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RICHARD Cory: ARTIST WITHOUT AN ART

By Lawrence Kart

(The following is a response to Jerome Kavka's "The Suicide of Richard Cory," a somewhat longer version of his "Richard Cory's Suicide: A Psychoanalyst's View.")

Accepting Jerome Kavka's view that the suicide of Richard Cory had a narcissistic basis, and reading the poem as Robinson's account of the effect on society of such an extreme act of narcissism, leads one to make a further corroborative point. If this reading of the poem is placed alongside the pattern of Robinson's career (which Kavka has described as an attempt by the poet to master his own somewhat narcissistic nature), then Richard Cory can be seen as an artist without an art, or an artist whose practice lacked certain qualities that might have sustained him.

That Richard Cory was something of an artist, that at least he had an aesthetically sensitive nature, is clear from the first three stanzas of the poem, which suggest that Cory's trips down town were events in which the people were spectators and Cory was the performer or the object on exhibit. Cory's role, it would seem, was simply to be Richard Cory—to allow the people to react to him in their various ways—and apart from the question of whether Cory was aware that he had any such role, it is not far-fetched to imagine him taking a kind of artistic care to insure that all aspects of his external self were harmoniously elegant before he ventured forth. (That Cory's elegance was cultivated is implied by the phrase "admirably schooled in every grace.") Another phrase—"and he glittered when he walked"—makes explicit the first flaw in Cory's artistic practice. Since he has dazzled the audience, Cory here seems to be the artist triumphant, but the cost to him is great because, by the narrator's account, Cory at that moment resembles not a man but a jewel-like object. (One wonders whether Robinson was suggesting some foreknowledge by the narrator that Cory, too, felt
himself to be more a thing than a person.) In any case, Cory’s art is flawed because he himself is its sole product, thereby ruling out any aesthetic or emotional distance between himself and his narcissism.

The second flaw in Cory’s art is that he allows no room for the audience to transmit value back to him. Although there is envy in the narrator’s description of Cory in the first three stanzas, there is also admiration and some record of how Cory’s self-art could give pleasure to those who apprehended it. Yet there is no indication that Cory was aware of the reactions (whether envious or pleasurable) that the people had to him. Contrast this with Robinson’s sense of his audience, particularly the letter to Harry DeForest Smith in which the poet defends his work against the charge of self-indulgent morbidity by imagining some “despairing devil” who might be made “a little stronger” by reading his verses.¹

Returning to narcissism, we can see why Cory, despite his aesthetic temperament, was an artist without an art. Cory is able to lavish aesthetic effort only on his literal self, and he cannot appreciate the effect that elegantly surfaced self has on other human beings—assuming he is aware, in any real sense, that there are other human beings. So, in “Richard Cory,” Robinson might be telling us (and himself) that an artist who does not produce works that are separate from himself—no matter how much of his self he puts in them—and who is unable to imagine and feel the effect his art has on others, will find that he has been denied art’s healing power and has been left open to such losses of self-esteem as the one that led Richard Cory to self-destruction.

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