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THE STRUCTURE OF E. A. ROBINSON'S  
*THE TORRENT AND THE NIGHT BEFORE*

By JOHN H. MILLER

E. A. ROBINSON arranged his short poems within their respective volumes roughly according to form rather than theme. This is clear in his second volume, *The Children of the Night* (1897), which collects together twenty-seven sonnets and twenty-three "Octaves" and generally groups the ballades, quatrains, and others into pairs or sets of four. Both the arrangement and the titles ("Ballade of a Ship," "Villanelle of Change," "Two Quatrains," "Sonnet") call attention to the young poet's experiments in old forms.

However, when Robinson published many of these same poems for the first time in *The Torrent and The Night Before* (1896), he arranged them not by form but by theme. Robinson scattered the sonnets, which account for more than half the total, throughout that slim blue book, his first published work. He did not place the four ballades together. Instead, he ordered the poems into pairs and groups related by theme. Some of the relations are evident even on a quick perusal of titles. For example, each of the nine poems beginning with the well-known "Dear Friends" ("reproach me not for what I do") and ending with the "Sonnet" ("Oh for a poet — for a beacon bright") has as its subject the artistic process, usually poetry. This group includes poems on Zola, Arnold, and Crabbe. The subject of other sections is less evident, especially the last where Robinson appended poems left over.

This early ordering of poems by theme is important for several reasons. By considering groupings we can gain new insight into individual poems with which critics have had difficulty. "Luke Havergal," for example, is best understood within the context of a series of poems on death, where Robinson first put it. A poem which seems straightforward standing by itself on an anthology page may become ironic when surrounded by the author with a number of poems which contradict it.

In addition, by considering groupings we can get some idea of what Robinson himself thought his major themes were at this early stage, and we can even see within the structure of *The*

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*Torrent and The Night Before* a general argument. I do not mean that each poem has an inevitable place. But each group of poems seems to be answering a set of specific questions, which finally lead to Robinson's final and most general question: "How do I live in this world?" The answers to his implied questions at this stage of his development are tentative; he admits the possibility of other answers than his own and tries out a variety of attitudes. Yet at the end of each section he summarizes and finishes with what appears to be his own conclusion, his own "Credo," to mention one.

As Ellsworth Barnard has pointed out recently,<sup>1</sup> Robinson critics may be divided roughly into two groups according to whether they see Robinson's response to the world around him as negative or ultimately affirmative. In his first book, I wish to argue, Robinson's tentative conclusion is that men can receive the light (his symbol for spiritual knowledge and joy given by God's grace) in the physical world. He emphasizes learning to live profitably rather than looking forward to death or bemoaning his life in this world.

*The Torrent and The Night Before* contains a short introductory section, four major divisions, and the long concluding narrative, "The Night Before." The themes of the four main sections are art, death, light, and living in the physical world. The first announces Robinson's intention to be a poet even though he recognizes grave dangers in that decision. The second contemplates different attitudes toward death and concludes that death is an inevitable fact, neither to be ignored nor sought after. Then Robinson investigates the possibility of finding spiritual light in a dark world defined by death and change, a section which ends with a statement of belief ("Credo") and an exhortation for others to see the light ("The Children of the Night"). Finally Robinson asks, "Given my belief in the light, how do I live in this world?" His answers here are tentative and general and tend to repeat previous points — that we must love, accept all men as equals, screw up our courage, and believe in the ideal.

The first four poems in *The Torrent and The Night Before* form a brief introduction composed of two parts, each intro-

1 "Edwin Arlington Robinson," in Jackson R. Bryer, editor, *Fifteen Modern American Authors: A Survey of Research and Criticism* (Durham, N. C., 1969), 362.

ducing an important theme in the book. The first pair, "The Torrent" and "Aaron Stark," take up immediately the topic of making money. In "The Torrent," the narrator enjoys the "mad flash" and "magic symphony" of a waterfall in a glen and worries that "hard men" will come to cut the trees and "turn to gold the silver of that spray."<sup>2</sup> But the poem does not simply praise the delights of nature and strike out at the materialism of hard-hearted men bringing "progress." It is not a cliché. He welcomes the men who will turn idle water into money, because his images of the torrent have been "jealous visionings," terms which indicate that he is now ready to share, jealous to keep the torrents to himself no longer. He will share because he knows that his visionings "Were steps to the great place where trees and torrents go," a vague line<sup>3</sup> which seems to say that his view of the scene was the first step toward some kind of ideal reality which would not change after the trees were gone. Thus, seeing the ideal in the physical scene makes the narrator less miserly.

"Aaron Stark," the companion poem, pictures the miser whose eyes see only the physical; they are "like little dollars in the dark." Consequently, he is completely cut off from other people: his "few snarled words" are "like sullen blows"; he is "A loveless exile" who laughs only *at* others when they pity him. Aaron Stark is the direct opposite of the narrator in "The Torrent." One is miserly, the other shares; one is "glad / In earnest" when other people come, whereas the other, "Glad for the murmur of his hard renown," avoids people (p. 4).

Thus, in this introductory pair of sonnets Robinson raises an issue he will come back to shortly when he declares to his "Dear Friends" in the section on art that "The gold I miss for dreaming is all yours" — the issue of making money. The narrator criticizes Aaron Stark for hoarding money to the exclusion of human friendship and understanding. But in "The Torrent" the poet shows he is not simply against making money. "Dollars

2. Charles T. Davis, *Edwin Arlington Robinson: Selected Early Poems and Letters* (New York, 1960). 3. This is the only readily available source for all the poems in *The Torrent* and *The Night Before*. Moreover, Davis preserves the order of the original 1896 edition. The poems quoted in this paper have also been checked against a first edition of *The Torrent* and punctuation conforms to the 1896 edition. Hereafter, all page notations cited in the text are from the Davis edition.

3. Perhaps the vagueness contributed to the "total inability of almost everybody who reads the book to find out what I mean by the last two lines of 'The Torrent'" that Robinson complained of. Richard Cary, editor, *Edwin Arlington Robinson's Letters to Edith Brouwer* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), 39.

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are convenient things to have," Robinson wrote to a friend in 1890, but he objected when the "dirty race that men are running after them" got in the way of more important things, human friendships and visions of ideal reality.<sup>4</sup>

The second pair of introductory poems, "The Dead Village" and "Ballade of a Ship," begins the topic of death, also the subject of the second major section in *The Torrent and The Night Before*. Both poems contrast the noise and gayety of the past to the "mournful surge" and forgotten places of the present. And in both poems some inexplicable cosmic force — either God or a "sea-fiend" — brought death to the gay company. Yet the kinds of dead people in the two poems are quite different. Robinson juxtaposes a picture of innocent children at play in "The Dead Village" to the three hundred drunken revellers in the "Ballade of a Ship."<sup>5</sup> Together, the pair of poems shows that the gayety of both the innocent and the worldly will be cut short by death, which comes unexpectedly, without regard for justice.

Therefore, Robinson begins *The Torrent and The Night Before* with two pairs of introductory poems. Each pair establishes themes — the need for sharing love and material goods and for finding the spirit, the inevitability and inscrutability of death — which become beginning points for the first two major sections in the volume.

The first major group of nine poems in this small book begins with "Dear Friends," which takes up the topic of Robinson's decision to write poetry. "I am half afraid that my 'dear friends' here in Gardiner will be disappointed in me if I do not do something before long," Robinson wrote to Harry DeForest Smith in 1893, "but somehow I don't care half as much about the matter as I ought."<sup>6</sup> In Gardiner, Maine, "doing something" meant making money, not writing poetry. The poet wills money-making to his business-oriented "dear friends" and declares his intention to do what in their eyes is "bubble-work that only fools pursue" (p. 6).

4 Denham Sutcliffe, editor, *Untriangulated Stars: Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson to Harry DeForest Smith 1890-1905* (Cambridge, Mass., 1947), 4.

5 According to Davis, 223-224, the revellers are courtiers sailing to France with the English crown prince, the son of Henry I of England.

6 Sutcliffe, 107.

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"Dear Friends" does more than declare independence from the business world; it also indicates the purposes of Robinson's poetry at this time. The first question Robinson poses for himself in this section, then, concerns the aim of poetry. He then questions the dangers in a life devoted to art and asks about the methods and the possibilities for success. Finally, he adds the summary "Sonnet" ("Oh for a poet — for a beacon bright") which calls for a new poet to show the meaning of "the men, the women, and the flowers, / The seasons, and the sunset, as before."

"Dear Friends" states that one can "read the spirit through" the games people play — the details of their lives, the way they "fill the frittered minutes of a day." Moreover, the person who acquires the skill to read a man's spirit may "some unprofitable scorn resign, / To praise the very thing that he deplores" (p. 6). This indicates Robinson's purpose and method in most of his character poems: by looking at the details of appearance and actions, he will find the spirit; then he will refuse to scorn, no matter how great the failure of the man may be.

The following "Sonnet" ("When we can all so excellently give") continues the topic of finding the spiritual in the concrete detail.

Oh, brother men, if you have eyes at all,  
Look at a branch, a bird, a child, a rose—  
Or anything God ever made that grows—  
Nor let the smallest vision of it slip  
Till you can read, as on Belshazzar's wall,  
The glory of eternal partnership! (p. 6)

Like Emerson, Robinson finds brotherhood not with men only, but with all things, because in every object "God's wholeness gleams with light superlative." Although Robinson himself does not often "sing about the bobolinks and bumble-bees,"<sup>7</sup> as he notes, he believes it is still possible to do so, for in physical man or branch or bird, spirit may be revealed to us.

Having declared his intent to be a poet and generally indicated his purpose, Robinson now asks about the dangers of this way of life and the possibilities of success. He begins to answer by considering in "Her Eyes" the problem of the artist who

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

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becomes so devoted to his art that he cuts himself off from the physical world. He then takes up the dangers that the poet may become a slave to his forms (in "Sonnet" ["The master and the slave go hand in hand"]) or use worn out forms ("Ballade") and that his public may be imperceptive ("Zola"). Finally, he reassures himself by considering the examples of Matthew Arnold, who used ancient forms to reveal "God's truth," and George Crabbe, who wrote "fearless truth" in spite of the public.

The short narrative "Her Eyes," which has not received the attention it deserves, is a key to understanding how deeply the early Robinson believes in living an engaged life among other men.<sup>8</sup> The painter in "Her Eyes," like Aaron Stark, has cut himself off from people around him. Robinson emphasizes this in the opening stanza:

Up from the street and the crowds that went,  
Morning and midnight, to and fro,  
Still was the room where his days he spent  
And the stars were bleak, and the nights were slow. (p. 6)

The painter loved a woman once, but did not marry her for the sake of his art. After slaving for many years, he becomes famous; but he disregards his success and goes in search of the "love that his brushes had earned at last." Since this woman is now only a "dream," he returns to his room, convinced that no flesh-and-blood woman comes near to the perfection of his dream. Consequently, he paints her "Like life on his canvas" and begins to worship her in place of a real wife. But her eyes only remind him constantly of the life he has lost by burying himself in a "nameless tomb" rather than living:

And he wonders yet what her love could be  
To punish him after that strife so grim;—  
But the longer he lives with her eyes to see,  
The plainer it all comes back to him. (p. 8)

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8 Ben Ray Redman, *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1928), 11, dismisses "Her Eyes" as "nearly as bad as it could be," and Edwin S. Fussell — *Edwin Arlington Robinson: The Literary Background of a Traditional Poet* (Berkeley, 1954), 104 — somehow finds it imitative of Browning and Swinburne. The incompleteness of information in the poem is the theme of Ellsworth Barnard, *Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Study* (New York, 1952), 42. And Hoyt C. Franchere — *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1968), 102 — deals with it autobiographically.

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The artist who will "read the spirit" through the details of a man's life must keep engaged with other human beings, not shut himself up for the sake of art.

Robinson continues his consideration of the dangers in a life devoted to art in "Sonnet" ("The master and the slave go hand in hand"), one of the most successful poems in the volume. He creates parallels between a king and a writer of sonnets, showing that each is actually a slave. Each must understand well "The mission of his bondage" and each is bound to experience some failure.

This failure may result not only from inability to find "The perfect word that is the poet's wand," or scepter, but also from the blindness of his culture. The sonnet "Zola" is not so much a poem about the French naturalist as an attack on so-called "Christian" culture ("We call it Christian faith!") that will not "scan / The racked and shrieking hideousness of Truth" and therefore will not find in it "the divine heart of man," (p. 9). If the poet should expose the "human heart / Of God" as Zola supposedly did, if he should reveal the spirit of man without scorn as the narrator promised to do in "Dear Friends," he might fail because of the open hostility of his culture to such Truth.

The last poem to consider the danger of failure in poetry is the much-anthologized "Ballade," later known as "Ballade of Broken Flutes." Dedicated in 1897 to Dr. A. T. Schumann, Robinson's tutor in the French forms, it narrates a dream of a poet that he will fail to breathe new life into those old forms — an ironic statement, couched as it is in a beautiful ballade — and be compelled to return to "join the common fray, / To fight where Mammon may decree" (p. 10).

Before Robinson concludes the section on art with "Sonnet" ("Oh for a poet — for a beacon bright") he adds paired poems on authors who have succeeded. "For Some Poems by Matthew Arnold" counters the "Ballade of Broken Flutes" by pointing to a poet who has used the ancient forms and subjects to affect a hostile culture "Where God's truth [is] cramped and fettered with a band / Of iron creeds. . . ." And "George Crabbe" counters "Zola" by pointing to a poet who, by "fearless truth," "plain excellence" and "stubborn skill," makes us feel ashamed of our lack of faith. Therefore poetic success is possible, though



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by no means sure, in spite of the difficulties in finding the "perfect word," the blindness of the culture, and the decay of the old poetic forms.

Finally, in "Sonnet" the author calls for the new poet who will do the things Robinson has asked for earlier. He will sing songs with souls and tell what "this barren age of ours" means by looking at physical objects:

Here are the men, the women, and the flowers,—  
The seasons, and the sunset, as before.  
What does it mean? (pp. 11-12)

The physical experience is still here. From it, poems will come that reveal the spiritual in the physical world.

Thus it is clear from this section that the artist envisioned by Robinson is an important person in his society. If he isn't the "legislator of the world" of early Romantic theory, he still has the power to point out to us the spiritual in the physical and can still, like George Crabbe, shame us for our spiritual blindness.

The second major section in *The Torrent and The Night Before* returns to the second topic in the introductory pairs — death.<sup>9</sup> If the new poet will tell what this world means, he must question its most important characteristics. The answer is clear: the physical world is defined by one unchangeable fact — everything changes and ultimately dies. In this section the author considers a number of different attitudes toward death, no one of which can be said to represent his own. Death may horrify us, or it may attract us. We may meet death heroically, or we may try to ignore it and seize the day. These poems agree, however, that love of other humans leads away from suicide and makes life worth living. Finally, Robinson concludes that all but love is dying and all things change.

"The Altar," the first poem in the section, acknowledges that death may attract those people who look upon it as an advancement out of a bewildering existence on earth. Putting aside

9 This section also consists of nine poems in the following order: "The Altar," "The House on the Hill," "The Wilderness," "Luke Havergal," "The Chorus of Old Men in 'Aegeus,'" "The Miracle," "Horace to Leuconoë," "The Ballade of Dead Friends," and "Villanelle of Change."

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brief misgivings, the narrator sees himself, like the rest of humanity, as a "Bewildered insect plunging for the flame." This flame connotes not only death, but spiritual release into some sort of heaven since it is an altar of flame with "upward promise" that "must burn somehow for the best" (p. 12).

Similarly, the speaker in "Luke Havergal" makes death attractive to the despairing. A voice comes "Out of a grave" to advise Havergal that since there will be no dawn in his own life, he should "Go to the western gate" where "The dark will end the dark" — that death will end the darkness of this world and bring him to his deceased love in heaven.<sup>10</sup> Thus if we equate the narrators of "Luke Havergal" or "The Altar" with the author, as a number of critics have done, we have an example of Robinson counseling death to the despairing, implying that happiness can come for them only in heaven.<sup>11</sup> He advises escape from the world by suicide. Suicide was a very possible reaction to the darkness of this world, Robinson knew, although it was not finally his own advice, as "Credo" and "The Children of the Night" were to show.

The main thing that prevents Havergal from following the advice of the speaker from the grave is the memory of his former love:

Out of a grave I come to quench the kiss  
That flames upon your forehead with a glow  
That blinds you to the way that you must go. (pp. 15-16)

As James G. Hepburn says, the voice "admits that the enemy to his own counsel is love. He must quench the kiss — the memory of love and the desire for life — that still prevents Havergal from committing suicide and following his beloved into death."<sup>12</sup>

The narrators in other poems in the section on death counter

10 Davis, 15. Richard P. Adams prefers not to believe that the narrator is advising death to Luke Havergal because "he is instructed to go to the gate, not *through* it, and to listen for a call, not to join the caller." This reading neglects a number of lines, especially "the dark will end the dark," which must mean that death will end the darkness of this world. "The Failure of Edwin Arlington Robinson," *Tulane Studies in English*, XI (1961), 132.

11 For examples of this critical position, see Ivor Winters, *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (Norfolk, Conn., 1946), 35, and Barnard, *EAR*, 39.

12 "E. A. Robinson's System of Opposites," *PMLA*, LXXX (June 1965), 271. Hepburn gives a good summary of the opinions of different critics about "Luke Havergal." His reading of the poem is close to my own.

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the voice from the grave and reinforce Havergal's inclination by advising return to loved ones in life and counseling against suicide. In "The Wilderness," the poem that immediately precedes "Luke Havergal," the narrator calls upon the men to leave the darkness on the mountain and return to the "lights of home." The men have a choice between death on the mountain and life at home, and the persona makes clear which is the right choice.

"The Chorus of Old Men in 'Aegeus,'" <sup>13</sup> which immediately follows "Luke Havergal," ruminates on the suicide of King Aegeus, who threw himself into the sea when his son, Theseus, forgot to show victory on his return home by changing the black sails of his ship to white. The old men feel that to die a natural death, even if divested of kingship, is preferable to suicide:

Better his end had been as the end of a cloudless day,  
Bright, by the word of Zeus, with a golden star,  
Wrought of a golden fame, and flung to the central sky,  
To gleam on a stormless tomb for evermore:—  
Whether or not there fell  
To the touch of an alien hand  
The sheen of his purple robe and the shine of his diadem,  
Better his end had been  
To die as an old man dies. . . (p. 17)

Therefore, Robinson has juxtaposed poems in which the narrators find death attractive to poems in which they call others back to love and life and lament suicide. Robinson cannot be identified with any of these narrators. He seems to be showing both attitudes as real possibilities.

Two other poems in this section reveal still different ways of dealing with death. In "The Miracle" the dying woman advises her listeners to pity and forgive her unfaithful lover. On the other hand, Robinson's translation of Horace's ode to Leuconoë (Book I, Ode XI) advocates *carpe diem*:

Be wise withal, and rack your wine, nor fill  
Your bosom with large hopes; for while I sing,  
The envious close of time is narrowing:—  
So seize the day—or ever it be past—  
And let the morrow come for what it will. (p. 19)

Once again, Robinson includes these as possibilities, not neces-

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13 An original poem by Robinson in the Greek manner, not a translation.

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sarily recommendations.

Although it is hard to pin down Robinson's own tentative beliefs in this section on death, two ideas do run through these poems without contradiction. First, love of other human beings, particularly between a man and a woman, can make life worth living, as we have already seen in "Luke Havergal" and "The Wilderness." "The Ballade of Dead Friends" adds, "Love's the trade we're plying, / God has willed it so" (p. 19).

"The Ballade of Dead Friends" also makes Robinson's second point: no matter what attitude one takes toward death, the facts of change and death are defining characteristics of the physical world. Time is a "jester" which, in spite of our prayers and defiance, changes and kills everything but love: "All but Love is dying." The same idea is implicit in other poems in this section and explicit in "The House on the Hill" and "Villanelle of Change," the concluding poem. Whether the house on the hill represents only a house, or "a human body from which all the attributes of life have departed," as Lawrance Thompson<sup>14</sup> suggests, the point being emphasized is the *fact* of change and death, not how it happened. As the villanelle repeats over and over:

There is ruin and decay  
In the House on the Hill:  
They are all gone away,  
There is nothing more to say. (p. 13)

And "Villanelle of Change" is, in the words of Ellsworth Barnard, an "unprotesting acknowledgement that the past is irretrievable."<sup>15</sup>

In the third major section Robinson seems to ask, "If the principal characteristics of this world are death and change, what are the possibilities for finding happiness and the light?" Robinson begins the section with a series of poems which describe the darkness of this world and ask what a person can do to find the light in it. As in the sections on art and death, he acknowledges the possibility of failure — in this case, failure to

<sup>14</sup> Editor, *Tilbury Town: Selected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1953), 141.

<sup>15</sup> Barnard, *EAR*, 59.

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find anything but darkness. In "The World" he summarizes the possibilities he has discovered and concludes that what we are individually determines how we measure and see meaning in the world. This leads him to profess belief in the light in "Credo" and "The Children of the Night" and to admonish others to believe in the light also.

The section on the light opens with a pair of first-person sonnets, each on the narrator's reactions to reading works of Thomas Hood and Thomas Hardy. Both poems consider the relationship between bitterness and pleasantries, woe and mirth in this world.

The narrator describes Thomas Hood as "The man who cloaked his bitterness within / The winding-sheet of puns and pleasantries." Hood looks upon "a world of anguish and of sin" and tries to cover it up with laughter, but the cover turns out to be a shroud, and the bitterness still shows:

We laugh, and crown him; but anon we feel  
A still chord sorrow swept,—a weird unrest;  
And thin dim shadows home to midnight steal,  
As if the very ghost of mirth were dead—  
As if the joys of time to dreams had fled,  
Or sailed away with Ines to the West.<sup>16</sup>

The readers of Thomas Hood (the "we" in the poem) do not agree with his pessimism; it gives them a weird feeling of unrest, and the narrator emphasizes twice that they feel only *as if* the "joys of time" were gone, implying that normally they do feel real joy in this world. As in a number of earlier poems, Robinson admits bitterness as a possibility for living in this world, but the narrator here does not adopt or propose it.

An alternative to Hood's attempt to cloak bitterness with pleasantries that have no real joy in them comes in the next poem, "For a Book by Thomas Hardy," where the narrator learns "Life's wild infinity of mirth and woe" (p. 22). The point is that this world has an infinite amount of both joy and woe, and *both* should be acknowledged and accepted.

Then why doesn't Thomas Hood do so? Why do the narrators in other poems in this section feel joy in the physical world while Hood can only try to cover over the anguish and pain he

16 A reference to Hood's poem "Fair Ines." Davis, 21.

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feels? It is through no fault or virtue of their own, but because God has sent grace to one and withheld it from the other. God's gift to Thomas Hood has been an uncommon capacity to see anguish and sin, whereas the narrator in "For a Book by Thomas Hardy" wanders first in darkness and then receives a "magic twilight from below" which is "given by God's grace" (p. 21). The poems indicate no reason — no good works or moral superiority, for example — why one should be elected to grace while the other is excluded. As Ellsworth Barnard has shown, the Christian doctrine of grace — "or something very like it — lies at the heart of Robinson's vision of the world."<sup>17</sup> Barnard's lengthy discussion of this problem concludes correctly, I think, that Robinson held concurrent and somewhat contradictory beliefs in spiritual determinism and limited human freedom. Thus Robinson refused to condemn spiritual failures but still insisted on man's responsibility for what he is and does.

The darkness and light images are the most important symbols in Robinson's poetry. Here as elsewhere, darkness represents a life of woe, cut off from any spiritual dimension — a life often described as wandering without direction or purpose, at times a "hell." Notice the opening lines in "For a Book by Thomas Hardy":

With searching feet, through dark circuitous ways,  
I plunged and stumbled; round me, far and near,  
Quaint hordes of eyeless phantoms did appear,  
Twisting and turning in a bootless chase. . . . (p. 21)

On the other hand, the light given to the elect by God's grace gives life orientation and brings knowledge — in this case knowledge that life contains a "wild infinity of mirth and woe." Furthermore, this symbolic "magic twilight" becomes literally the cottage lights of Hardy's Wessex and leads the narrator, like the window gleaming in "The Wilderness," back to the love of human beings. Additional poems in this section will add meaning to the light symbol. For now we should emphasize that light comes to the elect in the physical world and makes living in it worthwhile.

The following pair of poems contrasts the transitoriness of

<sup>17</sup> *EAR*, 231.

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the physical world in general and fame and money in particular to the unchangeableness of the transcendent light. In "Supremacy" the first-person narrator describes the darkness as "a drear and lonely tract of hell / From all the common gloom removed afar" (p. 22). This figurative hell, Robinson explains in a letter, is "an exceedingly worldly and transitory one"<sup>18</sup> populated by the unsuccessful, men the proud narrator has slandered by calling them "churls and sluggards." After these men die one by one the narrator is struck "with a shaft of God's eternal day" which destroys his dream of worldly glory and reveals to him "the dead men singing in the sun." In "Three Quatrains," too, the narrator warns that worldly glories perish — "Time finds a withered leaf in every laurel" — and implies that men should think of "Glory" spiritually (p. 23). Once again, these thoughts seem much like Christian doctrine.

These poems warn again against neglecting the physical world. The worldly failures should not be scorned, as the narrator in "Supremacy" learns. Speaking of this poem, Robinson remarked, "I have brought out the idea of the occasional realization of the questionable supremacy of ourselves over those we most despise in a moderately new way."<sup>19</sup> Similarly, in "Three Quatrains" the narrator advises, "Drink to the splendor of the unfulfilled" (p. 23).

If "Supremacy" and "Three Quatrains" argue that there is a splendor in apparent darkness, "For Calderon" and "John Evereldown" show failures who do not receive the light. The poet does not condemn those failures; he shows only that neither has been elected to receive grace. John Evereldown has found that "God is no friend"; thus he believes there is nothing he can do except "follow the women wherever they call" and pray soon "to be done with it all." The murderer in "For Calderon," too, has been living in his figurative hell for twenty years and is resigned to nothing better after death. But before he dies, he repeats the point of "Supremacy" as he advises his brother Calderon that pride should be put aside for the courage to live.

Therefore Robinson presents in this group of poems on the light two basic alternatives for living in this world: a life of darkness or of light. "The World" recapitulates these alterna-

<sup>18</sup> Sutcliffe, 108.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

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tives in preparation for Robinson's final statements of belief in "Credo" and "The Children of the Night." "The World" contrasts those people who are the "brothers of all humankind" to those who are blind "for sorrow and self-scorn."

Some say the Scheme with love stands luminous,  
Some say 't were better back to chaos hurled;  
And so 't is what we are that makes for us  
The measure and the meaning of the world. (p. 27)

Clearly, "what we are" depends not only on us, what we can make out of our lives, but also on the grace of the coming of the light, which brings knowledge of spiritual and human values.

After presenting the alternatives in "The World," Robinson acknowledges belief in the light in "Credo" and "The Children of the Night." Although it is dangerous in this volume to identify Robinson with his narrators, the general argument of the section and the placement of these two poems in a concluding position, the title "Credo," and the strong statements of faith in *Captain Craig*, Robinson's next new book, indicate that Robinson is using these narrators as mouthpieces. "Credo" begins in darkness, with the narrator so tough-minded, so willing to accept his life for what it is that he "welcomes when he fears, / The black and awful chaos of the night." Then God's grace comes to him both through the darkness and above it. In religious terms one might say that God's grace is both a part of the world and transcends it.

For through it all—above, beyond it all—  
I know the far-sent message of the years,  
I feel the coming glory of the Light! (p. 28)

Notice that the "I" *feels* the light coming; the experience is not intellectual but intuitional. Similarly, in "The Children of the Night" the narrator rejects intellectual creeds that glorify God and approves only "The common creed of common sense" (p. 29). Notice too in "Credo" that although the light is "coming" — that it is not yet completely revealed to him — it is also an immediate experience in the present. He feels it coming — present tense — and is excited by its imminence, as the exclamation mark testifies.

"The Children of the Night" also promises light for men in



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the future and states a belief in light in the present as well. Whether that "other life" that Robinson believes in for the Children of the Night is in this world or in heaven is unclear in the poem. It may be both. It is clear that the promise of the future makes life worth living now:

It is the promise of the day  
That makes the starry sky sublime;

It is the faith within the fear  
That holds us to the life we curse. . . . (p. 29)

At this point the narrator addresses his readers directly, an unusual technique in Robinson's poetry, admonishing them to join him in believing in an idealistic interpretation of the universe, and rising at the end to an evangelical fervor:

So let us in ourselves revere  
The Self which is the Universe!

Let us, the Children of the Night,  
Put off the cloak that hides the scar!—  
Let us be the Children of the Light,  
And tell the ages what we are! (p. 29)

The "Self which is the Universe" exists in each of us, an "Over-Soul" or "Universal Being," to use Emerson's terminology for the same thing, whose currents circulate through each of us, making us part and parcel of God.<sup>20</sup> Although receiving the light is a gift of grace, we can and should try to find it. We can "Put off the cloak that hides the scar," advice typical of Robinson's acceptance of this world in the early poems and the final repudiation of Thomas Hood's method of cloaking his bitterness, which began this section. We can accept our scars without shame, and in the darkness will come the light.

The final section of *The Torrent and The Night Before* is more loosely organized than the preceding sections. The poems are not so carefully paired, nor does the section follow a definite argument. Apparently he put the leftovers in here. Nevertheless, as in previous sections there are the two or three poems which

<sup>20</sup> The image is from Emerson's 1836 "Nature" in Edward Waldo Emerson, editor, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston, 1903), I, 10.

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show the possibility of failure ("On the Night of a Friend's Wedding," "Verlaine"), and most of the poems deal with the general theme Robinson has been building, the necessity of finding value and of living in this world.

At this point in the volume, this is not a new idea, nor are other ideas in the section new: the equality and brotherhood of all men ("The Clerks"), the necessity of courage and bravery ("Kosmos"), and the ability of art to penetrate to the eternal ideal ("Verlaine," "Walt Whitman"). And the emphasis on living actively in a changing world is stronger than ever:

Be up, my soul! nor be afraid  
Of what some unborn year may show;—  
But mind your human debts are paid,  
As one by one the phantoms go.

Life is the game that must be played:  
This truth at least, good friend, we know.—  
So live and laugh, nor be dismayed  
As one by one the phantoms go. (p. 31)

This conclusion of "A Ballade by the Fire" states the main point of the section and of the whole of *The Torrent and The Night Before*. As "Two Sonnets" puts it, we must look neither to the past ("in the names of buried men") nor to some nebulous future in heaven ("in the life that is to come") to find the spiritual meaning of life, the "Unseen." Instead we must "plunge into the crater of the Scheme," try to see the spirit in the material world here and now, slough off our fears, and prepare ourselves to accept the grace of light ("Love's handsel") when it comes (pp. 33-34).

"The Night Before," the long tragic monologue Robinson appended to this volume of otherwise short poems, likewise summarizes the poet's themes and concerns. "The main purpose of the thing," Robinson explained, "is to show that men and women are individuals; and there is a minor injunction running through it not to thump a man too hard when he is down."<sup>21</sup> The idea that each man is different and valuable we have seen several times, and it is quite explicit in the poem.

The main interest of "The Night Before" for us is the tale of lost love told by the narrator to Dominic, a tale in which the

<sup>21</sup> Sutcliffe, 162.

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narrator idolizes his wife and wrecks his life. This idealizing of a human being serves as a warning against ignoring the baseness as well as the spiritual value in every person. Robinson accepts people as they are, not as he dreams they might be.

The narrator and his wife live with such a wild, adolescent passion that they feel like “gods outflung from chaos.”

The baseness in me (for I was human)  
Burned like a worm, and perished; and nothing  
Was left me then but a soul that mingled  
Itself with hers, and swayed and shuddered  
In fearful triumph.<sup>22</sup>

When they are caught up in this “long delusion” the world grows insignificant for them. Finally, however, the wife runs off with another man because “hell and the world are better / For her than a prophet’s heaven,” and the disillusioned narrator shoots his wife’s new lover in the back. Thus the volume ends with a warning against being blinded to the realities of the physical world by concentrating only on the spirit. We must take this world for what it is — a mixture of the material and the ideal, of sadness and gayety, of darkness and light — and not cut ourselves off from it by dreaming of the ideal alone.

<sup>22</sup> Davis, 40. Compare Robinson’s *Tristram* and *Isolt* thirty years later whose erotic love also makes the world meaningless for them. However, they maintain their “delusion” to the end and welcome death as a final escape out of a meaningless world into pure spirit.

