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"Could we go back
To the old garden, we should not stay long;
The fruit that we should find would all be fallen
And have the taste of earth." (CP: 425-6)

On several occasions later in the book, Guinevere recalls these words of Lancelot. At the end, Lancelot has traced Guinevere to the convent at Almesbury, where she will live out her days. He it is who now expresses a longing to return to the lovely summer of the garden. It is Guinevere who now has seen the wisdom of accepting the fact of mutability. When such times, such summers are gone, she says: "We do not bring them back, or buy them back, /Even with our souls" (CP: 446). Though in the closing lines Lancelot joins the party of hope, he is not an Adamic 

For Robinson, as for Faulkner, to try to gain re-entry into paradise was impracticable and frankly futile. If man has a compulsion to look homeward to Eden, the place of delight long lost, his incommunicable gleams tell him that the Light lies ahead. Like Luke Havergal, Lancelot, Flammonde, and the man against the sky, he must climb his own sunset hill to where at last "The dark will end the dark, if anything" (CP: 74).

ROBINSON'S "FOR A DEAD LADY":
AN EXERCISE IN EVALUATION

By CLYDE L. GRIMM

Over a decade ago, Louis O. Coxe challenged admirers of E. A. Robinson's work to tell why they consider praise-worthy the poems they praise and to define "the kind of excellence readers who come to Robinson these days should expect."

Of course, the deficiency Coxe alleges is not peculiar to commentaries on Robinson's work alone: evaluation, as opposed to explication and other genres of criticism and scholarship, is the most troublesome and therefore least often attempted
and perhaps least often successful. But it seems to me that among “significant” poets Robinson has suffered more than most from this deficiency in criticism. Though he has certainly not suffered from want of praise, often of the highest order, his standing among American poets of the first rank remains tentative, due in large measure, I suspect, to a want of substantial praise, the kind supported by close analysis and specific demonstration of excellences.

“For a Dead Lady” is a case in point. Judging from the frequency with which it is anthologized and specially mentioned in studies of Robinson, it appears to be among his most highly regarded poems. Yet surprisingly little analysis has appeared in support of its alleged excellence. Reviews of The Town Down the River (1910), the first collection in which the poem appeared, established the prototype for most ensuing appraisals. Richard Le Gallienne called it “a beautiful dirge” and quoted the last four lines of the second stanza.2 Another reviewer found many poems in the volume “worth quoting” but implicitly acknowledged the special worth of “For a Dead Lady” by quoting it alone and in its entirety.3 Still a third reviewer, to illustrate Robinson’s “verses of the rarest imaginable beauty,” reprinted “For a Dead Lady” together with “Clavering” and “Uncle Ananias.”4 In the half-century since these earliest notices, the same “let-the-magnificent-poem-speak-for-itself” type of criticism has prevailed. Ellsworth Barnard, for example, in the fullest systematic analysis of Robinson’s work yet to appear, surpasses earlier critics only in the extravagance of his praise, calling the poem “indisputably one of the supreme lyrics of the language” but offering in support of this claim no evidence either of extraordinary originality or complexity in the thought and feeling it evokes or of unusual subtlety or intricacy in its technique or form.5

Before going on, let us examine the poem:

No more with overflowing light
Shall fill the eyes that now are faded,
Nor shall another’s fringe with night

3 Anon., “Three Poets of the Present,” New York Times (February 12, 1911), Sec. 6, p. 78.
Their woman-hidden world as they did.
No more shall quiver down the days
The flowing wonder of her ways,
Whereof no language may requite
The shifting and the many-shaded.

The grace, divine, definitive,
Clings only as a faint forestalling;
The laugh that love could not forgive
Is hushed, and answers to no calling;
The forehead and the little ears
Have gone where Saturn keeps the years;
The breast where roses could not live
Has done with rising and with falling.

The beauty, shattered by the laws
That have creation in their keeping,
No longer trembles at applause,
Or over children that are sleeping;
And we who delve in beauty’s lore
Know all that we have known before
Of what inexorable cause
Makes Time so vicious in his reaping.

Now, I gather that what this poem is generally regarded as doing is paying reverent tribute to a lady whose beauty, graciousness, and virtue were unsurpassed and, with some bitterness, asserting the injustice and mystery of death. (There has been some haggling over the lady’s identity, with a number of people believing her to have been the poet’s mother, and some over whether or not she was a flirt, but these disturbing notions have, I believe, been effectively discredited.6) I gather, too, that what is generally regarded as most original in Robinson’s treatment of this traditional theme is the striking imagery evoking the beauties of the lady’s person, manner, and character. Yet this is scarcely enough to establish the poem as a modern classic.

A considerable advance toward the kind of criticism needed has recently been made by Richard P. Adams, who is not content with merely asserting the fineness of the poem (i.e., “‘For a Dead Lady’ is Robinson at his best, and his best is about the best there is”) but seeks to define its excellence in specific

6 R. H. Super initiated the dispute in *Explicator*, III (June 1945), Item 60; Richard Crowder answered in *Explicator*, V (December 1946), Item 19; Super rebutted in *Explicator*, V (June 1947), Item 60; Edwin Fussell, *Explicator*, IX (March 1951), Item 33, and Barnard, 294, convincingly settled the matter, though a last word was had by Sylvia Hart and Esteile Paige, *Explicator*, X (May 1952), Item 51.
terms and by detailed analysis. Adams values Robinson's control of tone (i.e., "it never loses its tone"); the "vivid, concrete images"; and the "development, or increment, in the series of statements" about the lady's charms (i.e., her eyes, her movements, her emotions, the shape of her features, the color of life on her bosom) culminating in the summary word beauty at the beginning of the last stanza. He appears to value also the abrupt and shocking opposition of shattered, which leads into the concluding statement of the mystery of Time's destruction of beauty. After what I find an unfruitful discussion of form, Adams concludes that the excellence of the poem derives primarily from "the superlative management of thematic imagery," by which Robinson achieves "a delicate but tense balance between the beauty of life and the pain of death."

Whereas most readers have not found in the poem the compensation for the thought of death which is expected of an elegy, Adams thinks that this delicate balance permits us to regard the beauty of life itself as that compensation.

Though I disagree with very little of what Adams says, I think that a more thorough analysis is possible and even necessary in order to refine still further our understanding of Robinson's artistry. Once again, I take my cue from Coxe: "Robinson organizes his poems to a disarming extent, often building a structure that is so symmetrically proportioned that only the closest reading discovers the articulation" (p. 252). With this in mind, I have undertaken to read "For a Dead Lady" as closely as possible and to attach as much significance as possible to the various elements of structure. I may as well confess that I myself am not entirely persuaded by some of the "possibilities" I shall suggest, but I am convinced that if Robinson's best work really deserves and is to continue to receive the highest acclaim, critical analysis must drive it harder and farther toward the limits of its "articulation."

First of all, then, I think that the poem has a three-part rather than only a two-part "argument." Each stanza evokes an image or concept of ultimacy, an absolute that might be or has been worshipped by mankind or to which man otherwise might accommodate himself religiously or philosophically. The

The imagery of the first stanza clearly presents the lady as a goddess-like being, who presides over her own heterocosm ("woman-hidden world") and confronts her devotee the poet with just such sublime and incomprehensible wonders as are usually attributed to deity. The term light in the first line is, of course, Robinson’s favorite metaphor for ultimate truth, wisdom, and grandeur, and the imagery of light dominates this stanza.

The second stanza, however, provides the real key to my interpretation, and its first two lines are crucial. The term grace is richly ambiguous. Most obviously, it denotes the graciousness of the lady and, with the modifiers divine and definitive, suggests her perfection in this regard and reinforces the deity-image of the first stanza. It may also suggest the meaning found in the phrase grace period: some temporary postponement of a deadline or temporary exemption from a debt or obligation. This meaning, it goes without saying, is clearly relevant to the transience-of-beauty theme in the poem. Most significant, however, is the common theological meaning of grace: that freely given and unmerited spiritual gift of the Christian God by which fallen man is enabled to purify his life and achieve salvation in eternity. Among the basic tenets of New England Puritanism, with which Robinson was surely acquainted, was "The Perseverance of the Saints," that is, a belief in the irresistibility and permanency of the special grace extended to the elect. Thus "The grace, divine, definitive" clearly invites us to recall a conventional Christian belief that extraordinary virtue (beauty of character) in mankind is attributable to the love and mercy of God and is a sign of his justness and power.

But sharply undercutting and reversing this implication is the following line with its image of deterioration, of pitifully futile adherence, of irresistible or inevitable withdrawal. Significantly, the only revision which Robinson made in the poem, after its first appearance in Scribner's Magazine in September 1909, was the substitution of Clings for Comes. The change was not only apt but necessary. It was more than a matter of replacing a "neutral" verb with a "charged" one. By reversing the direction of movement suggested by the image—from inward to outward, from entering to leaving, Clings is more consistent with the predominant focus on loss or termination and clarifies both the image itself and the attitude or tone of the
poet. On the most literal level, the lines mean that only a slight and rapidly fading trace of the lady’s former beauty (e.g., the rosy hue of her breast) remains and that the total transformation of her appearance into that of a cold and pale corpse is imminent. Equally fitting is the reading that the memory or vivid consciousness of her beauty is fading from the poet’s mind, as the full realization of her death overcomes him. Most significant, however, is the implication that a belief in God’s grace is rapidly fading from the poet’s mind or indeed that the disparity between conventional reassurances of divine love, justice, and power and the destruction of this perfect human being has already led him to repudiate them. The sharp contrast between the alleged permanence of God’s grace and the obvious impermanence of its manifestation in the dead lady’s appearance indicates an ironic intent to challenge conventional platitudes by representing the orthodox Christian God as ineffectual or delusory.

The language of orthodoxy is, in fact, played upon ironically throughout the second stanza. This strategy is foreshadowed in the first stanza by repetition of the imperative third-person shall, which echoes the Decalogue’s imperative “Thou shalt not . . . .” However, it is anticipated most clearly, almost explicitly, in the line “Whereof no language may requite.” Re­quite itself carries theological connotations of sin, atonement, and reward. But the poet will not permit (“may”) mere words—the empty, ineffectual platitudes of Christian doctrine—to obscure or compensate for the wanton destruction of the lady’s flowing, shifting, many-shaded perfection. The ironic employment of this discredited language of accommodation begins in earnest with the image of fading “grace” in the opening lines of the second stanza. The third line (mistaken by some as evidence of a defect in the lady’s character), if read as a continuation of this verbal irony, levels the bitter charge that the Christian God of infinite love and mercy could not or would not extend either to one whose bright laughter suggests the childlike innocence and purity most deserving of both (hushed connotes parental suppression of a child’s carefree and spontaneous outbursts of delight). Calling in the next line carries the connotation of divinely ordained mission or duty, which the lady is prevented by death from answering or fulfilling. The line therefore suggests a contradiction between
the notion of God's demands upon man and His failure or inability to provide man with the means or opportunity to meet them.

The ironic treatment of Christian orthodoxy continues in the couplet of this stanza, where to the suggestion of God's impotence Robinson adds the suggestion of His fictiveness or nonbeing. Conspicuously ignoring the Christian belief that a Father or Guardian oversees His human "children," the poet rather consigns the childlike lady (little reinforces the child-image) to the Roman god Saturn, who not only betrayed and deposed his father, Heaven, but also devoured his own children to prevent being superseded by them. Thus Robinson suggests that ultimacy is more accurately represented by the image of a jealous and unfeeling infanticide than by the image of a solicitous parent. Further evidence of Robinson's intent to repudiate the historic Christian revision or displacement of pagan myth may be inferred from his decision to allude to Saturn rather than his Greek counterpart, Kronos (Kronos or Cronus would conform as well to the iambic meter and would also provide functional alliteration, the doubled k-sound reinforcing the image of harsh destruction which emerges in the third stanza). As Greece gave way to Rome in Western history, worship of Kronos may be said to have given way to worship of Saturn, and as pagan Rome gave way to Christian Rome, worship of Saturn (though he shared the Pantheon with others) may be said likewise to have given way to worship of Christ. In fact, celebration of the Christian savior's nativity displaced celebration of the Saturnalia near the winter solstice in December. Thus Saturn may have been preferable because he was the immediate pagan predecessor of Christ and because allusion to him would therefore be more likely to recall this historic transition and to sharpen the irony of the poet's apparent indifference to it or tacit rejection of it. Finally, however, neither Kronos nor Saturn can be regarded as anything more than a mythic figure, a primitive personification of Time. which, to quote Bulfinch, "as it brings an end to all things which have had a beginning, may be said to devour its own offspring."8 Thus neither is more reassuring—or less

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mythic—than the Christian personification of ultimacy. Indeed, as the last stanza will suggest, Time itself serves some abstract ultimate "cause," which in the poet's view prevails over all personal images of ultimacy.

The concluding lines of the second stanza develop the theme of repudiation still further by implying the inadequacy of the Christian view of man himself. The line "The breast where roses could not live" does indeed suggest more than a Renaissance conceit, as R. H. Super has urged, but certainly does not indicate, as he goes on to speculate, that the lady was a flirt. The rose is not uncommonly employed as a symbol of the Christian view of the human heart, in which the shame, sorrow, and regret aroused by a sense of sin and the fallen condition of man are mingled with the ecstasy of love, joy, and gratitude inspired by God's mercy and Christ's loving self-sacrifice in raising man from spiritual degradation. If roses here carries this symbolic value, then we may say that the lady's heart ("breast") was entirely free of, indeed immune to, any sense of sin or evil, untouched by sorrow or regret, and overflowing instead with unmixed delight. One so perfectly innocent and pure could have no concern with salvation ("rising") because she would be unaware of the need for salvation ("falling"), nor would she comprehend the preoccupation of others with such matters or be entirely at home among them. Needless to say, they in turn might neither comprehend nor fully appreciate her ("The laugh that love could not forgive" may suggest such a defect among her close associates, in addition to the meaning noted above). The tone of the idiom "to have done with" is often one of impatient annoyance, as with some troublesome or frustrating task or circumstance. Has done with may therefore reflect the poet's annoyance with conventional insistence upon sin and salvation coupled with blindness to or disregard of human perfection such as the lady's; it may also suggest his feeling that she is, in a way, better off for having escaped this inhospitable, stultifying milieu. This scornful attitude toward shame and regret, in or out of a Christian context, appears again and again in Robinson's work and resembles closely the attitude of Emerson, whose influence on Robinson is widely acknowledged.

9 See note 6.
The second stanza, then, may be summarized as an ironic repudiation of Christian theology for its failure to acknowledge human perfection and to resolve convincingly the question of what ultimate purpose or concept of justice is served by its destruction. Indeed the ironic image of the Christian deity which emerges from this stanza appears inferior to the lady herself as an embodiment of perfection.

 Appropriately, therefore, the opening of the third stanza substitutes beauty for grace as the proper term for the lady’s perfection, which is thereby stripped of conventional theological connotations and presented as a purely humanistic-aesthetic conception. The beauty of the lady’s defenseless, childlike innocence is once again evoked by the line “No longer trembles at applause” and then is complemented by the image of her beauty as loving and tender mother-protector, which contrasts sharply and ironically with both the earlier image of the defunct Christian “Father” and the following image of an impersonal “cause.” Disentangled from the ineffectual platitudes and misleading contradictions by which Christians attempt to account for it, the destruction of such beauty is restated as an elemental mystery. The poet cannot affirm that the creation is in the keeping either of the Christian father-savior or of any other personal ultimate; his skepticism permits him to deduce and inclines him to affirm only some indifferent, amoral, indeterminate force. It can be “known” not as either the pagan or the Christian anthropomorphists have presumed but only as an abstraction, which causes the thought of death to be felt all the more agonizingly.

 Thus neither conventional theology nor the skepticism born of modern science assuages the pain of the poet’s loss. Yet, though the abstract “cause” born of skepticism proves the most powerful of the three ultimates by destroying both the lady and the poet’s belief in her traditional protector, the lady herself or the “divine” beauty which she embodied remains the most compelling absolute and, for the poet, the most fitting object of worship.

 If this seems a great deal to make the poem mean, I can again invoke the assistance of Coxe: “Robinson is a poet with a prose in view. Read ‘Eros Turannos’ or ‘For a Dead Lady’ or ‘The Gift of God’ and you will feel that the scope of a long naturalistic novel has emerged from a few stanzas” (p. 248).
What I have suggested is no more than Coxe has invited one and all to find. The ideas are consistent with Robinson’s “philosophy,” as it is generally understood, and the compression of a prose argument of such scope into so few lines is just such as has always been recognized as a major characteristic and also a prime value of Robinson’s art. But if a great poem should mean more than it “says,” it should also, according to MacLeish’s famous dictum, “be” more than it means. By now it is a commonplace to say that genuine poetry evokes a nonrational response—emotional and/or aesthetic—in addition to or instead of a merely intellectual one. “For a Dead Lady” certainly does so; in fact, since its ideas display no particular originality, the dramatic interplay of the poet’s emotions becomes its primary interest. I do not pretend that the emotional structure of this or any other poem can be adequately accounted for by prose statement, but criticism is obliged at least to direct attention to this most basic aspect of lyric poetry.

As noted before, Adams has treated as a value the “delicate balance” Robinson achieves between the pleasurable emotion inspired by beauty and the painful one aroused by the thought of death. Again, however, I find somewhat greater complexity than this. The emotional structure of the poem, as might be expected, parallels the three-part argument, as the poet reacts emotionally to its ideas. His adoration of the lady, suggested by the deity-image of the first stanza, is clear enough, as is the mournful coloring provided by No more (echoing, as Adams says, Poe’s “The Raven”). A dramatic development occurs, however, when the poet introduces the idea of non-requital. Though I frankly doubt that the ironic allusion to Christian platitudes, which I have suggested above, is likely to strike most readers immediately, nevertheless the connotations of requite are such as to create some suspense or dramatic anticipation. The gradual unfolding or revelation of its thematic appropriateness, as one becomes aware of the significant accumulation of terms having theological connotations, is likewise dramatic. The poet’s tone reveals still more subtle shading, however, as we sense a dramatic tension between his bitter disillusionment with Christian reassurances and his peculiar reluctance to convey that disillusionment more overtly or to permit his bitterness unrestrained expression. It is as if
some inhibition, perhaps some lingering uncertainty, prevents his making a firm and altogether unequivocal disavowal. The underlying bitterness does emerge more forcefully in the last stanza, especially in *shattered* and *vicious*. The sharp contrast between the violent destructiveness of the impersonal laws and the innocent tenderness of the lady suggests a deeply moving climax to the emotional experience the poet is undergoing. The poem closes abruptly with the understated expression of loss and helplessness, as if the poet could scarcely bear to contemplate any longer either the void left by the lady’s passing or the void of the impersonal universe which he is inclined to affirm. Strangely, however, the personification of Time, indicated by *his* and by the conventional image of the reaper, suggests an irrepressible instinct to believe in, if only to blame, some personal ultimate. This, together with the understatement, indicates again a reluctance to make an unequivocal disavowal and implies perhaps a saving instinct to resist utter despair. Thus the tension in this subtle and complex dramatic structure is even more delicately balanced, its tone more astutely controlled, and its artistic value greater than Adams has hinted.

I shall conclude with a brief comment on the function of formal elements. The first stanza establishes a perfectly regular pattern of eight iambic tetrameter lines, interconnected by the rhyme scheme *ababccab*, with the *b*-lines having feminine rhymes requiring a ninth syllable. Odd-numbered lines have enjambement; even-numbered lines are end-stopped; there are no caesuras. Therefore, although short tetrameter lines tend to jingle, each successive pair of Robinson’s lines moves unimpeded at a smooth and flowing pace. The feminine rhymes add to the end-stops extra “weight,” which together with the regular and dignified pace contributes to the solemn effect of a dirge or hymn. The fifth and sixth lines draw together closely, because of the couplet-rhyme, as if, like the penultimate bars of a musical composition, preparing us for the conclusion, and thereby help to convey a more emphatic sense of closure and self-containment. The perfect regularity of this first stanza, including the perfectly fluid movement of the lines, enhances the visual image of the lady’s perfection. Also contributing to the total impression of the lady’s beauty is the preponderance of euphonious sound effects: the repeated
assonances (chiefly long o’s and e’s and both long and short i’s) and the intricately woven patterns of alliteration (chiefly of f, w, and sh).

It is a further indication of Robinson’s effort to adapt form to thought and feeling that neither of the other two stanzas displays such regularity (or such a pervasive use of sound effects). This is consistent with the reading that neither theism nor science provides an image of ultimacy so perfectly harmonious as the lady herself. Thus the opening line of the second stanza breaks sharply from the pattern of the first with two caesuras and an end-stop. The halting pace makes us read each of the modifiers of grace emphatically, so that the ironic reversal of the second line becomes all the more striking. The broken rhythm may also be said to enhance the sense of Christianity’s broken promise and of the disharmony, both psychological and emotional, experienced by the poet. Another irregularity is the caesura of the fourth line, which is not, it should be noted, grammatically necessary. The forced pause creates an effect of ironic suspension, in this case signaling the poet’s bitter view of the Christian belief in God’s “calling.” The third stanza, like the second, opens with a broken line, the caesura setting off The beauty exactly as The grace is set off above and perhaps calling attention to the meaningful difference I have suggested; the break also emphasizes the opposition between beauty and shattered which Adams has noted. Another forced pause breaks the pattern of enjambment in the third line, again suggesting ironic suspension; indeed this and the following line may be taken as an example of the rhetorical figure zeugma. Trembles with its first modifier suggests the emotion of the lady as child-recipient of affectionate approval but with its second modifier suggests the emotion of the parent-giver. The pause calls attention not only to this two-fold beauty of the lady as loved one and love-giver but also to the ironic contrast between her and both the unlovable, unloving laws of creation and the Christian Father, unloved by the poet because of His failure to demonstrate His love for the lady. A final departure from the pattern of the first stanza is the omission of the end-stop in the sixth line, permitting the unimpeded rush of the emotion-charged and barely restrained final statement.

To conclude this analysis of “For a Dead Lady,” I am
obliged to make explicit what I consider its values. In general, I value the poem's demand for a close reading—but only upon finding in it commensurate aesthetic rewards for such an effort: a subtle but coherent structure, all the more valuable because dramatically complex and moving; a sensitive and purposive selection of language to the end that meaningful and consistent patterns of connotation and imagery enrich the "argument"; and a more than mechanical or arbitrary employment of form. More subjectively, I value Robinson's poised treatment of matters which have tempted more than a few poets into expressions of rash thoughts and overwrought emotions; the Robinson who emerges from "For a Dead Lady" is a man sensitized but not disabled by the experience he records and the truth he perceives in it.

For these things I value "For a Dead Lady" very highly, and though it would not be entirely sound to infer from this one poem the general excellence of Robinson's work, one might with this poem in view seek such excellence elsewhere in his work with some confidence.