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Robinson's Poets

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A. Robinson once told Carl Van Doren that “poets should stick to their trade and leave criticism to others.”1 Unlike many twentieth century poets, Robinson showed very little interest in the writing of criticism. As a consequence his informal comments in letters and interviews have become the primary source for discovering his critical attitudes. However, another important source is the poetry itself, for Robinson had no qualms about incorporating criticism in his poems. His explicit subject matter for an unusually large number of poems is poets and the writing of poetry. These poems may be divided into three groups: those that celebrate the work of an actual poet, those that deal with the work of the generic poet, and those that have to do with a specific, fictitious poet. An examination of these poems helps to clarify the premises upon which his poetry is based.

The eight actual poets that Robinson chose to write about have little in common: they are Verlaine, Shakespeare, Crabbe, Hood, Arnold, Poe, Emerson, and Whitman. Also, his approaches toward the writers vary. In some poems he indicates a familiarity with the work of the poet by making specific allusions, such as a reference to Lenore in the poem on Poe and the mention of Sohrab in the one on Arnold.2 In some he merely comments on the poet’s career and reputation, as he does in the case of Crabbe and Verlaine. While each of the poems is admiring in tone, Robinson’s choice of subject seems

1 Carl Van Doren, Three Worlds (New York, 1936), 160.
2 “For a Copy of Poe’s Poems,” Lippincott’s, LXXVIII (August 1906), 243. This poem was never included in a collection. “For Some Poems by Matthew Arnold,” in Charles T. Davis, editor, Selected Early Poems and Letters (New York, 1960), 10. This volume presents the poems as they appeared in the first edition of The Torrent and The Night Before, The Children of the Night, and Captain Craig. It will be used only when the poem or text in question is not found in the Collected Poems. Further references will be included in the text with the abbreviation SEP.
largely arbitrary. For instance, he said of the Whitman poem, “I was very young when I wrote it, but I knew all the time that I didn’t really mean it.” And he is reported to have once remarked sadly, “I have a set of Crabbe . . . . Somebody thought that I was crazy about him because I wrote a sonnet about him, and gave me a set.” It is impossible to conclude, therefore, that this group as a whole is significant as being influential to Robinson’s work.

The poems about Emerson and Shakespeare, however, deserve attention. Robinson believed Emerson to be “the greatest poet who ever wrote in America.” Unlike the other sonnets on poets, “The Sage” does not refer to specific poems or to Emerson’s career but focuses on his interest in Eastern philosophy:

Foreguarded and unfevered and serene,
Back to the perilous gates of Truth he went—
Back to fierce wisdom and the Orient,
To the dawn that is, that shall be, and has been.

This interest in Emersonian thought is significant in the light of Robinson’s own emphasis on transcendentalism and mysticism. This poem was published in the volume with “Captain Craig,” a work which is informed by the synthesizing of Eastern and Western philosophies. The lines quoted above almost anticipate the last refuge for the protagonist of “The Man Against the Sky,” the “orient Word that will not be erased” (CP, p. 66).

“Ben Jonson Entertains a Gentleman from Stratford,” the most elaborate and complex of the poems on poets, differs radically from the others in technique. In this dramatic monologue, Robinson not only demonstrates his thorough knowledge of Shakespeare by making multiple allusions to the plays, but also creates brilliant characterizations of both Jonson and Shakespeare. He furthermore includes critical comments on what he must consider the essential quality of Shakespeare’s art. In the most lengthy passage of this nature he emphasizes Shakespeare’s originality and optimism:

3 Winfield Townley Scott, Exiles and Fabrications (Garden City, N.Y., 1961), 167.
4 Ibid.
5 Quoted from an unpublished letter to Lilla Cabot Perry, March 12, 1929, now in the Colby College Library.
6 Collected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York, 1937), 192. Further references will be included in the text with the abbreviation CP.
For granted once the old way of Apollo
Sings in a man, he may then, if he's able,
Strike unafraid whatever strings he will
Upon the last and wildest of new lyres;
Nor out of his new magic, though it hymn
The shrieks of dungeoned hell, shall he create
A madness or a gloom to shut quite out
A cleaving daylight, and a last great calm
Triumphant over shipwreck and all storms.
He might have given Aristotle creeps,
But surely would have given him his katharsis.
(CP, p. 31)

If these are the qualities that Robinson admired most in Shakespeare, it is possible to assume that he himself either felt that he shared them or aspired to do so.

The group of poems about poetry in the abstract indicates more surely Robinson’s attitudes about poetry, for in these poems one must conclude that he is delineating his own values. That most of these poems were written when Robinson was still in his twenties perhaps accounts for their burden of high seriousness and their subjective quality. “Dear Friends,” for instance, announces the persona’s intention to be a poet in spite of what the public might think of him. Robinson believed that he was fated to write poetry, as his comment in one of his two published prose pieces about his writing indicates: “It must have been the year 1889 when I realized finally... that I was doomed, or elected, or sentenced for life, to the writing of poetry.”7 This idea is reflected in the sonnet, “Many Are Called,” a poem about Apollo, “who has never died” (CP, p. 581). The sentiment expressed here is that no man, however diligently he tries to lure Apollo, is able through his own will to “rift the sullen walls” (CP, p. 582). The allusion of the title, Matthew 22:14, is immediately familiar to the average reader and effectively clarifies the meaning of the poem.

On occasion Robinson expresses dissatisfaction with the life of the poet, and complains that it is impossible to write really well, as he does in “Three Quatrains” and “On the Night of a Friend’s Wedding.” The principal attitude one finds in these poems, however, is the belief that poetry is a noble profession. “Poets and kings are but the clerks of time,” he once proclaimed in a sonnet (“The Clerks,” CP, p. 90). The line is significant only in that poets and kings are connected co-

7 “The First Seven Years,” Colophon, IV (December 1930), n.p.
ordinately. To make this association was not unusual for him. An implied comparison between poets and kings is made both in the sonnet “The Master and the Slave Go Hand in Hand” and “Three Quatrains.” These poems have little in common other than the analogy. The sonnet is a poem on the sonnet and suggests that it is impossible to be completely satisfied with the molding of a poem, just as kings are often unhappy about “battles that are never won” (CP, p. 95). The quatrains compare the poet and the king in their search for fame. In each case the analogy extends throughout the poem and is consistent. Since the tenor of the two poems is different, the fact that the king is used as a vehicle for making a statement about the poet in both gives an added significance to the comparison: Robinson suggests that poets and kings have equally elevated positions in society.

The nobility of the poet resides in his function, which is, according to Robinson, to tell the truth. This search for truth is a theme that is strongly emphasized in his poetry. In the first poem he ever published, “Thalia,” he asks the question, “Where is the man to write man’s epitaph?”8 “Dear Friends” includes the lines: “The games we play/To fill the frittered minutes of a day,/Good glasses are to read the spirit through” (CP, p. 84). In context the games refer to the songs the poet sings. Poetry, then, is important insofar as it reveals truth to man. The idea is expressed most clearly in the first Octave, one that he did not choose to collect:

To get at the eternal strength of things,  
And fearlessly to make strong songs of it,  
Is, to my mind, the mission of that man  
The world would call a poet. He can sing  
But roughly, and withal ungraciously;  
But if he touch to life the one right chord  
Wherein God’s music slumbers, and awake  
To truth one drowsed ambition, he sings well.  
(SEP, pp. 55-56)

Robinson indicates an ambiguous attitude toward the words used to tell the truth. On the one hand he speaks of “the perfect word that is the poet’s wand,” and says that rhymes are the jewels for the crown made of “thought’s purest gold” (“Sonnet,” CP, p. 95). The greater emphasis, however, is on the inability of words to convey the truth:

8 The Reporter Monthly, Gardiner, Maine, (March 29, 1890), 3.
Nor jewelled phrase nor mere mellifluous rhyme
Reverberates aright, or ever shall,
One cadence of that infinite plain-song
Which is itself all music. ("Octave XIX," CP, p. 106)

Again he says:

The prophet of dead words defeats himself;
Whoever would acknowledge and include
The foregleam and the glory of the real,
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.
("Octave XX," CP, p. 106)

While Robinson emphasized craftsmanship in his prose writings, in his poetry he regards skill only as a necessary adjunct to inspiration and the ability to tell the truth.

Complementing Robinson’s veneration of the poet as seer is his attack on merely skillful verse. In what is perhaps his most famous sonnet on the role of the poet this idea is clearly stated:

Oh for a poet—for a beacon bright
To rift this changeless glimmer of dead gray;
To spirit back the Muses, long astray,
And flush Parnassus with a newer light;
To put these little sonnet-men to flight
Who fashion, in a shrewd mechanic way,
Songs without souls, that flicker for a day,
To vanish in irrevocable night. (SEP, p. 11)

This sentiment is similar to that of Emerson’s “Merlin,” in which the poet expresses his dissatisfaction with the “trivial harp.” It is plainly an attack on the versifiers of his time, who write in either an outmoded or uninspired way. Apparently Robinson’s ideal poet is one who will not fall into the mediocrity of the conventional. The sonnet continues:

What does it mean, this barren age of ours?
Here are the men, the women, and the flowers,
The seasons, and the sunset, as before.
What does it mean? Shall not one bard arise
To wrench one banner from the western skies,
And mark it with his name forevermore?9

9 At least, in The Torrent and The Night Before he calls for a bard. In the Collected Poems he changed the line “shall not one bard arise” to “shall there not one arise” (CP, p. 98). Stylistically, the shift from noun to pronoun weakens the line, and the alliteration is lost. Perhaps he found “bard” too archaic, or too obvious, for his later taste.
Even though a precise meaning cannot be assigned to the rather grandiose "banner in the western skies," there can be no doubting that Robinson wishes the state of poetry to be reformed.

In two other early poems Robinson suggests that there must be something new in the way poetry is written. "Ballade of Broken Flutes" suggests that pastoral poetry is no longer possible, however desirable:

No more by summer breezes fanned,
The place was desolate and gray;
But still my dream was to command
New life into that shrunken clay.
I tried it. And you scan today,
With uncommiserating glee,
The songs of one who strove to play
The broken flutes of Arcady. (CP, p. 78)

Evidently Robinson is talking about the kind of poetry that was once written and is now out of step with the times. However, he may be speaking of the form of that poetry. If so, the poem is extremely ironic, for the ballade form itself is old-fashioned. The sonnet, "Amaryllis," is also about the decline of poetry. An old man shows the persona the grave he has made for Amaryllis, whose name represents pastoral poetry. The speaker says: "But though the trumpets of the world were glad,/It made me lonely and it made me sad/To think that Amaryllis had grown old" (CP, p. 85).

"Ballade of Broken Flutes" and "Amaryllis" take as subject matter the kind of poetry that Robinson can find no longer feasible. "Shadrach O’Leary" is an attack on incapable poets. This poem is one belonging to the third group of poems about poetry, those in which Robinson portrays imaginary poets. During the time that O’Leary was a poet, he wrote in the romantic tradition, singing of "many ladies, frail and fair,/The rolling glory of their golden hair" (CP, pp. 345-46). But O’Leary was not a shrewd little sonnet-man, for his poems were really not very good—"And if they limped, O’Leary didn’t care" (CP, p. 346). However, O’Leary eventually is spared from writing bad poetry and gives up "the ladies and the lyre." Robinson does not tell us what he turns to afterwards; we only know that he is to be admired.

"Shadrach O’Leary" borders on satire, a quality character-

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10 See William C. Childers, "Amaryllis," Explicator, XIV (February 1956), 34.
istic of those poems Robinson wrote using fictitious poets and one that is markedly lacking elsewhere. The predominant tone of the poems about historical poets and those about poetry in general is that of solemnity. With the single exception of "Ben Jonson Entertains a Gentleman from Stratford," when Shakespeare pokes gentle fun at his friend's pedantry—"'Ben, you're a scholar, what's the time of day?'" (CP, p. 24)—Robinson appears to be overwhelmingly earnest. The opposite is true of the two lengthy poems in which Robinson creates fictional poets, "Captain Craig," published in 1902, and Amaranth, published the year before his death, 1934. Through the satirical treatment of poets and poetry, Robinson makes his clearest statements about his profession.

"Captain Craig" is concerned with the last days of a flamboyant pauper-philosopher and his coterie of youthful admirers. When he is found on the streets by a member of the Chrysalis Club he is taken up, and apparently taken care of, by the group. While the Captain is so unsuccessful as to be unable even to beg properly, he is a man of wide and esoteric learning. His conversation is full of classical allusions, gnomic sayings, and object lessons. He likes to think of himself as Socrates, and hopes to be remembered above all as a humorist.

In "Captain Craig" Robinson satirizes the writing of poetry in two ways. First, there are bits of verse that appear to be self-parodies. The Captain quotes poetry from two friends. One is a sonnet written by Count Pretzel von Wurzburg, the Obscene. The sonnet, written in perfect Petrarchan form, has to do with one Carmichael, who "had a kind of joke-disease" (CP, p. 136). Carmichael is more eccentric than the Tilbury eccentrics, and his difficulty is considerably less clear than that of, for instance, Cliff Klingenhagen. Nevertheless, the similarities between the two are very strong. The other poem consists of eight lines of not quite perfect blank verse, beginning with "The toiling ocean thunders of unrest/And aching desolation" (CP, p. 152). In content and form, it bears a strong resemblance to Robinson's "Octaves." The Captain does not criticize the Count's sonnet, but presents the author as a charlatan, who admits that he has a genius in him that "prohibited complete fidelity." Nothing at all is said of the author of "the toiling ocean" but the Captain calls the work a contribution to "the dirges of all-hollowness." Both poetic offerings seem to be bad
imitations of the sort of thing that Robinson himself was engaged in at the time.

The Captain speaks largely on the subject of poetry. These comments are scattered throughout the poem, and it is not immediately apparent that they are all acerbic. When these critical statements are put together, one concludes that the Captain feels that the writing of anything worthwhile is so very difficult that a man must be either a madman or a fool ever to attempt it. The Captain himself had at one time tried his hand at poetry, but had wisely rejected the activity: "I turned a little furrow of my own/Once on a time, and everybody laughed—/As I laughed afterwards . . ." (CP, p. 118).

Robinson's satire reaches its height, however, in the presentation of Killigrew, poet of the Chrysalis Club. Killigrew is very young, very earnest, and very enamored of his own poetry, which, as the reader is able to see, is very bad indeed. Three samples of Killigrew's art are quoted for the reader's edification. In the first, one discovers that Killigrew is no judge of his own poetry. In a letter he has written the narrator (who has conveniently gone out of town so that he can receive mail), Killigrew tells him that he has written a poem that will scan, something that he had apparently had difficulty in doing previously:

"Augustus Plunket, Ph.D.
And oh, the Bishop's daughter;
A very learned man was he
And in twelve weeks he got her;
And oh, she was as fair to see
As pippins on the pippin tree . . .
Tu, tui, tibi, te,—chubs in the mill water."

(CP, p. 139)

As a matter of fact, the last line does not scan, although the poem is, as Killigrew claims for it, "Connotative, succinct, and erudite." It is also a bit of nonsense. Killigrew does not seem to be aware of any faltering, and in a burst of confidence says that he may one day write an epic.

A ballad of Killigrew's composition is also presented to the reader. The Captain sent that one along to the narrator, and intersperses comments of his own about it. The last stanza is a sufficient sample:

"'And you—you go to London Town?'

(Breezes waved the feather)—
'Yes, I go to London Town.'
(Ah, the stinging feather!)
'Why do you go, my merry blade?
Like me, to marry a fair maid?'—
'Why do I go? . . . God knows,' he said;
And on they rode together. (CP, p. 145)

Here Robinson seems to be parodying not his own verse, but that of the sort prevalent among turn-of-the-century popular poets. It has been suggested that Robinson is attacking the work of American poets who palely copied the ballads of the late Victorians.11 The Captain himself is not at all impressed with the poem, and says of it:

Barring the Town, the Fair maid, and the Feather,
The dialogue and those parentheses,
You cherish it, undoubtedly. Pardee!
You call it, with a few conservative
Allowances, an excellent small thing
For patient inexperience to do;
Derivative, you say,—still rather pretty.
But what is wrong with Mr. Killigrew?
Is he in love, or has he read Rossetti?
(CP, pp. 145-46)

But then the Captain is not at all impressed with Killigrew, whom he regards with undisguised condescension. Killigrew, the Captain observes repeatedly, "smiles too much."

Actually, Killigrew is not such a bad sort, and, in spite of his simple-mindedness and pomposities, is finally presented as a good-hearted soul. When the Captain is on his death bed and the men of the club have gathered around him, Killigrew "sacrificed himself to fight that silence" by quoting an impromptu effort:

"‘Ten men from Zanzibar,
Black as iron hammers are,
Riding on a cable-car
Down to Crowley’s theater . . .’"
(CP, p. 164)

Even though the Captain is devastating in his comment about that verse, it is actually no worse than the ones Killigrew had so sedulously struggled over. At least he is aware of his deficiency in this instance.

Although Killigrew's verses in no way resemble the kind of poetry that Robinson was writing at the time, the character of Killigrew himself might well be a caricature of Robinson. Killigrew is a ridiculous little man, but his earnestness, his aspirations, and his essential humanitarianism are exaggerated qualities that are easily associated with Robinson.

"Captain Craig" is perhaps Robinson's most exuberant poem; in it he steps back from his own high seriousness to poke fun at empty meters as well as amateur and inexperienced poets who think their work is far more important than it is. That Robinson can view his profession—and himself—with such detachment provides a pleasing counterbalance to his earlier solemnity. Nevertheless, the impact of this parody and caricature is finally serious: while form is important, it is useless if the ideas it conveys are frivolous, mannered, derivative, or too private for the reader to find meaningful; dilettantism and the inability to judge one's own work are dangers to be rigidly avoided. The Captain, who insisted upon being called a humorist, says at one point: "for I do nought, /Say nought, but with an ancient levity /That is the forbear of all earnestness" (CP, p. 141). Robinson's levity also includes this earnestness.

There is humor in *Amaranth*, but it is of a different sort, and the poem itself is far more ambiguous than "Captain Craig." Nevertheless, the poet Robinson describes in his penultimate poem might very well be Killigrew grown old. Pink the poet is one of several failed artists who are gathered together in a surrealistic world. He is described in this fashion:

*The slight one*

Who sits erect, impervious, and secure,  
Is Pink the poet. He cuts and sets his words  
With an exotic skill so scintillating  
That no two proselytes who worship them  
Are mystified in the same way exactly.  
All who believe themselves at one with him  
Will have a private and personal Pink,  
And their unshared interpretation of him—  
Which makes him universal for the few  
And may be all he wants. (CP, p. 1321)

While the prevailing tone here is satiric, the last two lines suggest a seriousness that is not present earlier. The phrase, "universal for the few," is an example of a Robinsonian paradox that appears often enough in the poem to become a significant
characteristic.

The poem is cast in the form of a dream, in which Fargo, a former painter who has turned to making pumps, revisits the "wrong world," inhabited primarily by not very successful artists, although there are also representatives of the professions of medicine, law, and the church. Fargo is introduced to these people by his host, Amaranth, "the flower that never fades," whose unwilling duty it is to allow men to see the truth about themselves.

Amaranth tries to protect the poet from this self-knowledge, but Pink is fearless, and insists. Once the discovery is made, however, he dashes off to commit suicide. "Excuse me," he says, "while I go and hang myself" (CP, p. 1326). This announcement is greeted with a startling equanimity. The doctor remarks that poets are so tough that they are hard to kill, and suggests a toast to his departure. Evensong, the mediocre musician of the group, interrupts with an already prepared dirge to the departed, and then proposes that they "drink to Pink." It never occurs to anyone to try to stop him.

Pink's role in the poem is far from over, for he appears in the next section hanging from a rafter, neither alive nor dead. This state arouses consternation on the part of the group who find him. The doctor wonders about the state of his health; the lawyer considers whether or not it is legal to leave him hanging. Their concern elicits from Pink a vitriolic speech, reminding his visitors of their inadequacies and objecting to his lack of privacy. They leave after the preacher, the Reverend Pascal Flax, makes a speech which concludes with the sentiment: "Poets, whatever the end,/Should know a little more than most of us/Of our obscurities" (CP, p. 1337). These lines are themselves obscure, especially in the light of the original description of the rather absurdly egotistical little poet. It is important to remember, however, that Pink is actively engaged in dying when he tells the group things that they take seriously.

Furthermore, Pink dead is almost as important to the poem as Pink alive. The others are constantly reminded of him and what he had said about them. Generally the comments about him are made with grudging admiration. When Miss Watchman, the lady writer of the piece and the second victim of Amaranth's chilling gaze, hears that Pink is dead she makes
this rather illogical statement:

“I am not surprised,”
She said, “and in a manner am not sorry.
I could have told him his enameled words
Were dead while he was making puzzles of them.
Sometimes, when I was tired, I played with them,
But never read them twice in the same way.
And some of them were beautiful. Poor fellow!
He never found his world.” (CP, p. 1346)

The doctor believes that he had found his world, but that he had found it too late:

“Pink, in his diagnosis
Of my complaint, was nearer the physician
Than I was; and his candle might have burned
Longer, and with a wider light around it,
If Amaranth had waylaid him in his youth,
And held him and compelled him till he saw.”

(CP, p. 1386)

Atlas, the painter and the third suicide, says of him, “Only a poet/Would have such a divine be-damned assurance” (CP, p. 1366). In the last section of the poem the group considers revisiting him until Flax objects:

“There are complexities and reservations
Where there are poets, for they are alone,
Wherever they are.

Though he fail or die,
The poet somehow has the best of us;
He has a gauge for us that we have not.”

(CP, p. 1388)

Finally Amaranth himself speaks: “The strings he left in you would not be itching/Without the lingering acid of some truth” (CP, p. 1389). On the evidence of most of the speakers in Amaranth, then, Pink is not someone to be dismissed lightly, but a person of somewhat bewildering importance.

The character and function of Pink have puzzled critics. Ellsworth Barnard suggests that the description of Pink is an attack on modernist verse.12 Robert Hillyer finds Pink to be “suspiciously like Ezra Pound.”13 Within the context of the

elaborately allegorical and ironic structure of the poem, however, Pink seems much too significant to be given the designation of a single man or a single poetic movement.

By virtue of the dream structure and the symbolic names, there can be little doubt that Robinson intended to write allegorically, but critics have consistently taken at face value the "wrong world" and assumed that the creatures there are misfits—failures in the "right world."\footnote{Lengthy discussions of the poem can be found in Henry Wells, \textit{The American Way of Poetry} (New York, 1942), 101ff., and Estelle Kaplan, \textit{Philosophy in the Poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson} (New York, 1940), 71ff.} They have overlooked the possibility of an elaborately ironical structure in which the wrong world is really the right world. The most apparent parallel to the structure of the poem is the descent into Hades. The darkness and grotesqueries, as well as the dream-journey, testify to the comparison. Yet Amaranth, Fargo's host, has the name of the flower that resides in Milton's heaven.\footnote{See \textit{Paradise Lost}, Book III, 11. 353-357.} The two ideas are not compatible; together they indicate a reversal that may be indicative of a reversal of the entire poem.

Also, Amaranth in the poem symbolizes truth. Truth is surely something that should reside in the "right" world. However, at the end of the poem are the lines: "'Remember me... the name was Amaranth.../The flower... that never... fades...'/"But you are fading!'/Said Fargo" (\textit{CP}, p. 1392). When Fargo awakes from his dream and returns to the right world, the flower that never fades has done just that.

Another point to consider is that the right world is inhabited by pump-makers and stevedores—practitioners of honest toil—whereas the wrong world contains the artists, inventors, and visionaries. There is no indication that there are artists anywhere except in the wrong world. When these people say that they are failures, then, it may mean that they are merely failures in the eyes of the materialistic world. Possibly they are living in the wrong world by virtue of their professions, not because of their failure in them.

Finally, certain stylistic elements indicate that the poem might be read in its entirety as an ironic commentary. The reversals in thought and structure that have been mentioned earlier—heaven in hell, the wrong world which is the right world—are reflected in the tone of the poem. The example
previously used, "universal for the few," is applicable here. There is certain irony in Amaranth's fading, just as there is implicit irony in having a doctor named Styx. This pervasively ironic tone is strengthened by the grotesque humor of it. The most comic scenes are also horrible—Pink's hanging, Miss Watchman's dissolving into dust, the explosion of a ship. In the wrong world death, the most solemn of all experiences, is treated with the greatest humor. The presence of this grotesquerie is another example of the basic reversal of the poem.

If the poem, then, is to be read as a mirror image of the world as Robinson knows it, Pink is not suspiciously like Ezra Pound, but suspiciously like the typical poet. In the world of the artist the poet is in a preeminent position: he is the first to seek truth, and the first to act upon the discovery. Given the only two alternatives open to him, to commit suicide is evidently more commendable than to settle into a resigned mediocrity. Perhaps the poet, realizing with more clarity than the other artists the impossibility of conveying what is real through his art, rejects his art in the only way he can, for his art is his life. In this respect he is like the painter, who also commits suicide:

"There was nothing in life
For him but art; and when he saw the end
That had been waiting for him, there was not life."

(CP, p. 1374)

The poet is not like the painter, however, in the force of the impact that he had on his society. In the poem Atlas destroyed his painting before he died; Pink, as he is hanging, tells his companions things they cannot forget—things that have the sting of truth in them. In so doing he achieved a kind of immortality, and a recognition that he had a unique understanding. If, as Robinson believes, the poet's chief function is to tell the truth, Pink is not a failure or a misfit for he was able to fulfill that function.

Pink found his art, which was his life, only by losing his life, which was also his art. This paradox is not an uncommon idea for Robinson; a similar situation exists in The Man Who Died Twice. Fernando Nash is not a poet, but he received his inspiration for music only at the cost of his ability to compose. Perhaps the world of Amaranth is wrong only in the sense that the real world is wrong—that is, man's imperfection prevents
him from speaking absolute truth or being an agent of ideal art. The poem is not clear because a consistent allegorical reading cannot be made. Robinson attempted to make a serious statement about the function of the poet through an extravagant fantasy. Because he tried to put more into the poem than the structure would allow, the result is confused. Nevertheless, it is the most significant comment he made on the nature of art and the responsibility of the artist. In light of Robinson’s incomplete and inconsistent statements of theory, even the poem’s ambiguity is important.

To conclude, Robinson in his poetry makes extensive use of poets and poetry as subject matter. While he employs an impressive variety of approaches, the ideas about the role of the poet and the nature of poetry remain within rather narrow limits. Of primary importance to Robinson is the poet’s ability to communicate truth to his audience. A poet is able to do this only insofar as he has an “inner fire,” an attribute that he cannot choose for himself. Conversely, the poet must be a conscious craftsman. The poet’s style must of necessity be individual, for he must speak personally to his reader—there must be an understanding between poet and reader which transcends the meaning and syntax of the words. Robinson’s contempt for poetic fads and merely clever verse possibly stems from this idea, as well as from his apparent belief that poetry should edify before it entertains. The poet has an elevated position in society because of the difficulty of his task and because of his responsibility in attempting to convey what he finds to be significant. While these ideas do not make up a systematic aesthetic, they are nevertheless the bases upon which Robinson built his poetry.