that is a friend begets a friend.
 Whether or not we love him, still we have him;
 And we must live somehow by what we have,
 Or then we die. If you say chemistry,
 Then you must have your molecules in motion,
 And in their right abundance. Failing either,
 You have not long to dance. Failing a friend,
 A genius, or a madness, or a faith
 Larger than desperation, you are here
 For as much longer as you like as may be.¹

That man is the storehouse of his own destiny is an accepted fact with Robinson. There are certain forces lying within man that Robinson refers to as fate in some poems and nature in others. At any rate these forces are at work causing man to respond to circumstances as he does. He attributes man's failure to certain characteristics in his own physical and mental nature. Failure is not provoked by man's vice and sin but by some error in his judgment, remarked Robinson to Nancy Evans. Lying within man are fear, hate, remorse, greed, doubt, jealousy, self interest, "and all the other devils that live near the tree of knowledge "which cause him to fail."²

unint Robinson's characters are all failures in a material sense; they are only rich in spiritual strength which the world does not recognize. A careful study of his failures discloses the fact that each is responsible for his own failure. Cavender, for example, is primarily interested in himself. He has a desire to possess and control everything about him, even his wife's thoughts and desires. When he

¹ An Introduction to Edwin Arlington Robinson, p. 129.

² Op. cit., p. 678.

begins to doubt her virtue, he becomes jealous, afraid she has betrayed him, allowing himself to be overcome by a terrible fit of anger which brings

...down so heavily on himself
His tower of self that crushed and mangled him,...¹

Robinson points to the evil within one's own self causing his error in judgment when he speaks of Cavender, who

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

Another reference to the forces within man, which cannot escape one's notice, is found in one of Laramie's speeches to Cavender:

"I was not hurt. You only frightened me,
And gave yourself a scar that will not heal....
...hands harder than yours were helping you
To hurt yourself that night."³

By repeating Cavender's situation Robinson emphasizes the fact that Cavender ruined himself. Robinson gives the reader a glimpse of the man before he introduces him; Cavender tells the same things about himself; Laramie repeats the accusations; and an imaginary voice at the end of his torment repeats again those qualities within him which cause his ruin. The following lines are taken from another speech of Laramie's directed to Cavender:

"Poor Cavender!
The man who makes a chaos of himself

¹ "Cavender's House", Collected Poems, p. 966.

² Ibid., p. 970.

³ Ibid., p. 971.

Should have the benefit of his independence
 In his defection. He should wreck himself...
 I have been asking, Cavender, since that night,
 Where so malicious and inconsiderate
 A devil could hide in you for so long time".¹

The same ideas of evil within provoking incorrect
 judgment is present in Talifer. Karen relates to Doctor
 Quick the horror in Talifer's eyes, to which Quick replies:

"You are the devil, Karen; ...
 Talifer's eyes are not so terrible
 As you believe them....It was all
 A wild misunderstanding on your part",...²

Matthias, one of the temporal successes, builds his
 "tower of self" that crumbles before him. Timberlake warns:

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

Again the poet emphasizes the influence of self interest on
 one's character when Timberlake tells Matthias:

"Most of us are half-born, with only self
 To cheer us with the promise of importance
 Until it is all over"-----⁴

In "Avon's Harvest" the poet relates a story of haunting
 fear and extreme hatred which completely destroys Avon's
 life. He

Fed with unrevealing reticence
 The fire of death we saw that horribly
 Consumed him while he crumbled and said nothing.⁵

¹ "Cavender's House", Collected Poems, p. 997.

² Talifer, (N.Y. Macmillan Co., 1933), p. 73.

³ Matthias at the Door, p. 78.

⁴ Ibid., p. 96.

⁵ Collected Poems, p. 543.

Something within Avon made him hate a former school-mate maliciously to the day of Avon's death:

"and all the while
There was a battle going on within me
Of hate that fought remorse--if you must have it--
Never to win..."¹

Allowing this hatred to grow, Avon became an addict to fear, for Robinson tells the reader "where there's hate there's always fear." Haunting fear is so deeply embedded in Avon that life becomes a hell, and death the ultimate result. The doctor, who is called to diagnose the case, reports that Avon died because he was afraid, and because "it was the devil" in him.²

Another of Robinson's characters fails because his material wealth is suddenly swept away. Benwick Finzer becomes an outcast and beggar because

Something crumpled in his brain
When his half million went.³

Although only a few of his failures are mentioned here, it must be understood that he has written volumes about those who have failed.

long The fact remains that Robinson assumes failure is due to the forces at work within one, the forces within which react to outward circumstances. There is no cure for failure, because as Robinson has Timberlake tell Matthias,

¹ Collected Poems, p. 554.

² Ibid., p. 573.

³ "Benwick Finzer", Collected Poems, p. 55.

"There is no cure for self;
There's only an occasional revelation,
Arriving not infrequently too late."¹

Again Robinson puts a speech in Timberlake's mouth that any reader who knows Robinson will recognize as his own philosophy of failure.

"Why do we come to nothing who have more,
We'll say, than most? What is our value here
Unless we fit? To make a mould that fits us,
You'd like to say, Matthias, but aren't going to:
Read a few years of history, and you'll see
The stuff is not so pliable as all that.
If it were so, we should all be each other--
So great that nature would be on her knees,
Which is not nature's natural attitude.
Why are we as we are? We do not know.
Why do we pay so heavily for so little?
Or for so much? Or for whatever it is?
We do not know. We only pay, and die.,
To a short-sighted and earth-hindered vision
It would seem rather a waste, but not to mine.
I have found gold, Matthias, where you found gravel,
And I can't give it to you. I feel and see it,
But you must find it somehow for yourself.
It's not negotiable. You have to find it"--²

To those who desire triumph and contentment Robinson
lifts high the value of truth, honesty, sincerity, and courage:

Take on yourself
But your sincerity, and you take on
Good promise for all climbing; fly for the truth
And hell shall have no storm to crush your flight,
No laughter to vex down your loyalty.³

One need not fear what the future years may bring so long
as he is honest with his fellowman:

Be up, my soul; nor be afraid

¹ Matthias at the Door, p. 78.

² Ibid., p. 76.

³ Quoted by Louis Untermeyer, Modern American and British Poetry, (N.Y. Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1923), p. 76.

Of what some unborn year may show;
 But mind your human debts are paid,
 As one by one the phantoms go.¹

Robinson insists that truth will drive away troubled conscience and fear. If Avon had used his courage and spoken the truth to his enemy before they parted instead of silently hating as he chose to do, Robinson assures him his life would not have been such a miserable failure.

"If you had given him then your hand," I said,
 "And spoken, though it strangled you, the truth,
 I should not have the melancholy honor
 Of sitting here alone with you this evening.
 If only you had shaken hands with him,
 And said the truth, he would have gone his way,
 And you your way. He might have wished you dead,
 But he would not have made you miserable.
 At least," I added, indefensibly,
 "That's what I hope is true."²

The author clearly shows the effect of with-holding the truth in "The Book of Annadale". Damaris would have been much happier had she told the truth to her dying husband regardless of the consequences. Though she promised never to love another man, Damaris realizes later it is impossible to keep such a vow. Because she has sworn an oath on her husband's death bed, gnawing conscience holds her to a promise which she knows to be impractical.

Robinson throughout insists on truth being the one main step to contentment.

While Robinson is writing of failure in others he is not unmindful that a poet may be either a success or failure. He

¹ "Ballade by the Fire", Collected Poems, p. 77.

² "Avon's Harvest", Collected Poems, p. 558.

is firmly convinced that the successful poet

Must work with something else than pen and ink
And painful preparation: he must work
With unseen implements that have no names,
And he must win withal, to do that work,
Good fortitude, clean wisdom, and strong skill.¹

Poetry must reflect soul to be great, and the "little
sonnet-men" fail when they

...fashion, in a shrewd mechanic way,
Songs without souls, that flicker for a day,
To vanish in irrevocable night.²

¹ "Octaves", Collected Poems, p. 106.

² "A Sonnet", Collected Poems, p. 93.

Love

Robinson assumes that love between man and woman is a very fragile possession, which cannot survive long. Regardless of how ardently two people may love they cannot remain always in such a blissful state. He finds that love is inconstant and unstable because it is subject to death and overruled by fate. Fate in this sense signifies all the forces within and without man that work against him. They are the forces which are preordained, over which he has no control.¹

Accordingly, in the poem "The Book of Annandale" love is struggling with deliberate thought within the breasts of two people, Annandale and Damaris. There is a subconscious force urging them to seek new love and life, because, as Robinson points out, death has destroyed their former love. They are independently debating with themselves whether to remain loyal to the memory of their dead companions, or whether to listen to, what Mr. Cestre terms, "the call of life" and find new love.¹ Robinson dwells long on the fact that there is a human force at work urging both of them to seek new life and love. He makes much of the promise that Damaris has made to her husband on his death-bed. She had sworn that she could not love another. Soon after he is dead, she meets Annandale and realizes how untruthful she has been.

...could she have known enough to know
The meaning of her grief, the folly of it,
The faithlessness and the proud anguish of it,

¹ An Introduction to Edwin Arlington Robinson, p. 137.

There might be now no threads to punish her,
 No vampire thoughts to suck the coward blood,
 The life, the very soul of her. ¹

A force within urges her to love again; but her conscience will not permit it, for she has sworn an oath never to love another man. It is through her troubled conscience that Robinson reveals his idea of love. She has sworn an oath which is impossible to keep. The human urge to love a new life is stronger than her grief, in spite of the fact that she tries hard to cling to his memory. The young widower Annandale is tempted to answer the call of life even at the moment he should be experiencing grief. He tries hard to make himself mourn, but the urge to seek a new mate is too strong.

He knew the loss--therefore it puzzled him
 That he should sit so long there as he did,
 And bring the whole thing back--the love, the trust,
 The pallor, the poor face, and the faint way
 She last had looked at him--and yet not weep,
 Or even choose to look about the room
 To see how sad it was; and once or twice
 He winked and pinched his eyes against the flame
 And hoped there might be tears. But hope was all,...²

Robinson expresses in this poem, writes Mr. Cestre, what he accepts as a truth, that it is natural for people to leave the memory of dead love and seek the life found in new love. A force within drives out the old love, and makes room for the new. ³

In "Merlin" and "Lancelot" love suffers from inevitable circumstances. Merlin is too wise in human foresight to believe

¹ Collected Poems, p. 205.

² Ibid., p. 197.

³ Op. cit., p. 139.

that the admiring young Vivian will always love him, and she has a suspicious feeling that Merlin will not always remain with her. She fears that some day King Arthur will call him, and that he will go beyond the sea to Camelot. Time and fate pursue the lovers. With these forces at work within them they begin to lose their love and happiness. The call from beyond the sea comes, and Merlin cannot resist the King; fate has overcome them. He trembles as he fondly presses her hands between his.

"Tomorrow," he said;

"Tomorrow I shall go away again
To Camelot; and I shall see the King
Once more; and I may come to you again
Once more; and I shall go away again
For ever." ¹

They part in sadness, Mr. Cestre remarks, realizing that human happiness is a fragile possession.²

Even the passionate love that Lancelot and Guinevere possess for each other cannot remain the same against the compelling forces of fate. Lancelot's chivalrous spirit and his loyalty to Arthur will not allow him to sacrifice his honor for love. The thought that Guinevere may be doomed to wander in exile if she falls from Arthur's grace forces Lancelot to depart from her. Guinevere who feels she cannot live without him realizes after it is too late that love is not so noble as loyalty. Their ardent love begins to wane after Arthur's death and the fall of the kingdom. Lancelot would like to recall it; Guinevere knows it

¹ "Merlin", Collected Poems, p. 297.

² Op. cit., p. 10.

cannot be.

He took her two small hands
That were so pale and empty, and so cold:
"Poor child, I said too much and heard too little
Of what I said. But when I found you here,
So different, so alone, I would have given
My soul to be a chattel and a gage
For dicing fiends to play for, could so doing
Have brought one summer back."

"When they are gone,"
She said, with grateful sadness in her eyes,
"We do not bring them back, or buy them back,
Even with our souls. I see now it is best
We do not buy them back, even with our souls."¹

Tristram and Isolt of Ireland have such a passionate love
for each other that Isolt thinks nothing can destroy it:

"Tristram, believe
That if I die my love will not be dead,
As I believe that yours will not be dead.
If in some after time your will may be
To slay it for the sake of a new face,
It will not die. Whatever you do to it,
It will not die. We cannot make it die,
We are not mighty enough to sentence love
Stronger than death to die, though we may die.
I do not think there is much love like ours
Here in this life,"...²

Robinson shows the error of such confidence in love. It is
too susceptible to fate and time to remain unchanged. In Isolt
lies the main force which destroys their ideal love. Mark is in
prison, Tristram is at home from exile, and their reunion seems
secure this time. But Isolt, broken from long waiting, sick
with humiliation, fearing that Mark's revenge will still reach
them, finds her love for Tristram is not the same happy love she
once experienced. She is conscious of the change and wonders

¹ "Lancelot", Collected Poems, p. 446.

² "Tristram", Collected Poems, p. 621.

... "whether or not
 His (God's) way was not the most merciful, he knows--
 Not we. Or was it fate, stronger than all?
 A voice within me says that God, seeing all,
 Was more compassionate than to let love see
 Too far"--...¹

A jilted wife of a fickle husband in "The Clinging Vine"
 finds comfort in the thought that the other woman will soon
 have the same experience that she has gone through:

"Be happy while she has it,
 For she'll not have it long;"²

Lorraine in "The Growth of Lorraine" prefers to meet death
 deliberately because the man she loves has ceased to love her.
 Before taking five drops of poison, when one is sufficient, she
 writes:

"You do not frown because I call you friend,
 For I would have you glad that I still keep
 Your memory, and even at the end--
 Impenitent, sick, shattered--cannot curse
 The love that flings, for better or for worse,
 This worn-out, cast-out flesh of mine to sleep."³

Robinson in all of his short love poems and dramatic love
 narratives reflects clearly the inconstancy, the weakness of
 love in the hands of fate, time, and death. Captain Craig
 sums up Robinson's idea of love when he says:

"You are in love....
 But never mind, it won't last long;
 It never does;"⁴

Again in "Lancelot" Robinson gives his assumption in clear concise
 statements of a nun at the convent. They have carried Guinevere

¹ "Tristram", Collected Poems, p. 684.

² Collected Poems, p. 8.

³ Collected Poems, p. 192.

⁴ "Captain Craig", Collected Poems, p. 129.

into the chapel unconscious after Lancelot leaves:

"She was the Queen, and he was Lancelot,"
One said. "They were great lovers. It is not good
To know too much of love. We who love God
Alone are happiest.¹

¹ "Lancelot", Collected Poems, p. 447.

Chapter IV

Marriage

The great number of poems composed by Mr. Robinson concerning the relations of husband and wife are ample proof of the author's interest in marriage. One has only to read these poems to be firmly convinced that he takes for granted there is no permanent happiness in marriage. One will find no happy marriages in his poetry. A reading will reveal the instability of love and the mockery which follows. To Mr. Robinson marriage is a "fireside farce", merely a "home where passion lived and died".

He invariably believes that the unhappiness in marriage is due to the emptiness of love and beauty. His plots are woven about the aftermath of love and beauty, the struggle of the two to exist in the face of estrangement. Because love and beauty are both subject to decay, they cannot remain the same forever, according to Mr. Robinson. When love between the husband and wife begins to disappear or the wife begins to lose her beauty, Robinson reflects that unhappiness occurs. Soon after marriage one or both are disillusioned; discontentment begins. Jealousy, fear, hate, indifference, and selfishness take the place of love; as a result, the home becomes nothing more than a shelter, "firelight and four walls". The husband and wife become strangers to each other; they are forced sometimes to endure "a drama of hard words unspoken", because they are too ashamed and too proud to admit their failure in marriage.

Once love has died, there is no renewing the affection,

in the stories that Mr. Robinson relates. Over and over in his poetry this author reveals the absolute impossibility of rekindling the fire of love once it has been extinguished; only the ashes and smoke remain.

In "Eros Turannos", with its aftermath of love, the wife fears her husband and will always asks "What fated her to choose him?" She cannot let him go though she finds him a Judas. Pride takes the place of love in her heart and she pretends to the world she is happy.

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.¹

"The Unforgiven" describes another "Fireside farce", "a drama of hard words unspoken", where "she, the unforgiving, hates him more for her lack than for her loss". This woman has lost her beauty; at one time "he", the husband, "found her fair" and nothing could have taken him "anywhere that would have been away from her." Time has changed the story; he cannot "retrieve the vision" that he once had of her. Because her beauty did not remain, "two lives are broken". He sees in love a "coin to toss" and knows that all is over:

He waits, and there awaits an ending,
And he knows neither what nor when;
But no magicians are attending
To make him see as he saw then,
And he will never find again,
The face that once had been the rending
Of all his purpose among men.²

¹ Collected Poems, p. 33.

² Ibid., p. 38.

"Another Dark Lady" tells the story of the husband and wife who have both ceased to love the other or to have any mutual interests. It is the wife who speaks in this instance.

Think not, because I wonder where you fled,
That I would lift a pin to see you there;
You may, for me, be prowling anywhere,
So long as you show not your little head:

She does not hate him, because the love she once had for him prevents that; but she has no love for him now that she has learned the truth about him. Once she thought him everything that one could ask for; she will not make that same mistake again.

I cannot hate you, for I loved you then.
The woods were golden then. 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.¹

The title of "The Woman and the Wife" explains the story included with very little need of comment. The woman becomes a different person after she has been a wife awhile. One can feel the death of romantic love of the woman in the gulf across which the wife attacks her husband:

"What is it worth to-night that you can see
More marriage in the dream of dead kiss
Than in a thousand years of life like this?
Passion has turned the lock, Pride keeps the key."

Again pride is the foundation upon which marriage is supported. Passion and love are dead, but rather than admit their unhappiness they must remain together and endure the estrangement to the end. The wife suggests that their sorrow is a price that

¹ Collected Poems, p. 41-42.

they must pay for the love they once enjoyed. Disillusionment follows love as darkness follows day. She admits her mistake, "God never made me for the wife of you," but

"Let us both be strong,
And we shall find in sorrow, before long,
Only the price Love ruled that we should pay:
The dark is at the end of every day,
And silence is the end of every song." ¹

The man and woman in "Firelight" have lived together ten years, each reminiscing on a former love. They are living like two strangers thankful only for "firelight and four walls":

Wiser for silence, they were not so glad
Were she to read the graven tale of lines
On the wan face of one somewhere alone;
Nor were they more content could he have had
Her thoughts a moment since of one who shines
Apart, and would be hers if he had known. ²

"London Bridge" is another story of hate and endurance in the aftermath of love. The wife is unfaithful to the husband; her mind is occupied with thoughts of others. Their estrangement becomes so great she feels "sinful in giving all she has in holy loathing to a stranger all her life" and she wonders if

"...souls are any whiter when their bodies are called
wives." ³

Robinson offers the reader a change of situation in "Genevieve and Alexandra"; however the plot is similar to all those in the above mentioned poems. Genevieve, in talking to her sister about her husband, complains that he loves every other

¹ Collected Poems, p. 194.

² Ibid., p. 510.

³ Op. cit., 497.

women but her. The trouble lies in her own self, but she is too stubborn and blind to accept help from Alexandra, who frankly rebukes her for her own unhappiness:

Whatever it is, you make it what it is.
 I know the man. He wants his house to live in.
 He's not the sort who makes another man's
 Romance a nightmare for the humor of it;
 He's not one to be spinning webs of gold
 As if he were a spider with an income;
 He's what he is; and you that have him so,
 I see are in the best of ways to lose him.¹

In Genevieve's answer there is the same philosophy that Robinson repeatedly gives his readers. Love cannot be revived once it has died; indifference replaces it and the endurance of the estrangement is the easiest way out:

I hear you-all you say;
 And what you say to me so easily
 May be the end of wisdom, possibly.
 And I may change. I don't believe I shall,
 Yet I may change-a little. I don't know.
 It may be now that I don't care enough;
 It may be too that I don't know enough-
 To change. It may be that the few lights left
 Around the shrine, as you say, may go out
 Without my tending them or watching them.
 It seems a jealous love is not enough
 To bring at once to light, as I have seen it,
 The farthest hidden of all mockeries
 That home can hold and hide--until it comes.
 Well it has come.²

"Cavender's House", a longer narrative, includes almost all the forces that cause the unhappiness in Robinson's marriages. Love is only present a little while; after it disappears and the wife loses her beauty, Cavender is possessed by jealousy, hate, fear, selfishness, and doubt. In a fit of jealous wrath he murders

¹ Collected Poems, p. 880.

² Ibid., p. 881.

his wife by pushing her off a high cliff back of their house. Twelve years later Cavender returns to the scene after learning too late that

"Sometimes,...suspicion
May take the face and shape of certainty
And so be worse than truth and ruin together"¹

It was too late to save Laramie but not too late to envy those "who had married safer faces". Her face was beautiful at one time, and Cavender sees that it was the face and body he has loved. In his imagination he hears Laramie saying:

"No doubt
My pride was in a panic when it first
Conceived how little for you there was of me
That was not either a body or a face"...²

Here again the reader comes in contact with Robinson's belief in the futility of love and beauty, which causes unhappiness in marriage:

"But I was foolish
Then, for I let my love make me believe
Too much. I believed almost anything then.
You made me, and you let me. I was happy.
Then you would hold me close to keep me warm,
And I would watch clouds going over the moon,
Like doubt over a face--if I had known
Enough to think. I was not trying to think.
You said I was too beautiful to think.
You said that if I did, your quality
Might have a shrinkage....It was careless
Of me that I was not much given to thought
While I believed in you and your love,
Which was a sort of love--the sort that owns
And gloats, and prowls away complacently
For capture and a change."³

¹ Collected Poems, p. 969.

² Ibid., p. 988.

³ Op. Cit., p. 996.

Robinson repeats the idea that it is impossible to reestablish love to its former quality when it begins to diminish. Love has been deceived; Laramie is not sure she could ever find happiness in his arms again:

"If you should come to take me, I'm not sure
That in your arms I should find happiness,
Though once I found it there."¹

Cavender's love has turned to fear that Laramie should find happiness in another's arms. After he has committed the murder he is still in doubt about his wife's faithfulness. This doubt and the gnawing of his conscience brings Cavender back to the murder scene where he hears an imaginary voice saying:

"How do you know the stone you cast that night
Was not your fear, hammered to look like love
By passion and sick pride? Love would have been
The death of you far likelier than her,
If there was to be death. Love would you call it?
You jealous hound, you murderer, you poor fool!"²

Matthias at the Door presents another husband and wife who live peacefully for many years without mutual love. Natalie, the wife, has never loved Matthias, although she has never revealed the secret to him. She plays the part well, as Robinson finds all married people playing a part, and Matthias would never have known if forces beyond her control, which Robinson calls fate, had not interfered. Timberlake and Natalie meet accidentally at Garth's tomb where their love for each other, which has been hidden many years, bursts forth in spite of all they can do. Matthias, unknown to the other two, is near to hear their

¹ Collected Poems, p. 974.

² Ibid., p. 1004.

confession of love to each other. When questioned by Matthias Natalie brings forth the truth:

"There was a man I would have married once,
And likely to my sorrow, but you saved him
Out of the fire--and only saved yourself
By mercy of a miracle. You were brave,
Matthias; and because he was your friend,
That man gave me to you, first having given
Himself to folly, and to waste worse than crime.
I don't know yet whether he loves me really,
Or if it's in him to love any woman
Save as a game and an experience,
I know that I'd have given myself to him,
Not caring whether or which. But it was you
Who saved him from the fire, and he remembers,
As he remembered then. He is your friend,
And sometime you may know, wherever he is,
Your need of him. I married you, Matthias,
Because I liked you, and because your love
Was too real to be tortured, and because
There was no better thing for me to do."¹

Matthias feels that they cannot remain together, but Natalie suggests that since they have lived together so far without her love, they can continue their relations as if nothing had happened. Houses have been built on "infirm foundations" than theirs, she tells him. Matthias submits to her wish and their house remains the same to outsiders:

No friends of hers,
Or garrulous acquaintance envying her,
Would have said everything was not as always;
And time went by.²

Unhappiness reigns within each of them and marriage becomes such a mockery that Natalie gets desperate enough to strike Matthias. He lives in memory of their past after she dies; he dreams of their miserable lives at night and broods over them in the

¹ Matthias at the Door, p. 45.

² Ibid., p. 53.

day. Matthias walks into her room:

He had come there asleep,
To find her in a dream of heaven, and then
To lose her in another dream of hell.
His life with Natalie had been like that,
He thought; yet he could think no ill of her,
Though she had struck him. He could not forget,
The blow, and he could not forget his love,
Which had been real, if blind and unreturned,
With Natalie a stranger in his house,
And in his arms.¹

Talifer is a story of unhappiness in two marriages, the first having been caused by a husband and a wife who are mismatched, and the second by a love which has been wounded too severely to recover. Talifer jilts Althea, who loves him deeply, for a brilliant and scholarly girl, Karen. Talifer and Karen are married, much to the sorrow of each of them after a while. After a year of extreme unhappiness Talifer, realizing their terrible situation, tries to find a solution.

"And we, not being two fools,
Must own the presence of an error somewhere,...
Acknowledge it, and find what's left to do
With our mishandled lives." ²

It is Karen who solves the problem for them by leaving Talifer to Althea, whose marriage to him results in hardly more happiness than he and Karen enjoyed. Althea drifts into mental disturbances at times over reminiscence of his former marriage.

Talifer explains to his friend Quick:

"At first I was alarmed," he said, "but later
Became cold-hearted and resigned. So now,
When it comes on, I wear the face of patience,
And wait till she returns. If she had manners,

¹ Matthias at the Door, p. 82.

² Talifer, p. 67.

Or morals, her obliterative instinct
 Would urge her to conceal, or to forget,
 Her joy in my remorse. If she had mercy,
 Or decent sympathies, or a character,
 She might, with years, be an agreeable helpmate.
 But while she lets her memories and inventions
 Rummage the past, more like a thankless cat
 In an ash-can than an obedient wife,
 What has a man to say? What has a man
 To do, but wear the face of patience?"¹

Althea cannot renew her love although it had been great when she first knew him, before he quenched it by his refusal of her and choice of another. In this poem, as in all the other marriage poems, Robinson is saying that once love has disappeared there is no finding it again.

One might relate Robinson's marriage poems indefinitely. He has written many and always he uses the same plot--the unhappiness of both the husband and wife because love does not remain long after they are united, and because it cannot be renewed once it has been destroyed.

¹ Talifer, p. 96.

Chapter V

WOMEN

Robinson assumes that women are stronger, mentally and spiritually, than men. That his poetry reflects this attitude cannot be denied. His women are always sure of themselves in time of distress. They are never afraid to face the truth in spite of the consequences. When affronted with troubles and fears Robinson's men recoil and hide, while his women stand firm and fight with all their ability to conquer the trials. In addition to the superior quality of courage and strength found in Robinson's women, there is also a certain fluency in their speech, which enables them to say directly what they think and feel. The men in his poetry are not so gifted; they stumble about with difficulty when they try to lay their thoughts before women. Instead of words based on doubts and illusions, so typical of his men, one finds in his women words based on truth and wisdom. One critic, Alfred Kreyborg, finds that

The Robinson heroiness throughout speak more directly than the heroes. The men funble about; are haunted by doubts and dreads; still cling to illusion; are immature compared with the women.¹

It is the courage of the woman in Matthias at the Door that keep their house from falling. Matthias cannot face the truth when it comes to him. Learning that Natalie has never really loved him, Matthias is ready to give up this life; he

¹ "The Wise Music of Robinson", The History of American Poetry, p. 304.

wants to die. But Natalie, who is stronger and braver than he at such a crisis, and who has already courageously sacrificed for him many years, will not submit to defeat. She is very sure that they can endure their estrangement "for some time yet". In the following speech of hers one gets an idea of the directness of speech in Robinson's women, and of the truth and wisdom that are the basis of their reasoning:

"I'm saying that my wishes,
If they are strong enough, will hold our ship
Together for some time yet, with only ourselves
To know that underneath, where none may see them,
There are some patches to keep death away.
Matthias, if only your bewildered pride
Would lend its eyes to your imagination,
You would see ships afloat with patches hidden
That would be worse and larger far than ours
Would have to be. Meanwhile I see dark water
Filling our ship; and it's for you to say
Whether or not we sink. I'd rather we sailed,
With a flag flying." 1

In the Robinsonian sonnet "The Woman and the Wife", which is further proof of his reflections on his women characters, it is the wife again who wields the weapon of wisdom and scientific truth. As Kreymsborg says, "it is no subtle rapier, but a forthright battle-axe" when the woman exclaims:

"Do you ask me to take moonlight for the sun?" 2

Cavender in "Cavender's House", when facing doubt and fear, shows his weakness by submitting to jealousy and kills

1 Matthias at the Door, p. 50.

2 "The Wise Music of Robinson", The History of American Poetry, p. 305.

his wife. It is Laramie, the wife, again who is stronger. She even faces death without fear. The husband imagines that he can see and hear his wife as she defiantly directs at him words that are bitter and hard, yet full of truth.

"I'd rather see a demon, Cavender,
Than a dead woman after I had killed her;
And I would rather see her dead before me
Than know she was down there, not seeing her.
You must have had a melancholy night,
Waiting for news of me. None of your friends
Or mine, could tell you where I was that night,
For none could say till early workmen found me.
The town's had never so rich a mystery
Before or since to engage its hungry tongue.
It was a cream for cats; and all the time
They wondered why the woman they most envied
Should do it. It was peculiar, Cavender;
And you could answer nothing. You were broken,
And it was no more than in tune with nature
That you should bury me and then go away.
But why could you not so much as hesitate
That night, before you seized me and then threw me
Down on those rocks, a hundred feet below us?
I was not hurt; you only frightened me.
But still you should have waited and been sure,
And had at least the balm of certainty
To wash your scar."¹

Over and over Robinson returns to the same plot between man and woman, with the woman growing more and more compelling and the men growing weaker. Even the heroic Tristram and Lancelot are weak in comparison with their women. Tristram in the presence of Isolt of Ireland or Isolt of Brittany becomes what Mr. Kreymsborg calls a "stuttering puppet".² Isolt of Brittany knows she has lost Tristram's

¹ "Cavender's House", Collected Poems, p. 999-1000.

² Op. cit., p. 305.

love. The bravery, valor, and calmness with which she accepts this truth show her strong character. Tristram cannot find words to answer such a direct and apt speech as this:

"If I lost you
For a long time," she said, with her insistence,
"I should not cry for what had come between,
For I should have you here with me again.
I am not one who must have everything.
I was not fated to have everything.
One may be wise enough, not having all,
Still to be found among the fortunate,"¹

Charles Cestre, likewise, recognizes the strength of Robinson's women and mentions the fact that it is Isolt of Ireland who, in an "outburst of bravery" faces "fate", and speaks words of encouragement to Tristram when he "offers to yield to despair". She insists that some favorable circumstances may save them from their disappointment:

"Tristram, fair things yet
Will have a show black as night before them,
And soon will have a shadow black as night
Behind them. And all this may be a shadow,
Sometime, that we may live to see behind us--
Wishing that we had not been all so sure
Tonight that it was always to be night."²

Lancelot stands "dumb, like a man twice banished", gazing down at the stone floor of the nunnery, while Guinevere sums up the past in a speech full of meaning and wisdom, and reveals how much superior she is to Lancelot in spiritual courage.

"I feared the light was leading you," she said,
"So far by now from any place like this
That I should have your memory, but no more.
Might not that way have been the wiser way?
There is no Arthur now, no Modred now,-
No Guinevere." She paused, and her voice wandered
Away from her own name: "There is nothing now

¹ "Tristram", Collected Poems, p. 654.

² An Introduction to Edwin Arlington Robinson, p. 106.

That I can see between you and the Light
 That I have dimmed so long. If you forgive me,
 And I believe you do--though I know all
 That I have cost, when I was worth so little--
 There is no hazard that I see between you
 And all you sought so long, and would have found
 Had I not always hindered you. Forgive me--
 I could not let you go. God pity men
 When women love too much--and women more."....¹

It seems to Lancelot they can be together now since
 Arthur is dead, but Guinevere who has more courage knows this
 cannot be and prevents it.

"No, Lancelot;
 We are going by two roads to the same end;
 Or let us hope, at least, what knowledge hides,
 And so believe it. We are going somewhere.
 Why the new world is not for you and me,
 I cannot say; but only one was ours;
 I think we must have lived in our one world
 All that earth had for us. You are good to me,
 Coming to find me here for the last time;
 For I should have been lonely many a night,
 Not knowing if you cared. I do know now;
 And there is not much else for me to know
 That earth may tell me."²

In view of the fact that Robinson takes for granted
 women have more courage and speak more wisely than men, Mr.
 Kreymborg thinks that his masculine characters are "hard
 for proud men to read about".³

According to Mr. Robinson's assumptions women, as a
 rule, hide their sorrows so deeply within themselves that
 they are rarely discovered.

¹ "Lancelot", Collected Poems, p. 441.

² Ibid., pp. 441-2.

³ "The Wise Music of Robinson", The History of American Poetry, p. 305.

There is the wife in "Tact", who hides her sorrow so completely when her husband leaves her that

He saw no ruin anywhere,
Nor fancied there were scars
On anyone who lingered there,
Alone below the stars.¹

Isolt of the white hands has borne her sorrow and disappointment without complaint though she knows

He had died there,
But not for her. He had not thought of her,
Perhaps, and that was strange. He had been all,
And would be always all there was for her,
And he had not come back to her alive,
Not even to go again. It was like that
For women, sometimes, and might be so too often
For women like her.²

Natalie in Matthias at the Door lives with Matthias many years before he learns that she has never loved him. It is not her deliberate action then that tells him, for she never intends that he shall know. Natalie has indulged in this deceitful secret only as

...a convenience, and a way prepared,
By circumstance to make Matthias happy.³

In similar incidents the woman in "Eros Turannos" keeps her secret of unhappiness from the world; Genevieve in "Genevieve and Alexandra" hides her secret of jealousy and unhappiness from her husband; and Laramie in "Cavender's House" never tells her husband the thing he wants to know. Robinson's women do not lay all their thoughts before their husbands and friends; they have "a leaf" in their book they

¹ Collected Poems, p. 474.

² "Tristram", Collected Poems, p. 729.

³ Matthias At the Door, p. 56.

will "not lay open".¹ And as Timberlake tells Matthias in
Matthias at the Door:

"....there is no man living
 With eyes or intuitions to interpret
 A woman hiding pain."²

Robinson has an aversion for women who are too pure
 and too virtuous. He assumes that they must have a touch of
 evil to make them human. He prefers women with eyes that
 have

...a gleam of heaven to make them pure,
 And a glimmer of hell to make them human.³

It is this combination of the good and evil elements that is
 so prominent in the women Robinson has created. He insists
 on a "dash of Eve to liven her in sensible perfection"-⁴

Robinson has created what Kreymsborg calls woman "in the round".

His perpetual antitheses attempt to draw woman, as all
 else, in the round, and to show her leading us down to
 hell and up to heaven, or moving along with her mate
 through the heavenly hell or hellish heaven which is life
 as this poet beholds it.⁵

The above authority states further that Robinson's women
 are often the devil "to whom the serpent handed the apple of
 knowledge".⁶ When one becomes aware of the way in which his
 women wield the weapons of truth and wisdom, he knows that

1 "Genevieve and Alexandra", Collected Poems, p. 875.

2 Matthias at the Door, p. 80.

3 "Her Eyes", Collected Poems, p. 79.

4 "Genevieve and Alexandra", Collected Poems, p. 878.

5 "The Wise Music of Robinson", The History of American Poetry, p. 300.

6 Ibid., p. 305.

Mr. Kreymborg has stated a fact.

In addition to strength, courage, and reason, Robinson finds women possess a loyalty not common to man. He draws a contrast between man's love and woman's love in "The Book of Annandale". The same human urge to seek new love is present in both the man and the woman when each loses his companion, but the woman reasons with herself until she conquers nature and finds:

Whenever she might look,
The certified achievement of a love
That had endured, self-guarded and supreme,
To the glad end of all that wavering;
And she could see that now the flickering world
Of autumn was awake with sudden bloom,
New-born, perforce, of a slow bourgeoning.¹

Woman has courage and strength enough to conquer the human urge, and remain loyal, but this urge to love again is too strong for the man. He cannot even weep at his wife's burial; he seems glad. "Like any other man" he has loved, married, and that is all. He begins immediately to search for a new love.

Was he a brute? No, he was not a brute:
He was a man--like any other man:
He had loved and married his wife Miriam,
They had lived a little while in paradise
And she was gone; and that was all of it.²

Loyalty of woman to man is experienced again in "As a World Would Have It":

"....There is one thing
No man can understand."

¹ Collected Poems, p. 210.

² Ibid., p. 200.

"I would have given everything?--gone down
 To Tartarus--to silence? Was it that?
 I would have died? I would have let you live?--
 And was it very strange?"¹

Although Robinson finds women more courageous and more loyal in every respect than men, he finds also that they are more impatient when waiting on man's success. In "Rembrandt to Rembrandt" he reveals:

A woman waiting on a man's avouch
 Of the invisible, may not wait always
 Without a word betweenwhiles, or a dash
 Of poison of his faith.¹

Again in the "Partnership" the husband has toiled many years, learning to create beauty in pottery. After he has attained his skill the wife exclaims:

Lift it--hold it high again!...
 Did I doubt you now and then?
 Well, we are not men.²

Robinson's women are always too ambitious to succeed and win to wait patiently for time to bring success.

¹ Collected Poems, p. 220.

² Ibid., p. 583.

³ Ibid., p. 223.

Amy Lowell speaks of Mr. Robinson's having a creedless religion because he revolted against Puritanism and accepted no other formal belief.¹ Charles Cestre finds Mr. Robinson's creed that of a Christian disregarding orthodox religion and going straight to the pure teachings of Jesus. He expresses his faith in the spiritual without reference to any formal belief and remains attached to Christian feelings, without Christian dogma.² In his own language Robinson assumes that there is one common creed sufficient for any phase of man's life, religion included:

There is one creed, and only one
That glorifies god's excellence;
So cherish, that his will be done,
The common creed of common sense.³

Robinson is not in sympathy with Christianity as it is practiced by the majority. He finds too much insincerity and hypocrisy among the people who profess to be devout followers of Christ. In "Captain Craig" he is satirizing the inhabitants of Tilsbury Town (Gardiner) who profess to trust God and let the poor starve:

They found it more melodious to shout
Right on, with unmolested adoration,
To keep the tune as it has always been,
To trust in God, and let the Captain starve.⁴

¹ "Edwin Arlington Robinson", Poetry and Poets, (N. Y. Houghton Mifflin Co., 1930, p. 217.

² Op. cit., pp. 23, 55.

³ "Children of the Night", Quoted by Amy Lowell, Tendencies in Modern American Poetry, p. 27.

⁴ Collected Poems, p. 114.

Robinson does not often use sharp, prickling, satire; but as a weapon against hypocrisy his satire usually becomes exceedingly cutting. Hypocrisy is one of the sins Robinson cannot endure in man or woman. One is positive that Robinson makes Captain Craig speak for the author when he draws the portrait of the self-seeking, insincere silly women, spoiled by too much money, who

"Giggles and eats and reads and goes to church,
 Makes pretty little penitential prayers,
 And has an eighteen-carat crucifix
 Wrapped up in chamois-skin. She gives enough,
 You say; but what is giving like hers worth?
 "What is a gift without the soul to guide it?
 "Poor dears, and they have cancers?--Oh!" she says;
 And away she works at that new altar-cloth
 For the Reverend Hieronymus Mackintosh--"¹

Such Christianity is only a mockery to Robinson. Again in "Zola" he speaks of "our shamed indifference" known as "Christian faith."² Christianity falls short of its real purpose, for mankind is not taking advantage of the price Christ paid for him. Humanity has always made Christianity a show. After nineteen hundred years of opportunity mankind will not accept Christ and let his spirit "purge the world." Humanity lacks the courage to be strong enough to accept him:

Friendless and faint, with martyred steps and slow,
 Faint for the flesh, but for the spirit free,
 Stung by the mob that came to see the show,
 The Master toiled along to Calvary;
 We gibed him, as he went, with houndish glee,
 Till his dimmed eyes for us did overflow;

¹ "Captain Craig", Collected Poems, p. 127.

² "Zola", Collected Poems, p. 85.

We cursed his vengeless hands thrice wretchedly,--
And this was nineteen hundred years ago.

But after nineteen hundred years the shame
Still clings, and we have not made good the loss
That outraged faith has entered in his name.
Ah, when shall come love's courage to be strong!
Tell me, O Lord--tell me, O Lord, how long
Are we to keep Christ writhing on the cross! ¹

He finds no fault with the Christian faith, but with the people who profess it. Robinson takes for granted that accepting Christ and following his examples are sufficient without the formal doctrine of any religious order. He is a profound believer in sincerity in religious activities and advocates through his poetry the use of common sense in religious practice.

¹ "Calvary", Collected Poems, p. 83.

Chapter VII

Death and Life Beyond

Death to Robinson is a horrible experience, which is "master" of the "strength of youth" and the "fluttered heart of age." In the battle between life and death life loses,

And the black master Death is over all
To chill with his approach,
To level with his touch,
The reigning strength of youth,
The fluttered heart of age.¹

Rarely does Robinson speculate on the state of man after death. He is almost solely interested, according to his friend Mr. Ledoux, in the result of character in this world and leaves to others to speculate as to what is beyond. Robinson is not interested in investigating beyond the human sphere of understanding.² He feels that man should not be disturbed about that which is beyond his comprehension.

Why trouble him now who sees and hears
No more than what his innocence requires...³

Occasionally Robinson reflects from his own point of view on death and the life beyond. He assumes that there is life beyond death, and that the soul, "the free life", advances to a better place without memory of its past life.⁴

Where does a dead man go?--The dead man dies;
But the free life that would no longer feed
On fagots of outburned and shattered flesh
Wakes to a thrilled invisible advance,

¹ "The Chorus of Old Men in 'Aegeus'", Collected Poems, p. 98.

² "Psychologist of New England," Saturday Review of Literature, p. 4.

³ "The Man Against the Sky," Collected Poems, p. 61.

Unchained (or fettered else) of memory;
 And when the dead man goes it seems to me
 'T were better for us all to do away
 With weeping, and be glad that he is gone.¹

John Brown, one of Robinson's creations, is lying near
 death when he tells his wife

"...death is what is coming, and then life.

 And you, my dear, are not to mourn for me,
 ...more than a soul should mourn
 In paradise, done with evil and earth."²

In life beyond death the soul will be void of memory,
 and its dead friends will be without means of identification.
 In Robinson's opinion there will be no recognition of dead
 friends in paradise. "I have not," he says,

...your ingenious recreance to think
 We cherish, in the life that is to come,
 The scattered features of dead friends again.³

When death comes the soul leaves

...the rough
 And reptile skins of us whereon we set
 The stigma of scared years...⁴

Only the soul of man will exist in life beyond death; he will
 leave behind all of his physical body and become all soul, to
 which God will reveal all mysteries:

When we shall hear no more the cradle-songs
 Of ages--when the timeless hymns of Love
 Defeat them and outsound them--we shall know

¹ "Octaves", Collected Poems, p. 103.

² "John Brown", Collected Poems, p. 488.

³ "Two Sonnets", Collected Poems, p. 89.

⁴ Ibid.

The rapture of that release which all
 Light science comprehends; and we shall read,
 With unoppressed and unoffended eyes,
 That record of All-Soul whereon God writes
 In everlasting runes the truth of Him. 1

Common sense and reason are the background for Robinson's
 faith in eternal life. He accepts this fact because all nature
 reveals it to him:

Oh, brother men, if you have eyes at all,
 Look at a branch, a bird, a child, a rose,
 Or anything God ever made that grows,--
 Nor let the smallest vision of it slip,
 Till you may read, as on Belshazzar's wall,
 The glory of eternal partnership. 2

Without life after death Robinson can see no purpose in man's
 life on earth:

And if there be no other life,
 And if there be no other chance
 To weigh their sorrows and their strife
 Than in the scales of circumstance,

'T were better, ere the sun went down
 Upon the first day we embark,
 In life's imbittered sea to drown,
 Than sail forever in the dark. 3

If after all that we have lived and thought,
 All comes to Nought,--
 If there be nothing after now,
 And we be nothing anyhow,
 And we know that,--why live? 4

God did not intend such waste, Robinson is sure:

It is impossible to believe that it is all for nothing--
 such waste would be inconceivable... 5

1 "Octaves", Collected Poems, p. 102.

2 "Sonnet", Collected Poems, p. 96.

3 "Children of the Night", Quoted by Amy Lowell, Tendencies in Modern American Poetry, p. 27.

4 "The Man Against the Sky", Collected Poems, p. 68.

5 Quoted by Nancy Evans, Op. Cit., LXXV, p. 680.

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