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W. R. Robinson

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E. A. ROBINSON'S YANKEE CONSCIENCE

By W. R. ROBINSON

The best works of art are the expression of man's struggle to free himself from this condition, but the effect of our art is merely to make this low state comfortable and that higher state to be forgotten.

Henry David Thoreau

Obvious as it may be, the fact that Edwin Arlington Robinson, born and reared in Maine, was a New Englander must be heavily underscored. For not only did New England constitute the primordial physical environment for his human life and poetic career, but it also impressed itself upon his being, as in the normal course of events it naturally would, as an ineluctable spiritual presence and moral force. He acknowledged the degree to which his native region occupied his imagination in "New England," a sonnet, first published in *The Outlook* in 1923 and collected in *Dionysus in Doubt* (1925), explicitly devoted to appraising it:

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

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

The poem opens by noting that the region, continuously swept by frigid winds, inhospitably endures man, and he survives against its merciless change only because, accommodating himself to its hostile reality, he learns "to walk on frozen toes." The warmth available to him in this alien habitat, the poem further implies, originates from a man-made fire in a man-made edifice. Yet the social order erected by intelligence

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upon the freezing land, rivaling it in coldness, treats him as an unwelcome intruder, too. New England's Conscience interjects itself between the inspiring heat source and the humane powers, and from there zealously protects Yankee wits from soilure by Passion, banishes Love as a cross of compassion it refuses to bear, and kills Joy with Care. Contrary to its nature and name (which etymologically means "knowledge in association with"), it is obsessed with dividing and dominating, and takes its "cheer" accordingly from the sadism, suppression, and negation with which it forces the impulses toward freedom and unity "to shiver in the corner." It so thoroughly dominates the speaker of the poem, in fact, that the utterance he manages to make amounts to little more, at least on the surface, than a defensive reaction to its aggressiveness. Exerting enough pressure upon him to threaten his survival, it harasses him, as the frigid land does the people, into resorting to his intelligence to ward off New England's annihilating cold. But while it prods him into intellectual awakening, it also keeps his attention absorbed in it, so that not only does it compel him to write but also to write about the region. His life, quite evidently, arises from and is brought to an existential crisis in this confrontation.

New England decidedly figures as more than an accidental subject in this sonnet. Here—and in general for Robinson's imagination, it is safe to say—the very life of his art depends upon the kind of relationship his imagination establishes with its environment, that is, New England's spiritual presence and moral force. And, indeed, "New England" seems to have disposed of that matter rather nicely: it gives all the appearances of flatly repudiating the region for its moral callousness while itself issuing from a liberated spirit dissociated totally from it. Certainly Conscience, despite its authoritative zeal and its considerable success in intimidating the warm feelings, fails to squelch completely the vital urges: the poem, written in protest of its inhumanity, does defy its moral tyranny in castigating New England as a place and a community.

The gestures it makes of a free spirit declaring its untrammelled independence and about to strike out on its own belies, however, the profounder moral forces at work in the poem. For despite the one-sidedness of the assertion its speaker makes, the poem renders the continuation of a moral quarrel in which New England functions as the speaker's antagonist. Having

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"told," New England is being told back. This quarrel definitely takes precedence over the sensory and sensual, even though the poem's bias thematically favors the hedonistic pleasures of the unspoiled, uninhibited creature. Armoring itself in New England qualities, the poem, in effect, walks on frozen toes—its form, the highly stylized sonnet, is rational and conventional; its argument, witty, or intellectually assertive; its diction, abstract, as is its major figure of speech, personification; and its manner, laconic. Its poetic "cheer," not unlike Conscience's cheer, comes from coldly torturing words with indirectness, compression, and irony. And this pleasure has crowded out those of the passion, love, and joy it thematically affirms. Judging by appearances, by the poem's explicit features, it would be more accurate to say that instead of repudiating New England the poem is New England, for it so adopts external circumstances that in outer characteristics the poem and region are indistinguishable.

But "New England" is anything but chauvinistic. In it a stubborn New Englander perversely turns upon his native ground the very qualities it prides itself upon, and it is this friction between the two that readily stands out as the salient fact in the imagination's relationship to its environment. Their superficial similarity does not cancel out that friction but rather, through the contradiction it introduces, hints of complex ironies. Apparently forced into adopting its characteristics in self-defense, the imagination has been trapped by the environment into internalizing its discriminations. The speaker keeps a tight intellectual lid upon the child's open innocence and eager spontaneity; the cat's undomesticable and solitary way; the sun, heat, feast, and drink of the pagan vision; as well as passion, love, and joy—all essential virtues of the imagination. No "lyric yeast of love" or anything else leavens the poem. Rather, an intransigent moral order superimposes itself upon the interior life of the imagination as well as the person, producing a consciousness intellectually and morally self-repressive. The frigid wind blowing down across New England and New England's divisive Conscience have opened a deep schism within the human being as well as between the individual and society.

As a result wit wars with wonder, conscience and intellect with the imagination—or, more accurately, the wits and the conscience are in the turmoil of a civil insurrection, one side

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within each exploiting its resources to defend propriety, the other enjoyment. They contend for possession of wonder, which one would force to "knit" dutifully and provide a practical garment for protection against the cold and the other would free in order that the spirit might rejoice in its natural warmth. But the immediate effect of this war within consciousness is that the one extreme of coldness badgers wonder into dreaming up its antithesis, an irrelevant, impotent fantasy of hot pagan indulgence. In this way New England has profoundly and complexly ingrained itself in the speaker's being and the poem. Instilled with its excesses and deficiencies, both are as cold as New England's Conscience, and both thereby extend its moral dualism, no matter how grudgingly. As a consequence, his argument, ultimately, is as much with himself as with New England, and, as culpable as it is, he stands, ironically, as condemned as the environment by his own conscience.

The poem's external features are considerably more than a skin-deep disguise to keep out of harm's way. In fact, its intellectualism so pervades it that "New England" cannot elude classification as a poem of the intellect. An even more obvious sign that its external qualities and implied quarrel that this is the case is the simple fact that the speaker makes assertions: his main act, what mainly happens in the poem, is that he uses language to describe a state of affairs. And in doing that he is engaged in baring the truth, the intellect's preeminent value. Since his crucial subject is Conscience, all his assertions and implied judgments "tell it like it morally is"; the poem, in other words, renders the imagination's moral predicament. As is inevitable from the point of view of the dichotomizing intellect, the moral phenomenon, exemplified in the poem by the incompatibility of wit and wonder, appears to consist of two incompatible worlds. The depth to which Robinson plumbed the moral truth in this direction is perhaps best attested to by Henri Bergson in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, published in 1936, one year after Robinson's death, so if anything a conceptual extension of rather than an influence upon his poetry. (John Dewey's *Human Nature and Conduct*, 1922, also could serve in this respect.) In Bergson's theoretical formulations, the two incompatible moral worlds are designated "pressure" and "aspiration." Eternally irreconcilable, the first exerts itself multifariously, as Bergson defines it, in support of

impersonal obligation, duty, habit, intellect, the abstract, law, order, restraint, repose, and a closed system; the second radiantly moves through vision, emotion, attraction, will, the concrete, creativity, action, joy, liberation, and possibility of an open universe.

But the complexity of the antagonists introduces a minimally novel moral truth compared to the insight recorded in "New England," and confirmed by Bergson, that both alternatives are groundless or rationally indefensible. Neither has a determinable priority or is backed up by infallible authority—in part because, as the philosophers were pointing out with their notion of the naturalistic fallacy, what is cannot provide a reason for what ought to be, and in part, and more devastatingly, because it is evident that there is not any such thing as "reality," a rock bottom to the world that could be used to measure the good even if the preceding were not true. Moral phenomena are unsponsored; their careers are a play of powers, precepts and principles being instruments within the struggle for supremacy. Values exist autonomously in a world generated by their own energy. Accordingly, in "New England" wit and wonder both derive their energy from the man-made fire, and the fire favors neither. When it breaks and divides, it sets in motion a moral drama in which the imagination and the intellect or society are on their own. And this absence of justification for its self-assertion largely explains the imagination's diffidence in the poem.

Yet the imagination does assert itself. Whereas Conscience with its selfish exclusiveness does its best to obstruct innovative moral action, still the imagination, intuiting its good, acts upon an instinct for self-preservation, so that although Janus-like the speaker faces in two moral directions simultaneously, he is not impaled in immobility upon the proverbial horns of his dilemma. The ironic and unsponsored condition, deep as it cuts, does not constitute the complete moral truth in the imagination's existential morality. There remains to be taken into account the fact that the imagination speaks out in this poem of the intellect.

Beneath the overt dualism of "New England" lies perforce, as a precondition of the poem's existence, a still more complex bond between the imagination and its environment than occurs on the intellectual plane. The coldness of the locale infused

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itself into the community erected upon it and the community in turn instilled that coldness, in the form of intellectual and moral aloofness, in the speaker, who begot a cold poem. In effect, a generative act, or a series of generative acts, has transpired during which, overall, the land has been transmuted into a poem, with the essential qualities of the former being handed down generation by generation to the latter. The land, New England, the speaker, and the poem are all blood kin, organically linked in a descending chain of increasing concreteness. Thus their primordial family trait, even beyond their coldness, resides in their creativeness, most notably present in the poem, since the relation between New England and the speaker occupies its foreground, in what transpires between the environment and the imagination. There Conscience reproduced itself in a conscience. In spite of itself, its aspiration prevailed over its pressure. The speaker and the poem are replicas of New England, therefore; begotten by and of it, they inherit and bear its Conscience and so perpetuate its character and urges.

Working beneath and around the surface friction, the imagination discovered and established a living bond with the world from which it emerged. It lives, as do the poem and Robinson's art, only if this vital connection prevails over the disjunctive force because, without a heaven or hereafter, decidedly absent from the poem, as a source or alternative, everything it has, including its creative power, comes from the "local" environment. It lives in so far as the world lives within it and it assumes a living responsibility to the world. The imagination and the environment survive as mutually interdependent functions of one another as long as their life line is intact. Of necessity, the speaker is involved in New England's destiny and it moves toward fuller realization through him; it inhabits him as he inhabits it, or his intellect participates in the life of his imagination as his imagination functions by means of it. The poem and its environment, as a consequence, are not only outwardly indistinguishable but inwardly, too: it is an incarnation of New England's spirit.

The most immediate concrete result of the generative event, then, is that an intently moral environment propagated itself in an imagination that sensed, as Thoreau did, that "Our whole life is startlingly moral." That is what it basically meant for

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Robinson to be a New Englander. But at the same time that also entailed his sensing that what New England said contradicted what it did. In its pronouncements it insisted upon austerity, repression, and conformity, and exerted its pressure to confine aspiration in set molds, yet in performing the creative act itself it set the example of innovation. Thus while Robinson's imagination abstractly understood itself to be duty bound, a strong upsurge of aspiration stirred within it.

Now the consequence of this contradiction, this tug of values, was not debilitation but liberation, not despair but possibility. It made the imagination a free moral agent, doomed to be moral but not predestined to make any given moral choice. The condition of its freedom is acknowledged in "New England" by the absence of time, history, or the past. The poem exists in the eternal present tense, the Now. The environment's authority depends solely upon its power to enforce its will, not upon any ancestral gods or traditional taboos. Nor is the imagination self-righteous. For both, historical guilt has been replaced by existential guilt, and both the environment and the imagination suffer from a deficiency of being. But the imagination suffers less than existential deficiency than the environment, since it, or the speaker, is a particularized creative agent. A mirror image of the environment, nevertheless he is different from it. The generative chain progressed from the unconscious land through the abstractly conscious society to the creatively conscious specific human being and finally to the poem. Endowed with the most highly individuated consciousness, the speaker stands apart as a distillation and enhancement of the environment. His special kind of consciousness allows him transcendent awareness of his environment and himself, and his free will and imagination make it possible for him to do something about the deficiencies he perceives in both. Once he becomes autonomous, the umbilical cord cut, he assumes the burden of employing his freedom to go forward, after the example of the environment in generating him, into greater life.

It follows as a correlative from the demise of historical guilt that only the future matters, but not in the sense of a terminal state to be reached eventually. The imagination is not going anywhere in time; it aims at refinement, not historical progress. Its good, it instinctively knows, lies in the intensification of life, so it works to manifest the spirit of life through further distil-

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lation and enhancement of it by means of aesthetic form, the most vividly individuated mode of existence. For this purpose its self-assertion constitutes an "inside narrative" focused appropriately upon its living truth and the intellect functions in an ancillary role to bring the creative chain to a culmination in consciousness objectified. (This accent in "New England" on knowing itself, or self-consciousness, gives way in different kinds of poems, it has to be kept in mind, to accent upon the creative freedom for which it is a preparation.)

Freedom for the imagination means having to choose. That is its inescapable existential moral burden. But coupled with the fact that neither the imagination nor the environment were sponsored by an authority on high and that the two dynamically contend for dominance, it meant also that on any given occasion Robinson had to choose one over the other. (And the wavering of his imagination in moral point of view and emphasis from poem to poem throughout his career reflects this plight.) Aware that such was his moral predicament, Henri Bergson, again conceptually articulating Robinson's poetic insights, made this choice:

we must search below the social accretions, get down to Life, of which human societies, as indeed the human species altogether, are but manifestations. But this is not going far enough; we must delve deeper still if we want to understand, not only how society "constrains" individuals, but again how the individual can set up as a judge and wrest from it a moral transformation.

Although aspiration shivers in the corner in "New England" rather than being openly acted upon, nevertheless the speaker makes Bergson's choice. Wit clearly holds dominion over wonder and casts the poem in the reflective mode, yet the poem's heart belongs to passion, love, and joy, even if the imagination can manage no more overtly than to state their plight and must affirm its loyalty ironically.

A poet committed to the values of the imagination, Robinson heeded what New England did above what it said. His art is a choice as well as a record of his choosing and choices, and to have chosen poetry was to prefer the active and constructive, the assertive and affirmative moral alternative. In "New England," by virtue of its being a poem, the liberating and unitive powers, despite appearances to the contrary, ultimately prevail

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over the divisive and diminishing ones. The poem, like the land, New England, and the speaker, in line with their generative acts, which opt for the concrete and individual, freedom and life within the world, values the created and creative. Contingency is acknowledged tacitly as a condition of these values, and in that way in addition to tracing its emergence from its ground, its evolution from the abstract into its particularized form, it acclaims a finite art and finite man in a creative universe over two decades before Jean-Paul Sartre announced a program dedicated to that in 1947.

Life's most startling moment for his imagination occurred, as a consequence, when wonder, no matter how unobtrusively, assumed dominance over wit. This is the monment George Bernard Shaw singles out as "turning a child into a man" when he has Tanner, in *Man and Superman*, reject the first experience of erotic love, the Romantic's wellspring, as the origin of the imagination's life with the argument:

No: the change that came to me was the birth in me of moral passion; and I declare that according to my experience moral passion is the only real passion [This] mightiest of the passions dignified all the other passions, gave them conscience and meaning, found them a mob of appetites and organized them into an army of purposes and principles. My soul was born of that passion You have no imagination, Ann The moral passion has taken my destructiveness in hand and directed it to moral ends. I have become a reformer, and, like all reformers, an iconoclast.

Like Tanner, Robinson assumed his New England birthright, his imagination came of age as a self-reliant agent, when it knew itself charged to be moral in this way. When morality became a passion for him in Shaw's sense, not righteousness or condemnation, not even the knowledge and dissemination of moral principles, but being and above all doing good were his paramount concern.

Henry David Thoreau, the archetypal New Englander, bore this moral passion, of course, long before Robinson did, and in *Walden* he carried out and defined in doing so the task the New England tradition prescribed for both himself and Robinson. The morally impassioned man, he saw, is a Columbus of "continents and seas in the moral world." Calling him to adventure, the moral life commands exploration into moral possibility, not obedience to already entrenched codes. The truly

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moral conscience, correspondingly, values above all else novelty, variously imaged by Thoreau as the new day dawning, spring, life resurrected, and the elated spirit. Such a conscience, "in an effort to throw off sleep," like Tanner, thrusts its reforming and iconoclastic fervor vigorously forward to uproot moral lethargy wherever it may be found. It knows that "while wholly involved in nature," for instance, that nature "must be overcome"; and that the soul must "transcend and redeem" itself, climbing constantly up what Emerson called the spiral of forms. This aspiration arises, inexplicably, when emerging from its source, consciousness perceives the "higher laws," and then alienated from its previous sufficiency, it simultaneously beholds in disgust man's and the world's imperfections. At that moment of moral awakening, conscience urgently enlists in a moral revolution dedicated to making man and the world over for the better. New England primed Robinson's imagination to discover that neither of them were good enough as they are, and thereby bound it, as it did Thoreau's, to quarrel with the region and itself in a relentless, continuous moral crusade. It demanded that his imagination by means of radical, uncompromising moral questioning come alive and stay alive. Which is precisely what New England's Conscience cannot do: rocking, moving without advancing, it administers a moribund or dead morality with the intent of obstructing the living conscience's passion for moral exploration.

Contrary to its conscious intentions, New England, acting compulsively to save itself from the self-inflicted death toward which Conscience inherently tends, blindly but wisely elected an individuated consciousness to insure the success of its aspiration in overcoming its wit's fearful resistance to regeneration. And to act successfully upon its choice of life, to rejuvenate while keeping intact the region's moral life, Robinson's imagination, in turn, was confronted with the problem of tapping the vital matrix and imitating while enhancing life's miraculous feat of continuously regenerating itself. His work is hypocrisy and a sham if, say, Thoreau had exhausted the possibilities of moral exploration within New England's moral world or Robinson was simply incapable of extending its moral frontier.

Neither Thoreau nor any other New England literary ancestor had fulfilled the region's moral aspiration, however, and

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Robinson was aware that they had not, as numerous comments in his letters, and those on Thoreau especially, reveal. Both he and Thoreau shared a common foe in the "Puritan Ethic," which enthroned money, respectability, worldly success in general—the outer signs of virtue—as man's chief good, and they were both devoted to demolishing that illusion and supplanting it with realistic living values. But otherwise their moral assignments differed rather markedly, so that though a powerful energy source to draw upon, Thoreau's achievement no longer sufficed. His escape from civilization, Robinson noticed quickly, aggravated the tendency of the Puritan Ethic to drive people apart and divorce them from their own humanity. That was the inescapable consequence of his sacrificing human relations to the transcendental consummation he ardently sought. Thoreau was committed, like Robinson, to bringing the mind into a creative conjunction with the vital, and he managed to do that to a degree by assigning the imagination hegemony over the intellect ("the imagination, give it the least license," he wrote, "dives deeper and soars higher than Nature goes"), reverencing the wild as well as the spiritual in himself, preferring words with dirt clinging to their roots, and scrutinizing the concrete, be it Walden Pond, a thawing railroad embankment, or a decomposing carcass of a horse, with scientific diligence. The commitment is there, to be sure, but the aspiration for rarified intellectual values has priority over it. His strongest urge compels him to polarize moral alternatives into extremes, blatantly evident in his isolating himself in a natural setting to carry out his moral adventuring.

Moreover, his moral truth, as qualified by his style, is characterized by an uncompromising fervor, and he leaps over links in the generative chain—man's social and sexual being—to attain the saintly lucidity and purity his spirit desired. Even though he knew that relations were the heart of the matter ("Children," he said, "who play life, discern its true laws and relations," and "not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations"), he so simplified moral relations that the categorical dominance he assigns to cosmic enlightenment limits him to illuminating the precondition of the mind necessary for facing directly and embracing fully the complex moral fact,

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which encompasses all man's relations and especially those of man with man and to himself.

For Robinson the cosmic alternative, at least after his early poems, had lost its allure. Human existence was more complicated than such a clear-cut choice allowed for, he sensed, probably because Realism and science had installed objectivity as the arbiter of all knowledge, including the moral, and thereby made all intellectual and moral certitude obsolete. His moral adventuring had to proceed, his imagination acknowledges in "New England," without recourse to moral absolutes; it is trapped in society and beyond that in relativity—that is, in relationships. Relations are its "reality" and it must make do with them.

This predicament is conveniently described by Irving Babbitt, the academic defender of rational values for Robinson's generation, in his essay "Genius and Taste." He blames the decline in reason's prerogatives as a moral authority, and therefore of moral absolutes, upon Romanticism's permissiveness, which, he argues, had unleashed a gathering moral disintegration that could be checked only with a renewed dedication to "restraint" or "a proportioned and disciplined view of life" attainable through a return to "standards" or a "supersensuous truth" recognized as having "an outer authority" with "veto power" for imposing "control upon impulse," "order upon energy." Reason loses its credentials as a moral authority because "the illusions of a higher reality" are "not given to man to seize directly"; actually a composite of "reality" and "illusion," the supersensuous truth of standards is the province of the imagination, which "governs the world." Thus the man of reason admits frankly that responsibility for determining the good falls not upon reason but "the ethical and generalizing imagination." He admits that in his moral quandary he depends upon the artist to keep him spiritually afloat and so unashamedly reiterates Emerson's call for the poet, the man of imagination, to illuminate man's way in the new world.

Objectivity and its concomitant relativity, the ontological conditions of "New England," freed Robinson's imagination from the categorical dominance of reason but in doing that set it loose on an uncharted moral frontier. And without what Babbitt called "traditional moorings," the classical confidence of intellect, his imagination had to trust itself. Nothing was

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predetermined for it except that it be moral or relate; otherwise its life was in its own hands, its relations were its own doings. And since relating—synthesizing it has been more commonly called—is what the imagination by nature does, its solo explorations in the moral world perforce articulate the morality of the imagination.

Which "New England" does, for, however covertly, its subject is itself and it is a self-definition for both the poem and the imagination that begot it. Through articulating itself, Robinson's imagination posits the laws of the imagination as the laws of the universe, a generalization that W. B. Yeats insisted upon also in "The Symbolism of Poetry." In that way it supplies the "standards" Babbitt anxiously appealed for to head off what Robinson himself once referred to as "the dark and awful chaos of the night," but those new standards are the "absolutes" of relations, of life, not of reason. All his imagination could take for granted in its crusade, as imaged in "New England," is the fire that burns within it, and in the end all that it could know was that it was involved inextricably in the living process. To be a New Englander was to be scarred by its moral fire, and once burned by it, he was Fate's lieutenant, paradoxically doomed to be free and in his freedom to bear the potency and purposes of his region onward. Since poetry was his calling, his moral adventuring, his getting down to life and wresting from society a moral transformation, his contributing to the greater freedom of the individual in the world, his more fully extending living relationships and bringing to further realization the morality of life, had to be done in poems. His burden was to be a good poet and write a good poetry.

Robinson's life and letters, suffused with moral if not moralistic concern, leave no doubt of the depth and intensity of his moral passion. That passion equally pervades his poetry, where it erupts in manifold ways—for example, didactically in poems such as "Zola," "Cassandra," and "Dionysus in Doubt," which rail at the world's evils; ironically in poems such as "John Evereldown" and "Miniver Cheevy," in which upstart passions are derided, the imagination, in effect, chastizing its own boisterousness; and implicitly in such poems as "The Night Before," "Isaac and Archibald," "The Book of Annandale," and "Nicodemus," to mention only the shorter poems. This diversity, resulting from an initial ambivalence toward the relative

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superiority of the values of Thought—a frequent word, capitalized, in his early poetry—over those of Life, reflects the tortuous path he negotiated in getting down to life. Though he began in moral uncertainty about what was involved in a commitment to life, that commitment is unquestionable, since abundant evidence of it is to be found in the arrangement of the poems in his first two volumes of poetry in a progression from poems of Thought to poems of Life or poems thematically assertive of life in such phrases as “touch to life,” “to know enough to be alive,” “life is a game that must be played,” and “to get to where life begins”; and in his evolution from poems about solitary figures or of solitary statements in the first two volumes to “marriage” poems, poems treating complex interpersonal relations, in *Captain Craig*.

Robinson's commitment to life provides the prevailing drive or aspiration of his imagination from the beginning of his career but traditional attitudes he inherited initially blocked his acting upon it to create poems of life. To clarify and realize its commitment, his imagination had to move beyond “poems of the mind”—didactic poems, vehicles by which a knowledgeable consciousness self-righteously lectures wrongdoers and aggravates the divorce of thought from life, and also the ironic character study, where the discordance between thought and life is even more pronounced than in the didactic poems. No creative transaction occurs explicitly within either of them or even underlines the ironic type, the most fully and exclusively intellectual, and so sterile from the vitalistic point of view, in Robinson's poetry. Clarity comes to it, and a resolution to the animosity between thought and life, not in poems like “New England,” which are limited to telling the moral truth and implying the unitive and creative desideratum, but in the poems of life—of being or structure if a metaphysical or aesthetic identification should be preferred—that increase in number as Robinson's career progresses until decisively dominant and that are his most distinctive and significant poetic achievement. In them, his imagination, eluding Conscience and Care and positioning itself next to the fire, its inspiring source, does its most daring moral adventuring. In them the “downward flash of something new and fierce, / That ever strives to clear, but never clears / The dimness of a charmed antiquity” in “Boston,” as in “New England,” wins its way into the open and his imagination suc-

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ceeds in rejuvenating while keeping intact New England's moral life, indeed, in pushing its moral frontier beyond where any of his ancestors or contemporaries had gotten to and to a point as yet unsurpassed.

"The House on the Hill"



DONN BYRNE