



March 1976

## Perception, Action, and Life in The Man Against the Sky

R. Meredith Bedell

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

---

### Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 12, no.1, March 1976, p.29-37

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

## *Perception, Action, and Life* in *The Man Against the Sky*

by R. MEREDITH BEDELL

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON, whose first two books were published at his own expense, and who lamented not bad reviews but no reviews, secured his reputation with the publication of *The Man Against the Sky* in 1916. The title poem, which was produced in a conscious attempt to philosophize, has maintained a tenacious though tenuous popularity. In an age in which the question "Why live?" has a certain vogue, the popularity of the poem seems in large measure attributable to its reputed tone of despair. However, the sense of defeat that many readers take from the poem is in direct opposition to the message Robinson claimed he wanted to convey. He consistently maintained that he was in fact an optimist and that a careful reading of his work would show this to be true. Although an artist's intention is not always reflected in the finished artifact, I believe "The Man Against the Sky" does reinforce the message sounded throughout the volume: Life is for the strong, for those who can face reality even though it brings pain, because it is the pain itself which may prompt change—the essence of life.

This basically optimistic interpretation, although it would probably be approved by Robinson, would not meet with widespread critical acceptance. Floyd Stovall, in "The Optimism Behind Robinson's Tragedies," has chronicled many of the critics who view Robinson's work as basically pessimistic. However, there is enough evidence in the texts for Stovall himself, in the face of so many opinions to the contrary, to suggest that "with adequate knowledge man makes painful progress, individually and socially, towards his ideal of the perfect life. This is the extent of Robinson's optimism."<sup>1</sup>

I think the case can be put more strongly. This adequate knowledge is the recognition of the need to face reality. Once reality is confronted and recognized man lives by asserting his acceptance of life through deliberate willed actions. Life itself is the goal of living and is possible for anyone. By finely drawing the individual case in his shorter poems, Robinson allows the reader to expand the instance into a generality that contributes to an understanding of a world picture which is anti-materialistic while at the same time it emphasizes the need to recognize and

1. *Appreciation of Edwin Arlington Robinson: Twenty-Eight Interpretive Essays*, ed. Richard Cary (Waterville, Maine: Colby College Press, 1969), p. 58.

act upon an objective reality with the unprovable assumption that there is significance, indeed value, in actively living. This philosophy is summarized in "Hillcrest," and some component of it is illustrated in each of the individual poems in the volume *The Man Against the Sky*. The last four stanzas of "Hillcrest" contain the heart of Robinsonian philosophy:

Who sees enough in his duress  
 May go as far as dreams have gone;  
 Who sees a little may do less  
 Than many who are blind have done;  
 Who sees unchastened here the soul  
 Triumphant has no other sight  
 Than has a child who sees the whole  
 World radiant with his own delight.  
 Far journeys and hard wandering  
 Await him in whose crude surmise  
 Peace, like a mask, hides everything  
 That is and has been from his eyes;  
 And all his wisdom is unfound,  
 Or like a web that error weaves  
 On airy looms that have a sound  
 No louder now than falling leaves.<sup>2</sup>

In these lines the reader is told that those who can look into the pain of living have unlimited potential for life: a theme also developed in "Llewellyn and the Tree." However, those with only partial vision may in fact fare worse than those who do not see at all. With vision enough to glimpse real pain, one might withdraw into inactivity; the totally blind *may* act in ignorance but act nonetheless, and thus by accident stumble upon life. This idea also is not restricted to "Hillcrest," but recurs throughout the volume. It is easily recognized in the counterpointing of "The Unforgiven" and "John Gorham."

The following stanza has a romantic ring, and those embracing the romantic might accept too quickly the idea that the child's view is the desirable one. As a practical matter, what would happen if each of us insisted on seeing the world as our own private playground? "The Gift of God" suggests one answer to this question—subtly, like the stanza in "Hillcrest," and in such a way that the reader must be on the alert to discern the illusion and peel it away from the reality. Childhood is after all a natural temporary stage: development should not be arrested at that stage. The potential cruelty in the innocent child's honesty becomes condemnatory perversity in the myopic selfishness of an adult.

"Eros Turannos" dramatizes the last two stanzas by emphasizing the undetermined nature of man's fate. Echoing the images of masks, leaves, and trees found in "Hillcrest," and concentrating on the effects of error, "Eros Turannos" is not a poem of final despair, but a poem of

2. E.A. Robinson, *Collected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1937), p. 17. All subsequent page references are to this edition.

possibility. Robinson's leap of faith seems to be embodied in his adherence to the idea that there is possibility even in approaching despair. At the moment when all seems lost there is a wrestling with the self; thus even a presentiment of futility may be the signal for action.

"Llewellyn and the Tree" (pp. 50-55) develops the idea that those who have the courage to see to the depth of their unhappiness, who will calculate the extent of their misery when it comes, may have the courage to pursue their dreams and may have the good fortune to attain them, even if only briefly. Llewellyn, a mild man, found himself saddled with a shrill wife whose actions he could not change, whose ambitions he could never fulfill. Before passion (roses) entered his life he had already sounded the depths of his discontent:

Before the roses ever came  
Llewellyn had already risen.  
The roses may have ruined him,  
They may have kept him out of prison. (p. 51)

Because he was alive to the conditions around him, because he did not blind himself to the possibilities for action, Llewellyn saw enough to recognize the futility of his continued unhappiness and the possibility of "The roses that had been his fall." Llewellyn had reached the point where "change / Itself is beauty, if not heaven," so he left an unhappy and unchanging life, and he grew old.

The face and hands and hair were old,  
But neither time nor penury  
Could quench within Llewellyn's eyes  
The shine of his one victory. (p. 53)

He could say "I've tried the world, and found it good," and he added this warning:

Be calm when you are growing old  
And you have nothing else to do;  
Pour not the wine of life too thin  
If water means the death of you. (p. 54)

Thus, for all his mortality, Llewellyn "Had something of immortal youth," and may well "Be gone to find again the Tree of Knowledge."

Abandoning uncomfortable security, Llewellyn found physical poverty as well as the heady wine of life. The conventional illusion is that his act of passion ruined him. His perceived reality is that his action permitted him to immerse himself in life, and thus become a more complete human being. He saw enough in his duress to move him to test the limits of his dreams.

Others, unfortunately, glimpse their reality, then suffer for their refusal to rend the last obscuring veil from their illusion and stare at reality. Such is the plight in "The Unforgiven" (pp. 37-39). The husband was, before marriage, temporarily blinded. However, only "God knows what good it was to blind him," because eventually sight

was partially restored. Unhappily, the vision he has of himself, of his wife, of their life, is one he *will* not try to clarify. He

... labors to retrieve the vision  
That he must once have had of her.  
.....  
But no magicians are attending  
To make him see as he saw then,  
.....  
And there will be no change today. (pp. 38-39)

He dimly perceives, but will not cut through to reality: indeed, he tries to mend the tattered veil of illusion. His fear thus creates his own hell. His is not a fire and brimstone hell ("no red light behind him— / No fumes of many-colored sins"), but the monochromatic silent hell of nothingness. The only action is his repeated and futile attempt to recapture what was. But this movement, like the movement of the waves as they try to capture the shore, being endless and always unfulfilled, is not really movement producing change, but changelessness itself: a living death. Since each day is the same as the next one, there will never be any change, and this man, like those discussed in "Hillcrest," sees a little of reality, and then retreats. By refusing to act upon the acknowledged reality underlying his current nightmare, he may do even less than one who sees only the illusion and glimpses nothing behind the facade.

Unlike the unforgiven husband who refuses to act upon what he knows and so condemns himself, John Gorham, in the poem of that name (pp. 13-14), is totally blind to the reality of Jane Wayland and so might stumble into life as he moves away from her. No glimmer of the reality of the woman behind the illusion of play has reached him. His blindness is so complete that he can assess their situation as one in which two people "have no longer much of anything to tell." That there is a woman beneath the frivolity, and that their problem is not one of lack of depth but lack of communication are facts totally hidden from John Gorham's view. Yet it is this very total blindness which may propel the action which strikes the spark of life. Because he has no vision of the possibilities he does not continue the condition. By withdrawing his attentions from Jane Wayland he opens the door to the possibility of the future. He may one day see the reality of another woman's being. Furthermore, he may be the catalyst of change for Jane Wayland. Her final plea of:

"Won't you ever see me as I am, John Gorham,  
Leaving out the foolishness and all I never meant?  
Somewhere in me there's a woman, if you know the way to find her.  
Will you like me any better if I prove it and repent?"—(p. 14)

raises the poem to the level of tragedy, yet simultaneously indicates the positive aspect of Robinson's philosophy of change. The person who is

Jane Wayland has been masked by the character she has adopted in the belief that her lover seeks entertainment rather than companionship. Too late she realizes that the man she loves longs not for a fairy but for a woman. Recognizing her error too late, she is condemned to his loss. However, the fact that she does recognize her mistake indicates that she may reexamine herself, and become what she believes she is rather than what she believes someone else might like her to be. The opportunity to change for John Gorham has been denied her, yet change has been forced upon her; in the experience of the rejection she may grow, may change.

John Gorham may also come to face reality and live. In his blindness he has acted. The illusion that Jane Wayland created is his reality, and he rejects it, which opens the possibility of his finding the reality of another woman another time. Furthermore, though what he is acting upon is not, perhaps, the truth that the reader sees, it is the truth that he sees. The husband in "The Unforgiven" did not act because he saw *in part* the true nature of his situation. Thus, the completely blind may stumble into life; the partially sighted may avoid it.

Those who are misled and therefore do not see, as in "John Gorham," may be pitied, but not despairingly. There is the possibility of revelation at any moment. Unfortunately, there are also those whose blindness is self-perpetuating, whose illusions are cultivated. This killing lack of perception is the subject of "The Gift of God."

"The Gift of God" (pp. 6-8) is often read as a tribute to a mother's love. But this poem does not describe a beautiful, unselfish maternal devotion. Instead it suggests the human cost for the boundless vanity of the selfless. This woman who seeks her meaning through her son recognizes neither his reality nor her own. Her world of childish fantasy is supported at the price of the sacrifice of a living relationship with her son and her neighbors. The title is ironic, bitter in fact. The irony is not quite as obvious on first glance as, say, "The Clinging Vine," which presents the monologue of a woman who demonstrates she is *not* a clinging vine; but a careful reading reveals the profane nature of the "gift." We might return for a moment to "Hillcrest," and note that:

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

Much as one may like children, one must admit that children are not noted for their unselfishness. In "The Gift of God" there is a role reversal. The mother isolates herself from the world of others and assumes the prerogatives of the child: it is she "Who sees . . . the whole world radiant" with her own delight.

That the phrase "proud humility" in the first stanza is clearly a contradiction of terms should not really need to be stressed, yet it seems

that the implied hypocrisy has not been noticed. The woman sees the world as she would have it: her son is "The firm fruition of her need," not a man in and of himself. His being is her greatness, allows her to "be so great / Among the favored of the Lord." Her innocence is "unwrung" so she has in reality not a son but a dream. We might smile and say: Yes, but as long as there is no test, no need to see the world as others see it, where is the harm? If we can accept with equanimity the stagnation of a life, the vision of childhood's selfishness encapsulated in the being of a mature woman, there is still an obstacle to unrestrained rejoicing that she "says again that life is good." There is no touching of souls that is so important in "Llewellyn and the Tree," "The Unforgiven," "John Gorham," and "Eros Turannos." "Apart, immune, alone"—these are the first words used to describe the son. His mother sees him "still shining" at the goal; but the way there is invisible, not to be thought of because it may involve a confrontation with reality.

"The Gift of God" closes with:

And should the gift of God be less  
In him than in her motherhood,  
His fame, though vague, will not be small,  
As upward through her dream he fares,  
Half clouded with a crimson fall  
Of roses thrown on marble stairs. (p. 8)

What is this gift of God? We might at first have inferred it is the son himself, yet in this last stanza it becomes clear that this interpretation is in error. We seem to have returned, if we look for antecedents in the poem, to the "proud humility" that accompanies the "innocence unwrung." This gift isolates the woman from the people around her, from the people whose opinions she won't hear. She is similarly isolated from her son: unconcerned about *his* needs "While she, arranging for his days / What centuries could not fulfill, / . . . / . . . has him shining where she will." Perhaps worst of all, she shuts herself off from the reality of her own being. "Innocence unwrung" cannot know itself, and dreams untouched by and untouching waking reality cannot become acts.

The young man "whose fame, though vague, will not be small" may not be as unique as his mother, but neither will his accomplishments be meager. If, touched by "the crude and common tongue," he does manage to face the world, to brush comforting illusion aside, then he will quite literally rise above his mother, even by virtue of living an everyday life.

Those who would read this poem as praise for the beauty of an unselfish mother's love for her son should read the last lines again with care. Throughout Robinson's poetry roses represent love, even more specifically, passion. Llewellyn was saved by the roses, by his passion, which drove him from Tilbury. Jane Wayland was "what it is that over

rose-blown gardens / Makes a pretty flutter for a season in the sun": she was the vehicle which carried John Gorham's passion on its short journey to disillusionment with illusion. The mother's passion in "The Gift of God" falls like a screen between her son and herself; it is part of the scenery of her dream. The final image is one of descent, and there is tragedy latent in the vision of the "crimson fall." It does seem death-like, as the crimson fall of blood from a fatal wound. This feeling is reinforced if the marble stairs remind us of the closing lines of "Eros Turannos" which postulate a stairway down which the blind descend into oblivion. Thus, with her dreams, her childlike self-centered vision, this mother becomes nothing.

"The Gift of God" reveals the trap of determined oblivion. Perpetual innocence is damaging: eternal childhood obviates the possibility of fulfilling the cycle of life. It also damages those who are necessarily preemptorily arranged in the egocentric garden of delight. "Eros Turannos" develops the promise in the uncertainty of those who do strive with their innermost selves to develop their fundamental beings. The strivers may have, as suggested in "Hillcrest," "Far journeys and hard wandering"; but this implies a life open to the full range of possibility:

... like waves breaking it may be  
Or like a changed familiar tree,  
Or like a stairway to the sea  
Where down the blind are driven. (p. 33)

The woman of "Eros Turannos" had the ability to penetrate reality, and what she saw frightened her. Her self-encouraged, if not self-induced, illusion does in fact hold a kernel of truth.

What she meets and what she fears  
Are less than are the downward years  
Drawn slowly to the foamless weirs  
Of age, were she to lose him. (p. 32)

There is no reason to doubt this judgment. Alone and without stimulus to internal life her existence could well have become the foamless weirs of age, the "dark tideless floods of Nothingness" which close the title poem of this volume. However, hers does become temporarily a "blurred sagacity" which fails to completely comprehend the difference between known emptiness enveloped in tradition, which could be her life without her husband, and illusory peace projected by an "engaging mask." When the mask begins to slip:

The falling leaf inaugurates  
The reign of her confusion;  
The pounding wave reverberates  
The dirge of her illusion. (p. 33)

Reality relentlessly intrudes into her life, so she withdraws into herself.



While the external environment laments the death of the possibility of a world as she would have liked for it to be, the battle rages within her between life as she would wish it to be and reality as she perceives it.

We know she is not to have the blind ignorance of John Gorham, but the truce between her environment and her desires is not predetermined. The battle may yield a living death, like that endured by the couple in "The Unforgiven." Like the waves which pound eternally upon the shore, then retreat to the enveloping anonymity of the sea, only to gather courage once more for the assault doomed to failure, she may join the men and women who begin to see but, unable to stand the glare of new light, try once more to veil their eyes. However, this monotony of disillusion ("Though like waves breaking it may be") is not the only fate possible. She may become "like a changed familiar tree." This surely should remind us of Llewellyn, changed yet familiar, gladly living a life others might deplore, as he moved toward the Tree of Life. Still we are not dependent solely upon "Llewellyn and the Tree" to strengthen the positive implications in this line. There is of course the traditional image of the tree of life, and her tree is not dead or blasted, simply changed. It has grown, weathered, lived. Furthermore, since the sense of "old trees" was one of the things that attracted her husband in the first place, there is certainly the possibility that life, with some adjustment of expectation, might be full for the couple yet. Unlike Jane Wayland, this wife may be given the opportunity to change and recapture the love that seems to be lost.

The final possibility is that she may become shut up in a world of perpetual illusion and thus live a life which pulses downward toward Nothingness. Like that of the mother in "The Gift of God" her life may be "like a stairway to the sea / Where down the blind are driven." We cannot know which it will be, nor can she until the internal battle is won and her will determines the reward for the victor. Should illusion win, all is lost. Should reality win, the deep roots of her being will be strong enough to sustain her new exterior. Should there be no victor she will become a darkling plain which reverberates to the pounding waves of ignorant armies.

This brings us back to "The Man Against the Sky," which closes with:

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?  
'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 dark tideless floods of Nothingness  
Where all who know may drown. (p. 69)

Unquestionably this is an image of despair, but Robinson has not sounded the clarion call for suicide. Once more we are dealing with reality and illusion. *If* all came to nought only the weaklings would remain alive and suffer. The strong would descend into the floods of Nothingness. Robinson is taking the argument to its logical conclusion; but he does not believe the postulated situation. The conditional “’Twere” asserts the indefinite nature of the earlier speculations about whether there be “nothing anyhow.” *If* that were true, but it is not. For those who recognize reality, life asserts itself through the terror of the nightmare of the tideless floods. It is only those who cling determinedly to illusion for support who drown in the absence of life which engulfs them.

Robinson’s answer to the existential agony is not Sartre’s reversal of Descarte: I am, therefore I think. Using the same model Robinson might assert: I act, therefore I am. Profitless pondering and egocentric fantasies culminate in emptiness. Yet mindless, manic activity is not the antidote. Robinson calls for a confrontation with the observed, immediate reality; and then conscious decisions to determine appropriate responses. A decision or action may not be the “approved” or “right” one, but if there is constant reassessment of situations, and a continuing concern to be involved, then errors will be redeemed through the pain—and pleasure—of living. Man, initiating action in response to his view of reality, may not have total control over his external life, but he does have the power to affect its direction.

*Florida State University*  
Tallahassee