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The Power or the Glory: The Dilemma of Edwin Arlington Robinson

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As early as the publication of his first long poem, *Captain Craig* (1902), Edwin Arlington Robinson seemed to have arrived at a system of value which was to shape his career. The story which he tells in this first long narrative is a framework in which to develop the thesis that the individual creates his values and his happiness without regard to the approval or disapproval of society. The Captain has led the kind of life which was most satisfying to him, a life of books, philosophy, good fellowship, and he has ended as a pauper whom strangers must feed until he dies. But he is undismayed as he tells his newfound friends:

You clamor for the food that shadows eat.
You call it rapture or deliverance,—
Passion or exaltation, or what most
The moment needs, but your faint-heartedness
Lives in it yet: you quiver and you clutch
For something larger, something unfulfilled,
Some wiser kind of joy that you shall have
Never, until you learn to laugh with God.¹

Captain Craig seems to speak for the young Robinson in assuming that loyalty to the truth within is the only guide which the individual needs:

Take on yourself
But your sincerity, and you take on
Good promise for all climbing: fly for truth,
And hell shall have no storm to crush your flight
Nor laughter to vex down your loyalty (p. 151).

The Captain is so certain of the integrity of his life that only the triumphant blare of trombones seems to him appropriate for his funeral.

But truth is neither so simple nor so readily accessible as Robinson shows it in *Captain Craig*, and the simple renunciation of the world is not necessarily the way to honor. In Robinson’s second long poem, *Merlin* (1917), we see a middle-aged magi-

¹ *Collected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1937), 119. All citations are to this edition.
cian grappling with the conflict of the desires of the individual soul and the need of a decaying social order for guidance. The problem of the prophet at Arthur’s court is a much more serious one than that confronted by the dying pauper, for Merlin sees not himself but a whole kingdom in death throes. No glad-hearted worship of the sun will avail to solve this complex problem. Indeed the crux which Merlin faces is that he knows that there is no solution. Arthur’s kingdom suffers not only from the disruption caused by the Queen’s love for Lancelot but more disastrously from the hateful ambition of Modred, who is Arthur’s illegitimate son. It is Merlin’s curse that he understands the problem too thoroughly:

I saw too much when I saw Camelot;  
And I saw farther backward into Time,  
And forward, than a man may see and live,  
When I made Arthur king. I saw too far,  
But not so far as this. Fate played with me  
As I have played with Time; and Time, like me,  
Being less than Fate, will have on me his vengeance (p. 297).

But Merlin’s problem is complicated by the fact that he has fallen madly in love with Vivian, a strange young woman with all the mystic attraction of romantic beauty. Here the dichotomy of Merlin’s soul is revealed: his duty to his king, who is the head and symbol of society, and his selfish desire to enjoy the love of Vivian, which means withdrawal from the kingdom of Arthur. Merlin doubtless was right in feeling that he could not have solved Arthur’s problem, but in the end he seems to experience a feeling of guilt for not having made the effort. At any rate he leaves Arthur’s court and enters into a love affair with the beguiling Vivian. After some ten years with her he returns briefly to Camelot, where he has an ineffectual interview with Arthur. He returns to his happiness in Broceliande, but finally, realizing the imminence of Arthur’s destruction, he leaves Vivian forever. Unfortunately it is now, as it had always been, too late to help Arthur. After a brief visit to Camelot, Merlin departs with the despairing Dagonet.

In this poem the demands of society on the individual and the desire of man to fulfill his own happiness in life are balanced about as neatly as they well can be. Merlin sincerely believes that his guidance would not have availed to save Arthur’s so-
ciety; yet at the end he feels guilty for not having made the effort. He gives up his place as counselor for ten years of happiness with Vivian in her idyllic retreat, but in his final despair at the general disaster leaves her.

At the inconclusive ending of the poem Robinson seems to perceive that the struggle between the needs of society and the wishes of the individual has no pat solution. In the complex world in which a gifted man has attained eminence, he has responsibilities which he cannot with impunity renounce. Merlin for a long time seems to experience something of Captain Craig's joy in following the simple demands of his heart, but this course leads him in the end to no triumphal funeral.

In Lancelot (1920), published three years after Merlin, Robinson turns from the position of Captain Craig and from that of Merlin to show that the preservation of society should take precedence over the desires of the individual, however deeply founded. Here Lancelot is a central figure in the problem which to Merlin appeared hopeless. He loves Guinevere with a passion which he at first puts before his loyalty to the King and the society which he nominally serves, and the Queen returns his love with a devotion as deep and passionate as his own. Here is posed the ancient romantic problem of the conflict between an overwhelming love and loyalty to authority, friendship, and religion. Merlin could perceive no other solution than that which indeed ultimately occurred, a confrontation between Arthur and Lancelot with the consequent ruin of Guinevere and of the structure of Camelot. Arthur makes the fatal mistake, which surely Merlin might have helped him avoid, of following the harsh law of the past and consigning the Queen to flames. It is inevitable that Lancelot should rescue her, and in doing so he begins the fatal tragedy of a civil war. Arthur follows with an army his captured Queen to France, and a series of indeterminate battles exhaust the forces of his kingdom.

To this point Lancelot has followed the pattern of the romantic hero, of the determined individual who will sacrifice all for love. It is the way of Merlin and in the tradition of Captain Craig. But in Lancelot a new idea is introduced. Lancelot, like many of Arthur's knights, had gone in search of the Grail, and on the quest he, unlike most of the seekers, had seen the Light, the meaning of which only gradually becomes clear to him. Unlike Guinevere he reaches the conviction that some kind of
peaceful solution, even one which will involve separation from her, is to be preferred to an exhausting war which will destroy the fabric of society. He accepts the solution, proposed by Rome, that Guinevere be returned to Arthur under guarantee of her safety. Lancelot agrees to this compromise in spite of the bitter resentment which Guinevere repeatedly expresses:

Why must I go
To Camelot when your kinsmen hold all France?
Why is there not some nook in some old house
Where I might hide myself—with you or not?
Is there no castle, or cabin, or cave in the woods?
Yes, I could love the bats and owls, in France,
A lifetime sooner than I could the King
That I shall see in Camelot, waiting there
For me to cringe and beg of him again
The dust of mercy, calling it holy bread (pp. 423-424).

Lancelot nevertheless returns the protesting Queen, and the civil strife between him and the King is ended, though unfortunately too late to save Arthur’s kingdom, which is now menaced by the revolt of his bastard son Modred. A final bloody battle destroys both the King and his son, and Lancelot is left to find a new way.

The implication of this poem seems clear enough. An overpowering love does not justify disloyalty to King and society. Lancelot sees, though too late, that the right way involves renunciation of self. The path which Merlin followed to the end and to which Lancelot had committed himself is destructive of the social structure, and no love, however intense, can justify it.

But in Tristram, published seven years later, this solution is no longer valid. Here the lovers, no more deeply devoted to one another than are Lancelot and Guinevere, are determined to destroy themselves as well as their world in order to enjoy a few brief weeks with one another.

There is a curious parallelism in the plots of Tristram and Lancelot—a parallelism, of course, going back to the sources of the legendary material. In each poem a king espoused to a beautiful woman sends a trusted knight to bring the lady home, but on the way the intended bride and the messenger knight fall passionately in love. Their love affair is ultimately discovered by the king, who vows to kill the faithless knight. The two lovers are caught in a trap, which brings to an end their love affair.

In Tristram there is not the threat of love destroying a king-
dom and symbolically a civilization. However, Tristram, at first despairing of any relation with Isolt, goes to Brittany, where he marries a second Isolt and lives with her two years. In deserting this devoted wife to take advantage of his uncle’s imprisonment, he is guilty of breaking not only Queen Isolt’s marriage vows but also his own.

Tristram thus returns to the philosophy of Captain Craig and Merlin in presenting protagonists who determine the values and purpose of their lives without regard to conventional ideas. When they meet danger and death, they do so resolutely with a kind of joy in the fate which they have created for themselves.

The lovers in Tristram feel that they are creatures of destiny. Isolt of Ireland says to Tristram early in the poem:

We are not mighty enough to sentence love
Stronger than death to die, though we may die.
I do not think there is much love like ours
Here in this life (p. 621).

Both Tristram and the Irish Isolt live as if controlled by a force beyond themselves. Their rash meeting on the night of Mark’s wedding is but one example of how they act with no apparent thought of consequences. When they meet again at Joyous Gard, Lancelot’s castle, all fear and ethical considerations are forgotten:

If there was death
Descending on all this, and this was love,
Death then was only another shadow’s name;
And there was no more fear in Tristram’s heart
Of how she fared, and there was no more pain (p. 677).

In outward circumstance the impoverished Captain Craig and the gallant Tristram are far apart. But they agree in being determined to live and die by the values which they have evolved from their own experience.

We have seen that Robinson appears to vacillate between value determined by self and that determined by society. One would suppose that in the field of artistic endeavor he would speak with one voice. Yet here too his testimony is equivocal. In The Man Who Died Twice (1924) Robinson relates the story of Fernando Nash, who gave promise of genius as a composer of symphonies, wrote two symphonies, which though unsuccessful revealed this promise, and then sank into alcoholism
and oblivion. When the narrator, whom we may roughly equate with Robinson, comes upon him, he is beating a drum in a Salvation Army band. The drum beats, it becomes clear, are symbolic of his approaching death, but before he arrives at this ultimate he goes through another bout of alcoholism in which a rat orchestra mockingly plays to him. From this nadir of despair and frustration he somehow struggles back to a kind of clarity and sense of reconciliation, the culmination of which is a dream in which he hears his uncomposed symphonic masterpiece played to him in its full power. Moved as perhaps he had never been, he gropes into the dark hall for paper to record his symphony and topples to the bottom of the stairs.

To the friend who has visited him from time to time during these last phases of his frustrated life, Fernando reveals that the dream symphony which he had heard was sufficient recompense for the tragic life which he had led:

... I had it, once.
Not more than once or twice, and hardly that,
In a same century will another have it,
To know what I have lost...

... . . . . .

But I have found far more than I have lost
And so shall not go mourning. God was good
To give my soul to me before I died
Entirely, and He was no more than just
In taking all the rest away from me.
I had it, and I knew it; and I failed Him (p. 955).

This confidence of the broken and alcoholic Fernando Nash is the same certainty founded on an inner security which makes the death of the pauper Captain Craig triumphant.

But in Amaranth (1934) it is clear that the aspirations of self, artistic aspirations in particular, are not always to be trusted. Indeed everyone in this nighmare world of rotting wharves and gravediggers is living a life of failure because each has mistaken his calling. There are aspiring poets, composers, painters, novelists, inventors, lawyers, doctors, and clergymen following careers for which they were never destined. The writers and artists are those who fail most spectacularly because each apparently cherishes the illusion that he is creating for immortality. But none can face the test of looking into the eyes of Ama-
ranth, whose name comes from the "flower that does not fade." Throughout this long narrative one after another perceives in the gaze of Amaranth the self-recognition that is death. Pink the poet, no two of whose readers "Are mystified in the same way exactly," seeing himself weighed in the appraising eyes, hangs himself; Elaine Amelia Watchman, a popular novelist, collapses into a little mound of dust; Atlas, the painter of blue horses, slashes all his canvases, falls as a dead weight, and is interred by the gravediggers with immoderate haste.

Who, then, is Amaranth, who has such a devastating effect on all that view him? Fargo, who has escaped from the wrong world but revisits it in nightmare, thus perceives him:

If it was man, it might have been all men
And women there as one. All who have been,
And all alive and all unborn were there
Before him, and their eyes were watching him
Out of those two that might have been the eyes
Of death, if death were life (p. 1315).

Amaranth, then, seems to represent the totality of society, past and present, judging the work of the artist. The symbolism is a little cloudy, for at times Amaranth seems to be the touchstone for judging artistic work that will not be of interest to posterity. At other times, however, he seems to judge those who have not found the right vocation in life, such as Styx, the doctor; Figg, the lawyer; and Flax, the clergyman. Here in the wrong world are evidently a whole coterie of souls who are failures in the eyes of society. Robinson does not quite make clear why Pink the poet when judged by Amaranth destroys himself and why Fernando Nash is so certain, with no visible proof, that he is a genius.

Certainly in the long poems Robinson, as he grew older, seemed less convinced of the ability of the self to withstand either outer or inner stress. In *Avon's Harvest* (1921) he shows a man destroyed by fear and hatred, by the inability to forgive. In *Roman Bartholow* (1923) he portrays a man whose betrayal by his friend and by his wife seems to be due to some weakness in his own nature and who because of his failure to understand his wife's temptation is indirectly responsible for her death. *Cavender's House* is a study of a once self-confident man destroyed by doubt of his wife's fidelity and by remorse for his guilt in slaying her. In *The Glory of the Nightingales* Nightin-
gale, who has been responsible for the financial ruin of Malory and indirectly for the death of Malory’s wife, tries before committing suicide to make some amends for his selfish and destructive life. In *Matthias at the Door* Matthias through the loss of his wife and two friends learns, when he is deserted and alone, that his life has been selfish and cruel to those who cared for him. In each of these long poems there is, however, some hope; for the protagonist, though sorely smitten and though frequently losing by his own fault those dearest to him, does move painfully toward redemption. But there is in none of these characters the serene self-confidence of Captain Craig and Tristram nor the more limited assurance of Merlin and Fernando Nash.

In Robinson’s shorter poems the score is rather evenly divided between those characters who by their inner strength seem to overcome adversity and those who by weakness or wrong choices bring doom upon themselves and those about them. In the first group are such characters as Cliff Klingenhagen, Reuben Bright, Aunt Imogen, George and Damaris Annandale, Shadrach O’Leary, Oakes and Oliver in “Two Gardens in Linndale,” Lincoln in “The Master,” Roosevelt in “The Revealer,” Flammonde, Old King Cole, Rahel and Vernagen, Rembrandt, John Brown, and Toussaint L’Ouverture. Among those doomed by their own natures belong John Evereldown, Richard Cory, Aaron Stark, Lorraine, the man in “The Clinging Vine,” the woman in “Another Dark Lady,” the wife in “Llewellyn and the Tree,” Bewick Finzer, Bokardo, the men in “Lost Anchors” and “En Passant,” and Avenel Gray in “Mortmain.”

Since Robinson evidently thought of himself as a moralist, the question of whether man should seek guidance from within or depend upon the judgment of society is an important one. In some poems Robinson seems to answer the question in one way, and in others in a different manner. It is notable that his most confident assertion of depending absolutely upon the inner spirit comes in the early *Captain Craig*, and that in the later years of his career only *Tristram* recaptures this certainty of inner direction. The most that can be said of the other late long poems is that Robinson holds out the hope that the erring individual by learning from his painful experience may ultimately find the integrity to guide him.

Actually, of course, there can be no final solution to the ques-
tion of whether the individual should follow his inner direction or the regimen enforced by society. Robinson has an interesting group of medium-length poems in which his characters puzzle over this problem. Ferguson in "Tasker Norcross" is aware that many persons supply deep needs of their natures by listening to music, looking at paintings, and reading books. He understands intellectually that this area of art is a rich field of human experience, but emotionally he cannot participate in any of these feelings:

"He knew, and in his knowledge there was death.  
He knew there was a region all around him  
That lay outside man's havoc and affairs,  
And yet was not all hostile to their tumult,  
Where poets would have served and honored him  
And saved him, had there been anything to save (pp. 506-507).

The failure of Ferguson is chiefly a limitation of range of experience, and it is a failure of which he himself is aware. Vanderberg's problem in "Sainte-Nitouche" is different in that it brings an individual directly into conflict with the accepted ethical standards of society. Vanderberg is a minister of God who surrenders himself to the love of a living and later a dead mistress and believes the experience to be an ennobling one. He will not give up his church nor his wife and child and continues to preach, though his narrator friend finds his sermons rather "glacial." But it is characteristic of Robinson that he refuses to commit himself upon the ethical issue involved:

The specious weight of loud reproof  
Sinks while a still conviction floats;  
And on God's ocean after storm  
Time's wreckage is half pilot-boats (p. 217).

In one of his most searching dramatic monologues Robinson sees in the soul of Shakespeare a struggle between dedication to a tremendous gift of genius and the petty aspiration to be the leading citizen of Stratford. The values and the good opinion of his fellow townsmen, as Ben Jonson relates the story, weigh more with Shakespeare than does the creation of a Cleopatra. This problem of whether one seeks his standing among the great of all time or among his fellow burghers may have troubled the man who for most of his life was not considered one of the lead-
ing citizens of Gardiner, Maine, for Robinson returns to the problem in “Rembrandt to Rembrandt.” Here the great artist, in disfavor with his fellow citizens, finds himself forced to choose between his new style of painting with the probable consequence of poverty and his old successful style which had brought him fame and money. He is aware that the fashionable critics regard him as a fool:

   And here's a fellow painting in the dark,—
   A loon that cannot see that he is dead
   Before God lets him die (p. 583).

His fearful self tells him that his beloved wife Saskia, had she lived, might have joined with those who see his art in decline. After all, he might as well follow the fashion and eat well in reward for his subservience. But his truer self assures him that the new development in his art is a deeper one. This Rembrandt counsels him:

   You made your picture as your demon willed it;
   That's about all of that. Now make as many
   As may be to be made,—for so you will,
   Whatever the toll may be, and hold your light
   So that you see, without so much to blind you
   As even the cobweb-flash of a misgiving,
   Assured and certain that if you see right
   Others will have to see—(pp. 589-590).

The question with which Robinson grapples throughout his character studies is one that has troubled the world since men began to record their thoughts and no doubt much longer. It is one which becomes especially acute in times of crisis and in division of national opinion. Robinson struggled with this dilemma, but he did not solve it. The early certainties of Captain Craig become more and more remote in the late poems, and the conviction based on inner guidance seems gradually to change to a humbled reassessment of values based on conflict with others and on the realities of the world. Yet I think that it can be said that throughout his career Robinson respected the lonely man groping out his own way. Keenly aware that both the individual and society are subject to error, he seemed gradually inclined to place his hope for both on the individual who through the batterings of fate and the waverings of human frailty has attained a measure of wisdom.