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THE TEMPERING OF FAITH IN
E. A. ROBINSON’S “THE MAN AGAINST THE SKY”

BY ROBERT S. FISH

Introduction

"The Man Against the Sky," first published in 1916, is a key work in the study of Edwin Arlington Robinson’s poetry. Most critical studies and biographies of Robinson discuss the poem to varying degrees. An area of disagreement among critics concerns the poem’s persona. One group views the piece as a didactic and philosophical poem, a personal expression of Robinson’s philosophy spoken in Robinson’s own voice. The other view is that while the poem does embody a philosophy, and one which is similar in some respects to the philosophy found in a number of Robinson’s poems, the speaker of “The Man Against the Sky” is not Robinson himself but is a dramatized persona speaking within a dramatic situation. The poem, therefore, is primarily dramatic rather than didactic in nature. Additionally, the poem is philosophical to the extent that a philosophy may be inferred from its contents, a statement true of most poetry. The philosophy in “The Man Against the Sky” is vivified and presented in the context of a dramatic situation through the speaker.

The thesis of this essay is that this latter position—the poem should be considered dramatic rather than didactic—is correct.

The Speaker as His Own Auditor

The speaker of “The Man Against the Sky” is primarily identifiable as a dramatized persona through his portrayal of certain characteristics of a prophet: he is a man of faith; he is sensitive to evil and concerned with combating degeneration of faith; through an intuitive experience he has perceived truths that other men have not; and he is aware of his responsibility to persuade other men to seek the truth.1

Although he wears the mask of a prophet, the speaker actually doubts the strength of his faith. He constructs a test of his belief out of the situation which centers upon the “flame-lit” hill and the man in the midst of the fire. Thus the poem be-

comes the development and resolution of his struggle: Within the situation of the hilltop as fiery trial, the “I” addresses himself in an attempt to strengthen his faith.

His primary intent is to persuade himself of the truth of his prophecy. He has had a glimpse of the Word, which gives him a stronger faith than most men have (since most men never see even a glimpse), but to the speaker himself his faith is not so firm as it should be. He is tempted by the sin of materialism; he admits that he does not “know” if an afterlife exists (“Where was he going, this man against the sky?/You know not, nor do I.” 11.224-25), but he accepts its existence on faith because he has had a glimpse of the truth of it. But the materialist proudly says “I know” and bases his unqualified statement on scientific knowledge. The materialist is not haunted by doubts; the materialist does not need faith because he believes he has proof. The position is appealing to the speaker in that it promises complacency in place of doubt, “facts” in place of faith, pride in place of nagging guilt, the known in place of the unknown. Perhaps the amount of time the speaker spends in directly condemning materialism, almost two-thirds of the poem, is an indication of the place he assigns it in the hierarchy of temptations. Perhaps when the speaker says “we” he really means “I”; when a person speaks out loud to himself, it is not uncommon for him to use the plural since he must simultaneously play two roles—speaker and auditor. Therefore, since the “I” may have some doubts concerning his ability to withstand the temptation of materialism as suggested by his admission that he does not “know” and by his repeated denunciations of materialism, the poem should be viewed primarily as a soliloquy.

But if the speaker intends to address himself, why does he wear the mask of the prophet? He does so as a persuasive strategy for himself. The speaker probably believes that by putting on the mask of faith, the mask will in time become real. By acting as though he has no doubts concerning his faith, he may aid himself in overcoming the doubts. The continual wearing of the mask of sure faith may transform the speaker’s own features into those of the mask. At that time the mask is no longer a mask but has become the speaker’s real countenance. The mask therefore serves a persuasive purpose for the speaker.

2 Collected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York, 1937), 66. All subsequent citations are from this edition.
The dramatic situation of the poem is the catalyst for the speaker's actions. As he walks in the country, perhaps lost in his own thoughts, and looks up to see a "sudden" hill, unexpected and arresting in the chaos and glare of the sunset behind it, the "I" stares at "one who moved and was alone up there" (1.6). This is the situation, the speaker watching a lone man walk over the crest of a "bleak, round, and high" (1.4) hill, which is silhouetted against a blazing sunset. This situation is inspiring for the speaker. He envisions the man on the hill as "the last god going home/Unto his last desire" (11.8-9). And he also envisions himself as the man on the hill. The actual man "moved along the molten west,/And over the round hill's crest" (11.25-26) and was gone, but for the speaker the moment when the man "stood where I had found him,/On high with fire all round him" (11.23-24) is frozen in time. The speaker sees himself as the man, having climbed the hill of life and now, before descending the hill's dark side to his life's end, he stands poised on the crest, engulfed in the questioning light of truth. Is his faith strong enough to withstand a trial? How can he strengthen his faith? What will happen to him if he fails his trial of fire? The "I" forces himself to deal with these questions. The situation of the hilltop as place of trial therefore precipitates the "I's" creation of a test of his faith.

Types of Men as Model and Temptations

The speaker's first reaction is to think of the type of man he would become if he passed his trial—a man of sure faith. The "I" as prophet is closer to this type than to any of the other four in the poem (the innocent optimist, the indifferent pessimist, the man of lost faith, and the materialist). But to himself, the speaker is not confident that he has "walked while others hardly dared/Look on to see him stand where many fell" (11.35-36). The man of sure faith is willing

To mount where more of him shall yet be given,
Bereft of all retreat,
To sevenfold heat,—
As on a day when three in Dura shared
The furnace. (11.39-43)
The man of faith has been tested in fiery trials, just as the three in Dura, and has emerged with a firmer faith each time. This firmer faith is the goal of the speaker in expressing the poem—to pass through the “furnace” with his faith increased.

After describing the ideal man he would like to be, the speaker reminds himself of the man he used to be—the innocent optimist. The “I” once saw and heard “no more than what his innocence requires” (1.64). This was before he viewed life realistically, as he does at present, realizing the pain and tedium of existence (See 11.283-86). In the possibility that the pressures of his trial of faith tempt him to desire to return to a past state of innocence, the speaker recalls the pitiable and meaningless happiness he once possessed. The optimist, in his naïveté, sets his life goals so low that meeting them is not a challenge: “Why trouble him now who...to no other height aspires/Than one at which he neither quails nor tires?” (11.63-66). The speaker-prophet could never be an innocent optimist again, for he could never regain the naïveté necessary for that belief. Yet, the life of the optimist is comfortable, as the speaker probably remembers: The strife, the struggles such as the “I” is experiencing, now did not exist; perhaps it would be simpler to go backward than forward; perhaps he could regain his innocence. To see again a world always pleasant and fresh—is that not to be desired?

The optimist, the “I’s” past, is a temptation to him, a temptation he must meet and conquer. Even if he must rationalize to the point of thinking his past outlook empty of all meaning, he will if that can help him overcome the temptation. Therefore, through the description of the optimist, the “I” reminds himself that no matter what happens he is better to be what he is than what he was. He would rather “mount where more of him shall yet be given,” (1.39) that is, face continual tests of his faith no matter the consequences, than enjoy the “meaningless” complacency of finding

As always, underneath him solid ground
Whereon to be sufficient and to stand
Possessed already of the promised land. (11.49-51)

This second type helps to strengthen the “I’s” faith by pointing up the values of the present in comparison to the past.

Having pictured the man he desires to be and having successfully overcome his first temptation, the man he once was, the
speaker looks to the future again to face other temptations.

He might become an artist, perhaps an actor or painter (11.82-88). In that role, he would be a creator; he would become godlike. How satisfying and powerful to be creative. But this desire is also the speaker’s temptation; he must fight the self-centeredness within himself that craves satisfaction. The “I” fights back with the idea that were he to become an artist, his egotism would gain control of him and he would become a pessimist, a cynic, a man indifferent to anything that did not have him as its center:

He may have had for evil or for good
No argument; he may have had no care
For what without himself went anywhere
To failure or to glory. (11.77-80)

If he did become an artist, he would probably become “immovable to old idolatries” (1.83). If he did become an actor, he would probably be so egotistical as to be “annoyed that even the sun should have the skies/For such a flaming way to advertise” (11.85-86). And if he did become a painter, he might become “sick at heart/With Nature’s toiling for a new surprise” (11.87-88). By the speaker’s reasoning, the consequences decidedly outweigh the advantages.

The speaker also considers the possibility that he may become pessimistic and cynical as a result of failing his trial of faith for whatever reason. Were he unsuccessful in resolving his conflict in his favor, he might become so disillusioned and cynical that his self-centeredness could easily become dominant in his life and he would be a man who

Saw truth in his own image, rather small,
Forbore to fever the ephemeral,
Found any barren height a good retreat
From any swarming street,
And in the sun saw power superbly wasted.

(11.92-96)

By letting his ego dictate his attitudes, whether through his becoming an artist or otherwise, what would he accomplish with his life? Would he create immortal works of art? Would they be worth the price he would have to pay? The truth is probably that

when the primitive old-fashioned stars
The speaker tries to convince himself that by giving in to his ego's desire to become an artist, he would render his life empty and bitter. He also holds this consequence up to himself as a warning of what he might become should he fail his trial at any point.

But his earthly ambition is strong and the warning of the pessimist may not be sufficient to overcome it. After all, if he were a pessimist, he would still have some faith, if only in himself, and he would still have his dreams. The speaker must now struggle against this aspect of his self-indulgence, and he does so by portraying the man of lost faith and of lost dreams. By seeking worldly success he may reach levels of great power (1.113) and influence which would again allow him to play the role of God, but his position would be ephemeral; he would climb the sun-drenched hill

_with infirm unsearching tread,
His hopes to chaos led,
He may have stumbled up there from the past,
And with an aching strangeness viewed the last
Abysmal conflagration of his dreams,—
A flame where nothing seems
To burn but flame itself, by nothing fed;
And while it all went out,
Not even the faint anodyne of doubt
May then have eased a painful going down
From pictured heights of power and lost renown,
Revealed at length to his outlived endeavor
Remote and unapproachable forever. (11.103-15)

The faith of the "three in Dura" was strong enough to prevent a fate such as this; the speaker must likewise find the strength. If his faith cannot withstand these tests in the heat of the "furnace," "sick memories of a dead faith" may gnaw at his heart (11.116-17). Even if he were a "hierophant," "the living death/Assigned . . . by chance" could befall him (11.118-20). The glory he would gain from worldly success would be quickly forgotten; his power could not save him from a moral and spiritual downfall. At that point the speaker would be
faced with a different internal struggle: whether to "cry out and stay on horribly," to "go forward like a stoic Roman/Where pangs and terrors in his pathway lie," or to "curse God and die" by committing suicide (11.131-36). Suicide would certainly be a resolution of the struggle with self-centeredness, but the speaker seeks a different resolution.

The man of lost faith is a fate to be avoided, and should be the worst that could befall him for the sin of wanting to be god-like. No, one other possibility remains—one more dangerous, more evil, more destructive to self and others than any other belief: materialism. The materialist has built "a living reason out of molecules / Why molecules occurred" (11.142-43); everything in the universe can be explained in terms of physical matter. Therefore any spiritual aspect to existence which cannot be proven by the scientific method does not exist. The materialist achieves the height of man's desire to "play God"; with science he controls the universe; when he discovers the secret of life he will be the supreme creator. Materialism is, therefore, the speaker's greatest temptation. It is the enemy. The insidious influence of materialism may be the cause of the speaker's fall. He does not admit this threat openly to himself, but his repeated and vigorous denunciations of the philosophy strongly suggest that he views materialism as a force potentially debilitating to all men, himself included, whose faith is not secure. Materialism is a cancer, a death disguised behind the acceptable and benign mask of science. As a prophet, the speaker fears its effects on others. As a man who has doubts concerning his own faith, he fears its effects on himself. Its allure is strong; therefore, the speaker attacks it vigorously in an attempt to overcome it.

Materialism is false, he tells himself, because its premises are false ("an airy monument" [1.154]); he would be wasting his life to believe in a philosophy that will "like once-remembered mighty trees go down / To ruin" (11.160-61). Materialism would serve his self-interests, however; perhaps he may become "so great/That satraps would have shivered at his frown" (11.165-66). "He may have been a master of his fate./And of his atoms" (11.169-70), or "a captain of a host" (1.173), all positions of influence, all ego-satisfying. But the speaker foresees only a dangerous pride and finally death as a result (11.175-78). The "I" has struck at his weakness, earthly
ambition, in this last statement, but not hard enough to slay such a formidable foe. He must try harder.

Now that the speaker has identified his real enemy, he ceases his revelation of types of men. In that revelation, the five types just discussed, the speaker has contemplated the innocence of his past and the failure or glory awaiting him in the future. As he overcame the temptation offered by the optimist, pessimist, and man of lost faith, he in effect affirmed his own belief as true and valid. One final temptation remains between him and triumphant glory. The test of the "furnace" is now upon the "I's" ability to overcome materialism's siren song as proof of the strength of his faith. The speaker attempts to resolve this struggle in the discussion section of the poem, strophes eight and nine.

The Speaker's Struggle Against Materialism

The content of strophe eight is primarily a denunciation of materialism. The speaker opens the strophe by identifying himself with the man against the sky:

> Whatever the dark road he may have taken,
> This man who stood on high
> And faced alone the sky,
> His way was even as ours;
> And we, with all our wounds and all our powers,
> Must each await alone at his own height
> Another darkness or another light.
> (11.179-81, 189-92)

The "I" realizes that he cannot depend on help from anyone else; this struggle is his to pass or fail alone. Knowing that his strength must come from within, the speaker accepts this responsibility and faces his enemy.

He asks himself a series of questions designed to resist the temptation by demonstrating materialism's faulty reasoning. If man refuses to believe either in a spiritual existence or in "oblivion" following death, would not his will be thwarted, enabling him to commit suicide?

> If inference and reason shun
> Hell, Heaven, and Oblivion,
> May thwarted will (perforce precarious,
> But for our conservation better thus)
Have no misgiving left
Of doing yet what here we leave undone?
(11.194-99)

Therefore, man believes in either the darkness or the light. And if man believes that "oblivion," or "another darkness," awaits him, what is the logic of bringing children into a world "that would have still in sight/A manifest end of ashes and eternal night?" (11.211-12). Is a belief in a universe governed solely by principles of physics and chemistry the only result of our scientific knowledge? Must we act as though our theories are facts and not admit the possibility that a spiritual aspect exists?

Is this the music of the toys we shake
So loud,—as if there might be no mistake
Somewhere in our indomitable will? (11.213-15)

Is man nothing more than “brains and bones and cartilage” tossed about by “crass chance”?

If this we say, then let us all be still
About our share in it, and live and die
More quietly thereby. (11.221-23)

The final statement is ironic: The speaker is anything but “still” as he goes on to challenge materialism for two more strophes, thus implying that he is more than a physical being. By utilizing this type of reasoning, the speaker intensifies his belief that man is spiritual in addition to being physical. He also weakens his desire to succumb to materialism’s temptation.

The speaker next admits to himself that he has doubts by saying, “Where was he going, this man against the sky?/You know not, nor do I” (11.224-25). The Word of truth cannot be “found or known” “save in incommunicable gleams/Too permanent for dreams” (11.230-32). Although the “I” has seen a gleam of the Word, he cannot prove it exists; he can, however, have faith in its existence and permanence. If his faith is strong enough, it will take the place of proof. The speaker reasons with himself that his faith in the Word can be secure even though the Word is vague and known only in gleams:

this we know, if we know anything:
That we may laugh and fight and sing
And of our transience here make offering
To an orient Word that will not be erased.

The speaker intends this strategy to help himself understand that his faith can be strong enough to withstand the fires of the furnace. This understanding without revelation may aid in making his faith stronger.

The rest of the strophe is the speaker’s final concentrated effort to resolve the struggle. He tells himself that nothing that stimulates a desire for worldly success (meaning materialism) has had an effect upon the past or will have an effect on the future:

No tonic and ambitious irritant
Of increase or of want
Has made an otherwise insensate waste
Of ages overthrown
A ruthless, veiled, implacable foretaste
Of other ages that are still to be
Depleted and rewarded variously
Because a few, by fate’s economy,
Shall seem to move the world the way it goes.

Earthly ambition is senseless because it is illusionary power and does not really “move the world.” Whatever future generations do either to harm or help themselves will occur in spite of materialism’s boasts, not because of them.

The speaker then convinces himself that no philosophy based on social reform will last or be of any value:

No soft evangel of equality,
Safe-cradled in a communal repose
That huddles into death and may at last
Be covered well with equatorial snows—
And all for what, the devil only knows—
Will aggregate an inkling to confirm
The credit of a sage or of a worm,
Or tell us why one man in five
Should have a care to stay alive
While in his heart he feels no violence
Laid on his humor and intelligence
When infant Science makes a pleasant face
And waves again that hollow toy, the Race.

These philosophies cannot explain why one man in five accepts science’s notion that the improvement of the human race is
man’s goal. The speaker holds up science which after all cannot prove all it asserts in comparison to the Word which asks only faith. Only the Word can explain mankind’s purpose. With faith in the Word, the speaker can know meaningful happiness and peace. And with faith, the speaker can be sure that oblivion is not his ultimate fate; something exists beyond this material life.

The speaker continues to demonstrate the fallacy of materialism with the ironic argument that if we are indeed in a

planetary trap where souls are wrought
For nothing but the sake of being caught
And sent again to nothing, (11.255-57)

man should “go away” and let the animals have domain over the earth. Through irony the “I” persuades himself of the untenable position of the materialists.

Strophes eight and nine are thus a discussion of the prophecy that materialism will be proven false and that some form of nonphysical existence exists beyond death. Their purpose is to strengthen, primarily through irony, the beliefs of the speaker as he stands in the midst of the fiery “furnace” on the hill’s crest.

The Speaker’s Victory Over Materialism

In the final strophe the speaker apparently overcomes the enemy, the obstacle to his becoming a man of sure faith. He asks seven questions of himself, each designed to move his faith closer toward total fulfillment and farther from the temptations of materialism. Irony is still the speaker’s basic weapon: He asks if we are “to pity ourselves and laugh at faith/And while we curse life bear it?” (11.291-92). He asks: “And if we see the soul’s dead end in death,/Are we to fear it?” (11.293-94). The point is, of course, that the “I” does not see the “soul’s dead end in death”; he sees something else “beyond our sunset fires”—the glimmer of the distant light of truth “that lights again the way by which we came” (11.297-98). The speaker resolves his struggle by turning toward the light. His faith has withstood, although not easily, the torments and temptations imposed on it by materialism. The turning point for the speaker occurred in strophe nine, resulting from the exposure of the promise within the Word and the lies of ma-
terialism. The speaker’s overt recognition of his triumph is found in the questions and final statement of strophe ten.

The final statement of the poem is an ironic dismissal of the once-dreaded materialism. If it is true that

there be nothing after Now,
And we be nothing anyhow,
And we know that, (11.306-8)

then only weaklings would not commit suicide and escape the “dungeon” of a meaningless, chance existence (11.304-14). The speaker’s attitude seems firm. He appears convinced that the Word exists and that materialism will be proven false as he knows it to be. The “I” has survived the test of the “furnace” and emerges as the man of sure faith, tempered by the fires of his inner struggle.

Conclusion

As a dramatic poem in which the speaker addresses himself for the purpose of self-persuasion, “The Man Against the Sky” reveals itself as a test both of materialism’s tenet that the universe consists solely of matter and of the “I’s” belief in something “after Now.” The focal point of the poem is the image of the “flame-lit” hill with the lone man standing in the midst of the fire, as did the “three in Dura.”

The speaker’s trial was not a simple one. By recalling the man he used to be and conjecturing upon the man he would like to be and the men his self-centeredness might lead him to be, he accomplished two things: He reinforced his desire to emerge victorious from his “furnace” and he identified the main cause of his being unsure of his faith. The “I” primarily employs irony from then on in the poem to prove to himself that materialism is a false belief and one unable to challenge effectively the existence of the Word. He has triumphed in his contention with evil and his own weakness. The “I” becomes a man of sure faith.

“The Man Against the Sky” will remain a pivotal poem of the works of Robinson because it is his best dramatic statement of the prophecy: The cosmic vision of the Word also passes through the “fiery furnace” of the poem, as do the speaker and implied auditor; and it is tested and tempered in the flames, resulting in an artistic fusion of dramatic, phi-
osophical, and rhetorical elements. The vision is noble in its execution, and the Word emerges triumphant from the furnace to illuminate in resplendent glory man’s position in the universe.

ROBINSON’S CAMELOT: RENUNCIATION AS DRAMA

By Celia Morris

Obviously beguiled by the stories of King Arthur and his court, E. A. Robinson composed Merlin (1917) and Lancelot (1920). To have any success, however, with the Arthurian material, he had radically to change its emphasis so as to make it congenial to his sensibilities and skills. The old legends, in Malory as in his French and English sources, were mainly stories: their dominant concern was narrative. But Robinson is not a poet of action and he never really tells a story. His mind is a reflective one; he is best at several removes from an event, trying to understand all that it may signify in the lives of his protagonists.

Most critics say that the Arthurian material appealed to Robinson because it is about the end of a world, the fall of a kingdom. Robinson wrote the poems when he was stricken by the fact of World War I, and a good deal of evidence suggests that he shared Henry James’s feelings about it:

The plunge of civilization into this abyss of blood and darkness by the wanton feat of those two infamous autocrats is a thing that so gives away the whole long age during which we have supposed the world to be, with whatever abatement, gradually bettering, that to have to take it all now for what the treacherous years were all the while really making for and meaning is too tragic for any words.

It was for them a “goodbye to all that” and the realization as well that “all that” had contained the seeds of its own defeat. The Arthurian material provided Robinson with an analogy, and he could use it to explore in his own particular way the personal faults and treacheries that brought the end.

1 Tristram (1925), surprisingly a popular success that won for the poet the last of his three Pulitzer prizes, is decidedly inferior to the other two. In his recent fine book on Robinson, Louis Coxe calls it “the only meretricious performance in his career.” Edwin Arlington Robinson: The Life of Poetry (New York, 1969), 123.