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JUXTAPOSITION AS STRUCTURE
IN "THE MAN AGAINST THE SKY"

By JOHN NEWELL SANBORN

The recent trend in criticism about the much discussed poem, "The Man Against the Sky" by Edwin Arlington Robinson, has been structural. It may be helpful to approach the poem from the point of view of an unusual but not unprecedented structural method. Robinson's interest in Medieval and Renaissance literature apparently developed his style and structure in more ways than in his use of Arthurian material and theme: his form in this poem can be shown to reflect an ancient and noble literary ancestry. Only recently, however, has the possibility of Robinson's using a non-discursive compositional method been noted.

Puzzled by Robinson's declaration that "The Man Against the Sky" is an affirmative poem¹ Yvor Winters doubts the actual merits of the work: "The crux of the poem is thus offered vaguely and in a few lines; and the greater part of the concluding section is devoted to describing the desolation which we would experience without this knowledge. Philosophically, the poem is unimpressive; stylistically it is all quite . . . weak . . . and structurally, it seems to defeat its purpose — for while it purports to be an expression of faith, it is devoted in all save [a] few lines . . . to the expression of despair."²

In two recent views of Robinson's work, Louis Coxe and James G. Hepburn demonstrate their adherence to Aristotle's dictum of the poetic necessity of treating only *one* theme. Thus, when conflicting or alternative ideas are perceived by a critic following Aristotle, he falls into an either-or trap, as he feels compelled to determine which development the poet meant as theme and which as digression. Louis Coxe notes that most reviewers have read "The Man Against the Sky" as a "philosophical statement which simply does not sort well with its form and which comes to no reasonable conclusion."³ Hepburn notes,

1 James Hepburn, "Edwin Arlington Robinson's System of Opposites," *PMLA*, LXXX (June 1965), 273.

2 Yvor Winters, "Religious and Social Ideas in the Didactic Work of E. A. Robinson," *Arizona Quarterly*, I (Spring 1945), 74-75.

3 Louis O. Coxe, *Edwin Arlington Robinson, the Life of Poetry* (New York, 1969), 99.

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"R. P. Adams provides the alternative way out of the dilemma: Robinson should have abandoned despair rather than philosophy. As Adams describes his situation, Robinson was susceptible to the chill that late nineteenth-century science laid upon most thinking people, described for them a universe that was mindless, aimless, dead."⁴ The implication made by Adams as Hepburn reads him is that in the final analysis, Robinson chose despair *rather than* philosophy.

The most helpful view of a possible different compositional form being used by Robinson is by David Hirsch, who attempts to resolve the philosophical and aesthetic controversy surrounding the poem by demanding a non-discursive reading of the poem: "I hope it will become apparent as this paper develops that the so-called split in the poem, which occurs when the 'man' disappears and the poet embarks on a series of questions which he asks seemingly in his own person, is actually a transition from the attempt to recreate an emotional experience of high intensity on the one hand to the attempt to give that experience meaning on the other."⁵ An even more coherent reading of the poem can be gained by supposing that Robinson was writing from a deep sense of the tradition that encompassed a system of opposites or alternatives as the structure of a poem. A poetic structure which juxtaposes two dissimilar ideas forcing a new understanding of relationship has an impressive ancestry including Chaucer and Ovid.

Historically, the Aristotelian structure comprised of a clear beginning, middle, and end and concerning itself with one central theme has been undoubtedly predominant and continues to dominate modern literary criticism. Nevertheless, many other compositional forms have been open to poets. The medieval penchant for a long poem and then a short palinode or retraction is well known. Ovid used this in his *Art of Love*, Chaucer in his *Troilus and Criseyde*. In a different way, by appearing to balance two separate poems, Blake achieved the same effect in his *Songs of Innocence and Experience* as did Milton in "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso." Because criticism has only

⁴ Hepburn, 273-274.

⁵ David H. Hirsch, "The Man Against the Sky and the Problem of Faith," *Edwin Arlington Robinson: Centenary Essays*, ed. Ellsworth Barnard (Athens, Georgia, 1969), 31.

recently been able to break the habit of reading *all* structure as following the beginning, middle, and end rule of Aristotle, a reminder of the method of Ovid, Chaucer, Milton and Blake may serve to throw new light on Robinson's structural method.

In Ovid's "system" of love there were three parts: Amours, the Art of Love, and the Cure for Love. The last of these treatises on love, in which he advises would-be lovers to avoid love at all costs, in effect stands in opposition to his first two, where Ovid expresses his view that initially only love matters, after which he states that the refinement is crucial. Structurally this third part may be considered a retraction or palinode. Other tripartite works on the subject of love similar in structure and sense are *The Ring of the Dove* by Ibim Hazam and *The Art of Courtly Love* by Andreas Capellanus. The rejection of love in the third section is indeed a counter theme that creates a tension with what went before rather than the final logical and most important argument of the author.

Robinson's structure in "The Man Against the Sky" strikes me as one of carefully developed contrast on the subject of the meaning of life, rather than the subject of love. In his juxtaposition of the two great philosophies of faith and reason, he allows the reader to derive the meaning of the poem not by a single or straightforward statement but rather by the tension and resultant understanding between the two opposing points of view. Furthermore, another interesting thing happens when one reads a juxtaposed structure. When Ovid offers his retraction, he tells the reader the folly of falling in love. He tells us it is better to never fall in love at all. Our minds resist by almost arguing aloud, "No, no! Other things are not as important as love!" Robinson's last and scientifically stated case offers the reader a similar retraction. He appears to end by asking the question "Why live?" Our minds scream, because of what has gone before in the poem, "No, no! There is a reason to live — and even to bring children into this world!"

Chaucer's use of juxtaposition as a structural base has received much critical attention of late by Charles Muscatine, Dale Underwood, and Robert Jordan. The envoi of *Troilus and Criseyde* and the retraction of the *Canterbury Tales*, while both are very short, force a reader to review the much longer first parts from a far different point of view. Of special interest

in *Troilus and Criseyde* is the necessity of love on earth with its refining and elevating potential framed within a pagan society. After Troilus is deceived and dead, however, the envoi shows him in a Christian heaven inveighing against the world of the flesh, or *cupiditas*. Muscatine discusses the ending of the *Troilus* in terms very close to the ones used by critics of "The Man Against the Sky" who have seen Robinson attempting to offer a wide variety of alternatives to man: "The conclusion of the *Troilus* is medieval and conservative, but coming at the end of this poem it has an impressive validity. It is neither the reactionary 'conclusioun' of a philosophic recluse nor the conventionally pious retraction of a frightened heretic The Narrator's stance is such that the story is literally experienced in the telling and the poem's texture is dense with the interlacing of a wide range of alternative values, tested in themselves and by each other."⁶ It is this last point that appears to me to be similar to what may be perceived as Robinson's juxtaposed structure. It is important to note that this juxtaposed structure is used by poets as an attempt to explain or define the truly great abstractions of love and philosophy or ultimately, as Robinson defines his inquiry, of the very meaning of life.

A pertinent structural interpretation of William Blake's "Tyger! Tyger!" by Lionel Trilling concerns a more modern than medieval but nevertheless "different" structure which tends to amplify thought rather than restrict to a single answer. Trilling says of Blake's poem:

When Blake brought together his *Songs of Innocence* and his *Songs of Experience* in a single volume, he called it *Songs of Innocence and Experience, Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*, and the title makes it sufficiently plain that in Blake's view a "state" which is "contrary" to another state is not necessarily a negation of it or antagonistic to it. The contrary of Innocence is not Wickedness or Evil but Experience, which is the condition in which a human being comes to realize and exercise his vital energies and in which he knows both the joy and the sorrow that follow upon their use. Both the state of the Lamb and the state of the Tyger are appropriate to mankind; both are sanctioned by the nature of God.⁷

Blake uses two contrary states of the human soul, each in a separate poem, in an attempt to convey the full scope of what

⁶ Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley, 1969), 165.

⁷ Lionel Trilling, *The Experience of Literature* (New York, 1965), 48.

he considered soul. This is not a great distance from the medieval habit of placing an opposing short palinode, envoi, or retraction at the end of a carefully worked out point of view. Both gain immeasurably by this method of composition where disparate views on vital questions are "tested in themselves and by each other," potentially giving rise to an even more profound and total understanding.

Structurally, the opening part of "The Man Against the Sky" concerns the attempt of one unidentified man, a sort of Everyman or possibly a Jesus, to fathom why he has lived, why he lives on, and what may be expected in the future. An unknown persona asks why this man against the sky has made the journey of life and why he continues to do so. Conventional reasons are given for his living and bringing children into the world. Near the end of what can be considered the first of two parts in the poem the following lines distill the essence of this question and imply that the answer is faith in something or someone suprahuman:

If, robbed of two fond old enormities,
Our being had no onward auguries,
What then were this great love of ours to say
For launching other lives to voyage again
A little farther into time and pain
A little faster in a futile chase
For a kingdom and a power and a Race
That would have still in sight
A manifest end of ashes and eternal night?
(11. 204-212)

The poet appears to ask the philosophical loadstone question which can alone give man hope for immortality.

Is this the music of the toys we shake
So loud, — as if there might be no mistake
Somewhere in our indomitable will?
Are we no greater than the noise we make
Along one blind atomic pilgrimage
Whereon by crass chance billeted we go
Because our brains and bones and cartilage
Will have it so?
If this we say, then let us all be still
About our share in it, and live and die
More quietly thereby. (11. 213-223)

After the "so-called split of the poem," as Hirsch calls it, the

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poet through a series of questions — unanswered and unanswerable — explores a second way of looking at the relation of life to death and the ultimate question — what is the meaning of life? Readers who are used to a poem having one theme which is resolved by the poet understandably would have trouble adjusting to the possibility that the poet is going to make *them* do the work. Consider how the conversational tone of the following lines forces the reader to become involved with the question:

Where was he going, this man against the sky?
You know not, nor do I. (11. 224-226)

The poet emphatically asserts his view that there is no answer to this problem. At least he says “you”, meaning the reader, and “I”, meaning the poet, do not “know” where man is going. The remaining lines after the split point out how the man who “lives and dies,” or the existential philosophy as we would call it in this century, may give meaning to Time. The usual readings of the poem point to the concluding lines as verification of Robinson’s pessimism about the human condition:

If after all that we have lived and thought,
All comes to Nought, —
If there is nothing after Now,
And we be nothing anyhow,
And we know that, — why live?
’Twere sure but weaklings’ vain distress
To suffer dungeons where so many doors
Will open on the cold eternal shores
That look sheer down
To the dark tireless floods of Nothingness
Where all who know may drown. (11. 304-314)

If, however, the poem is read as having two parts, the emphasis of its development is not in the ending but rather in the play between the two parts, or what may be called for lack of a better term, the poetic sythesis. This is indeed a crucial distinction.

Approaching “The Man Against the Sky” as split into two parts causes a curious thing to happen. Instead of a somewhat linear development of hope to despair, a tension is created by opposing how man has hoped for and continues to seek a one good man who is “like a god going home to his last desire”

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with the known facts of actual existence, or pessimistic existentialism, as Robinson says:

What have we seen beyond our sunset fires
That lights again the way by which we came?
Why pay we such a price, and one we give
So clamoringly, for each racked empty day
That leads one more last human hope away
As quiet fiends would lead past our crazed eyes
Our children to an unseen sacrifice? (11. 297-303)

In the examples cited from Ovid, Chaucer, Milton, and Blake, the opposing views are set forth separately. In Robinson's poem the two views, and indeed various aspects of each, are interwoven throughout the poem, though the first part is heavily weighted toward the immortality side of the question and the second part toward the existential more negative approach.

In the first part of the poem Robinson identifies immortality with a type of Christianity by use of Biblical happenings and terms. The particulars are Dura, Babylon, Roman, God, Nahum, Hell, Heaven, and Oblivion; while the general may be seen in the following passages. Lines 31-34 remind one of Christ's journey:

Even he who climbed and vanished may have taken
Down to the perils of a depth not known,
From death defended though by men forsaken,
The bread that every man must eat alone;

The following seems a reference to the Virgin Mary:

Possessed already of the promised land,
Far stretched and fair to see:
A good sight, verily,
And one to make the eyes of her who bore him
Shine glad with hidden tears. (11. 51-55)

Robinson achieved a contrapuntal effect by interlacing various aspects of the mortality and immortality questions throughout the poem in addition to the split in tone which Hirsch has pointed out.⁸ For example, in the lines immediately preceding

⁸ This interlacing of points of view would certainly have been possible to a writer with Robinson's interest and understanding of Medieval Romances. A recent book by Eugène Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance* (Oxford, 1971), makes the crucial point that the interlacing of a number of themes was the predominant mode of composition used by the authors of Romance in the Middle Ages.

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those quoted above which allude to a Mary persona, there is a distinct allusion to the possibility that "He" found his heaven not in a harrowing of hell "Down to the perils of a depth not known,/ From death defended though by men forsaken" and then a rising on high "to the seven fold heat" of the spheres, but rather right here on earth. That is to say, that the "He" or Jesus figure was man *qua* man:

Again, he may have gone down easily,
By comfortable altitudes, and found,
As always, underneath him solid ground
Whereon to be sufficient and to stand
Possessed already of the promised land,
(11. 47-51)

In the second part of "The Man Against the Sky" the effect is existential, not necessarily to be confused with the philosophy of the same name. The majority of words like Race, Science, Death, Nought, Now, and Nothing have possible existential overtones. The emphasis seems to be on the here and now and on history rather than Christian history, science rather than God, in short an emphasis on objective man rather than God-man:

No tonic and ambitious irritant
Of increase or of want
Has made an otherwise insensate waste
Of ages overthrown
A ruthless, veiled, implacable foretaste
Of other ages that are still to be
Depleted and rewarded variously
Because a few, by fate's economy,
Shall seem to move the world the way it goes;
(11. 233-241)

Or tell us why one man in five
Should have a care to stay alive
While in his heart he feels no violence
Laid on his humor and intelligence
When infant Science makes a pleasant face
And waves again that hollow toy, the Race;
(11. 249-254)

Again in this last part of the poem one finds examples of the opposing view occurring in the midst of the development of the apparently negative philosophy. One such occurrence is:

Shall we, because Eternity records
Too vast an answer for the time-born words
We spell, whereof so many are dead that once
In our capricious lexicons
Were so alive and final, hear no more
The Word itself, the living word
That none alive has ever heard (11. 270-276)

Read as composed of two juxtaposed, contrapuntal parts, each a standard vision of man's existence, "The Man Against the Sky" is, as Robinson claimed, a hopeful poem rather than a despairing one despite what critics have contended. The poem structurally consists of two parts which play against one another producing still another argument for the reader by exploring the problems and questions we have about both faith and reason. Robinson confronts each starkly, and in the resultant play of one against the other the reader may — in fact, must — construct his own "chaos stop."

Rosamond Tuve aptly points out in discussing how Milton's "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" derive fuller meaning from the constant play back and forth between each other that "Our sense that certain works will permanently charm is almost always connected with some structural excellence."⁹ To this point, few would argue that "The Man Against the Sky" does not have an abundance of charm.

9 Rosamond Tuve, "Structural Figures of L'Allegro and Il Penseroso," *Milton: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Arthur E. Barker (New York, 1965), 72.

