AN ANALYSIS OF THE PHILOSOPHY IN THE POETRY
OF EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Graduate School
Indiana State Teachers College

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of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science

by
Jock Wilson
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Committee on thesis:

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Representative of English Department:

[Signature]

Date of Acceptance August 18, 1955
PREFACE

Acknowledgement is herewith given to the investigator's wife, Mrs. Irma N. Wilson, whose assistance in classifying research data, whose advice as to proper editing and word choice, and whose preparation of the typed manuscript have contributed greatly to this study.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Edwin Arlington Robinson is more than just a poet; he is a poet whose message has definite philosophical implications. It is the purpose of this paper to ascertain to some degree just what that message and those implications consist of.

Although there is a lack of categorical philosophical expression in poetry, nevertheless, all poets, if they are poets in the profound meaning of the word, are certainly of a philosophical caste of mind as well. For poets like philosophers deal with universalities.

A. THE PROBLEM

Statement of the problem. The purpose of this study is (1) to evolve an interpretation of the major philosophical tenets inherent in the poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson, (2) to present an original interpretation of selected poems as well as a favorable, critical evaluation of the poetry, and (3) to summarize current criticism and philosophical analysis of his poetry, pointing out instances of agreement and disagreement with the investigator's findings.

Importance of the study. The prime importance in a
study of this nature is contained in the present and potential poetic worth of the poet himself. While it is generally agreed that Robinson has made an important contribution to American poetry, it is the investigator's opinion that all of the ramifications of this contribution have not yet reached their fruition.

This paper serves as a modest and limited attempt to bring more of Robinson to light. Because of the comparatively recent death of the poet, it is feasible to assume that more studies will be made of his work in the future, particularly studies dealing with his philosophical contribution. The bulk of research to date has centered on literary rather than philosophical criticism and analysis. Hence, any importance that this paper might have would be contained in the sense of its taking its representative place in the early studies of Robinson's philosophical message.

B. THE DATA

Sources of data. The biographical information in Chapter II was derived from various critical studies, from periodical reviews, and from commentary in various anthologies. The investigator is particularly grateful for the comprehensiveness of information found in biographical accounts by Hermann Hagedorn and by Emory Neff.

Most of the data in Chapter III were derived from
critical analyses of his poetry by Mark Van Doren and by Yvor Winters. The evaluation of his poetry and the appraisal of Robinson's poetic worth contained in this chapter represent the investigator's personal views, and as such, are not documented.

The data in Chapter IV, concerning Robinson's philosophical tenets, were taken from Estelle Kaplan's Philosophy In The Poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson and from Edwin Arlington Robinson by Ellsworth Barnard.

Several other studies, reviews, anthologies, and articles were used in this paper, and they are enumerated in the bibliography.

Treatment of data. No attempt was made to treat the data in an unusual way, except that a great deal of selectivity was used in employing data for certain chapters.

The data used in Chapter II were selected only for their possible uses in depicting the gradual development of Robinson's mind and attitude. Biographical information, per se, was not used in this chapter. The investigator particularly sought out the data that contained either an implied or expressed inference to Robinson's philosophical views.

The data used in Chapters III and IV, pertaining to the critics' appraisal of Robinson's poetic stature and to
his philosophical implications, were tabulated objectively without any judgment as to their favorable or unfavorable critical value.

The investigator made a conscientious effort to present the data employed in its original context, and all of the data contained herewith have been carefully documented and accredited with their proper footnotes.

C. ORGANIZATION OF REMAINDER OF THE THESIS

The study is divided into three general divisions: Robinson's background; his contributions; and his philosophical implications.

The division concerning his background has been purposely limited to those biographical clues that appear relative to his general attitudes. The division dealing with his contributions includes both his works and his contribution to the poetic tradition. The investigator's personal appraisal of Robinson's poetic worth or greatness as well as original interpretation of his poetry is contained in this division. The final division, relative to Robinson's philosophical implications, contains both the critics' and the investigator's findings.

An analysis of his position in the cultural, historical, literary tradition, as well as an examination of his poetry, serves to shed enlightenment upon his basic
philosophical attitudes.

The investigator's evaluation of the poetry, his appraisal of Robinson's poetic worth, and his personal belief in Robinson's future greatness, have prejudiced and limited to some extent the objectivity in the final deductions as to his implied philosophical attitudes.
CHAPTER II

THE BACKGROUND OF A POET

Robinson's life falls into four natural divisions: his years of learning, his years of knowing, his years of suffering, and his years of achieving. These divisions shed enlightenment upon his general development of attitude.

The years of learning, his first nineteen years, are years of learning in all youth, the time for ideals and dreams. Hagendorn describes Robinson as a boy "Calm and incorrigibly satisfied with apples and romance and ignorance." The years of learning were years of idealism. As a high school boy Robinson writes:

Now and then my fancy caught a flying glimpse of a good life beyond--Something of ships and sunlight, streets and singing, Troy falling, and ages coming back, and ages coming forward. . . .

This youthful enthusiasm crystalizes for Robinson in the second period of his life, his last nine years at Gardiner, Maine. The years of knowing are an awakening to the poet. He begins to know life as it is. He is able to perform only odd jobs; he is looked upon as a misfit by the

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2Ibid., p. 30.
villagers. Seasoned by two years study at Harvard, he begins to realize that being an artist in a materialistic world is a challenging task. Years of restlessness at home, climaxed by the death of both parents, culminate in Robinson's escape to New York City in 1897. Robinson has come to know reality and he is shocked and bewildered by what he sees.

Alas! I said,—the world is in the wrong.
But the same quenchless fever of unrest
That thrilled the foremost of that martyred throng
Thrilled me, and I awoke... and was the same
Bewildered insect plunging for the flame
That burns, and must burn somehow for the best.3

In New York City begin his years of suffering.
Poverty, alcoholism, and nonentity surround his days. But what makes him suffer more is the constant stream of rejection slips. These years of suffering, augmented by the deaths of his two brothers, cause Robinson, in despair, to leave poetry and to try the drama. This, too, meets failure. Somehow these years of suffering seem to be consummated in sections of Robinson's "Bokardo."

There's a debt now on your mind
More than any gold?
And there's nothing you can find
Out there in the cold?
Only--what's his name?--Remorse?
And Death riding on his horse?
Well, be glad there's nothing worse
Than you have told.

Past a doubt they will indeed
More than you have earned.
I say this because you need
Ablution, being burned?
Well, if you must have it so,
Your last flight went rather low.
Better say you had to know
What you have learned.4

Of this stage of Robinson's life, Hagedorn writes:

The coming of spring brought no light to Robinson's
darkness and one May day Torrence lured him out into
Washington Square, to catch a sense of the brightness
and new life that was in the air. 'Why are you so
down?' he asked.

Robinson's lips quivered, and for once the stern
controls were relaxed. Here he was, almost forty, he
exclaimed, and absolutely unknown. He never would be
read in any substantial amount. He had not justified
himself, he cried, had not proved himself to himself
or to the world.5

A. FORMATION OF AN ATTITUDE

Years of learning (1869-1888). Many characteristics
of the mature Robinson attitude were evident from the poet's
youth, among them, his reticence, his inquisitive spirit,
his love for poetry, and his feeling of not belonging.

Hagedorn mentions his discovering:

... rocking chairs at an early age and, in a chair
many sizes too large for him, would rock himself for
hours 'and wonder,' he wrote Amy Lowell forty years
later, 'why the deuce I should ever have been born.'
A burden was on him, he seemed to apprehend; a curse or

4Ibid., p. 58.
5Hagedorn, op. cit., p. 249.
a glory, he did not know which. He was as sensitive as raw flesh. Things that other people passed over or threw off with a laugh, hurt him appallingly.6

Robinson grew up, trying desperately to be like the other boys but somehow he realized that he was different. "When he was ten, he discovered words, and started collecting them as another boy might collect agates for their brillance and color."7

Spirituality played a role in the formation of the young poet's attitude. Hagedorn tells of his spending much of his time on the neighboring Swanton farm:

The happy household had its effect upon his spiritual development. Mrs. Swanton was a Swedenborgian, a vigorous Mary-Martha who was bringing up her turbulent sons on a pittance but giving them and their friends a sense of a vital Presence. The Robinsons went to Church, but one felt kindliness in their house rather than spiritual power.8

Robinson retained his inquisitive nature and, at seventeen, he was "brimming over with ideas, exploring the convolutions of character and personality, brooding over motives, imagining situations and the reactions of dissimilar types to them, asking what, in this circumstance or that, he himself would do."9

6Ibid., p. 18.
7Ibid., p. 19.
8Ibid., p. 29.
9Ibid., p. 48.
In June 1888, Win graduated from Gardiner High School, but soon found himself returning for more study. "Win Robinson, unprepared for College, unfitted by nature for the 'jobs' into which his friends slipped so comfortably."\(^{10}\) He brooded over his possibilities for the future.

Success . . . failure. Money in the bank was success, destitution was obviously failure. Or was it . . . always? And was money in the bank always success? There were bank directors whom young Robinson knew, who, for all their comfortable balances, had missed more than they had won. A youth of nineteen or twenty, inept at money-getting, absorbed in the pursuit of images and ideas and loyal to a call, might conceivably imagine himself one day stealing to a back-door for food. Would that in his case necessarily be failure? What constituted success?\(^{11}\)

Despite his inability to achieve immediate success in the village, Robinson never swerved from his course, that of becoming a great poet. "Robinson read voluminously, Swinburne, Rossetti, Austin Dobson; absorbed Walt Whitman and found Spinoza enticing; was seduced by Edna Lyall's 'Donovan' and fell avidly upon Thomas Hardy."\(^{12}\)

Years of knowing (1889-1897). The next nine years in the young poet's life were such that he came to know tragedy, death, and failure. He did little at Harvard, his

\(^{10}\)Ibid., p. 45.

\(^{11}\)Ibid., p. 54.

\(^{12}\)Ibid., p. 60.
parents died, and his own life seemed futile and pointless. From the idealism of his youth to the realism of adulthood, Robinson's attitude gradually hardened. But underneath the tragedy was always, lying dormant, a wisp of humor, a spark of hopefulness.

At this period, Robinson began to read formal philosophy. He became interested in Naturalism, in Pantheism.

Some of the influences upon his philosophical attitude, his reading, his friends at Harvard, and the failure of his brother Dean, are recounted by Neff:

Meditating on the meaning of individual lives Robinson quoted approvingly to Smith from FitzGerald's version of the 'Rubaiyat' the quatrain suggesting that the Creator will spare from Hell 'the luckless Pots he marred in making.' In this letter of March 10, 1891, thus appears what was to be a major theme of Robinson's verse, the problem of individual responsibility for failure, no doubt pressed upon him by his brother Dean's disaster and fatalism. How long before this he had discarded the Hell of popular religion is not known. Although his father was not a churchgoer, Robinson had attended with his mother the Congregational Church, whose creed was Unitarian. Science, in high school, at a time when the Darwinian controversy was still much in the American air, may have started his drift away. Finding the 'rather grim philosophy' of Omar 'rather attractive' was a stage through which many thoughtful youths have passed in their rebound from inherited creeds; but Robinson had not known life so easy as to be satisfied with the Persian's sugar coating of Epicureanism. The creedless spirituality of 'Sartor Resartus,' reinforced by Carlyle's 'half diabolical humor,' impressed him more, although he later discovered that he was far from understanding it. Carlyle and Omar, in their positive and negative fashions, alienated him from a Puritan tradition that had scarcely absorbed Darwin's challenge to a literally inspired Bible.13

Although Robinson had entered Harvard with high hopes of gaining some recognition as a poet, he soon found out that the road to success was going to be particularly long and arduous for him.

With all his diffidence, Robinson, at twenty-one, had no false modesty. He knew that he was a poet; he believed he was a real poet; and he cherished the happy illusion that Harvard would find it out. He did not know that Harvard already had among its undergraduates one poetic genius who completely filled the vision. In the October number of the 'Harvard Monthly,' William Vaughn Moody published a sonnet, 'Harmonics.'14

Hagedorn tells of the development of Robinson's mind while he was at Harvard:

Robinson who had freed himself from the orthodoxies of his Congregational background, leaned toward Unitarianism. He went so far as to approve the 'bete noir' of his generation, Robert Ingersoll, for exposing the absurdities of dogmatism, but he was convinced that a man who was destitute of a religious sentiment was no higher than an animal and that it were better for a man to swallow all the camels of orthodoxy than to have no religion at all.

'If there be nothing, good or bad,
But chaos for a soul to trust,—
God counts it for a soul gone mad,
And if God be God, He is just.'

He had no systematic philosophy and no exalted opinion of the sages who had conceived the systems; but admitted a mystic element in his thinking, though he would not defend or even formulate it.15

Returning home from Harvard after his father's death, Robinson came to know the listlessness of failure. A

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14Hagedorn, op. cit., p. 67.
15Ibid., p. 72.
gradual, overwhelming sense of gloom shaded his attitude. Neff tells of Robinson's writing a letter to a friend who had lent him 'Science and Health' and who had helped him to see what Carlyle had been driving at in 'Sartor Resartus'--

... 'denial of the existence of matter as anything but a manifestation of thought. Christianity is the same thing, and so is illuminated common sense' in Epictetus, Socrates, and Emerson. In studying philosophical idealism at Harvard he had only an inkling of the truth, nor fortified by experience, that it was 'the one logical and satisfactory interpretation of life.' Pain and disappointment had led to his 'acceptance of life' as a 'kind of spiritual exercise (or at least a chance of that) by which we may, if we will, put ourselves beyond it.'

Robinson, entering the third stage of his life, the years of suffering, was the pragmatic embodiment of all of the vagueness and melancholy popularly attributed to Lincoln.

B. ACHIEVEMENT OF AN ATTITUDE

Years of suffering (1898-1910). Robinson's mature personality was many-sided. He was hopeful as well as laconic and moody. He was humorous as well as profound. He had suffered the personal tragedy of deaths of all of the members of his family. He had been regarded as a failure by his townspeople, and far worse, by himself. He was yet to taste the very dregs of life, and he was yet to feast in the moments of delirious success. As a poet, he was keenly aware

16Neff, op. cit., p. 74.
of the transiency of existence, and through it all, he remained humble, reserved, hopeful, and sincere.

In New York, he met an old Harvard friend, George Burnham.

Burnham had achieved an oriental tolerance illuminated by an occidental sense of humor, and helped Robinson out the last of the hawsers that bound his spirit to 'the crumbled wharves' of accepted theology. 'The tap-root of the sub-conscious goes down to God,' he would say. 'There is only oneself. That we call God, or the Absolute. Everything is the manifestation of that Absolute.' Robinson followed his thought without accepting his phrasing. Night after night, at some cafe off Columbus Circle, they discussed the Absolute, over beers.17

Robinson's funds were getting lower, and he had no way of making a living as far as he knew.

Robinson was reaching out for experience and for friends; reaching out, even more for guidance, for such spiritual education as would help him, alien as he was in this world of getting and spending, to live on a minimum both of spending and getting. As a poet, he was assured, having his rudder, his compass and his star; but as a man, he was adrift. Where should he live and how should he make his living? ... He lived from day to day. He had left Gardiner in flight from conditions which had become intolerable, and from possibilities which he dared not face, and had no plans beyond the moment.18

By 1902 Robinson was still writing, still getting rejections. His "Captain Craig" got a second edition, but only 250 copies were published. Hagedorn describes Robinson's situation at this point. "His fourth volume was completed.

17Hagedorn, op. cit., p. 131.
18Ibid., pp. 136-137.
his fifth under way, his sixth, troubling his dreams, while his third was still in search of an open door.\textsuperscript{19}

As to the reviews, the following account is given:

But here and there over the country, a critic caught the shine of genius behind the apparent prosiness. In the 'Dial,' William Morton Payne spoke of 'a philosophy of life' in the book--'the philosophy of the free spirit that has given no hostages to the conventional life, and that seeks to divest from their adventitious wrappings the fundamental verities of existence' . . . . A western critic called Robinson, not without acumen, a 'forlornly joyous cuss.' In a personal statement, William James spoke of, 'a genuine poet,' 'an important future,' 'an original sense of life,' and wrote the publishers that he thought 'Isaac and Archibald' 'fully as good as anything of the kind in Wordsworth.'\textsuperscript{20}

The years of suffering did much to shape Robinson's attitude and did much to shade the "existentialism" of several of his shorter poems. This was Robinson's darkest hour. He poured forth all of his bitterness and dejection to his friend, Ridgely Torrence, on a New York street one day.

'Now look here,' Torrence exclaimed. 'Just shut up. You know what they say: It takes seventeen years for the public to understand a poet. That gives you still some years to go. And you're in a better position than any of us. Moody said to me only the other day, 'When we're all dead and buried, EA will go thundering down the ages.'

Robinson looked up.\textsuperscript{21}

Years of achieving (1911-1935). In July 1911, Robinson persuaded by his neighbor, Hagedorn, journeyed to the MacDowell

Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire. Although he had entertained a prejudice against colonies, he soon found that the friendly, quiet atmosphere enabled him to write prolifically, and unbeknown to himself, he was quietly entering an era of peace, of much writing, of gradual, increasing, continued success. He quit drinking simply by saying when offered a highball, "I'm off that." Despite his dawning of success, he was entertaining an inner struggle whether or not to forsake poetry for drama or for fiction. 22

Alfred Noyes remarked, in England, that Robinson was, in his judgment, the leading American poet. 23 At forty-three and one-half years, success was beginning to come to Edwin Arlington Robinson. It was time for it to come. Years of suffering and determination had preceded this well-earned recognition.

Reporters came to Robinson to ferret out his message. To most he was taciturn, but to one who had given him much favorable publicity despite his close mouthedness at a previous interview, Robinson opened up his heart. When asked what was his message, he replied:

'I suppose that a part of it,' he said musingly, 'might be described as a faint hope of making a few of us understand our fellow creatures a little better, and to realize what a small difference there is, after all, between ourselves, as we are, and ourselves, not only as we might

22 Ibid., pp. 261-278.
23 Ibid., p. 284.
have been but would have been if our physical and temperamental make-up and our environment had been a little different."

If that were fatalism, there was nothing he could do about it. 'I've been called a fatalist, a pessimist, and an optimist so many times that I am beginning to believe that I must be all three . . . If a reader doesn't get from my books an impression that life is very much worth while, even though it may not seem always to be profitable and desirable, I can only say that he doesn't see what I am driving at.'

Robinson returned to his world of writing. Summers at Peterborough came and went. Magazines began to publish his verse. He wrote profusely. "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford," "The Gift of God," "Hillcrest," and other poems rolled out. Not completely successful, but enough to gain back his confidence in the future, Robinson was at peace. He wrote and he waited for hopeful things to come.

Robinson's fuller personality, his warmth, his humanity, his humor, his friendliness, were beginning to emerge. No longer pressed by the impact of the years of suffering, he relaxed.

Peterborough summer after summer. 'Life has taken on a new color since my arrival in this place,' he was writing a friend in 1916; and it was the same three years later. 'So far as I can see, there is everything here that I do not deserve. . . .'"26

Robinson's later years, although highlighted by the winning of three Pulitzer prizes, were nonetheless not without

24 Ibid., p. 286.
the frustration or defeat he had known earlier in life. He made few friends, kept to himself, and devoted most of his writing to his longer poems which were not always cheerfully received. Winters in New York and summers in the MacDowell Colony occupied his latter years.

A summation of the chief events in Robinson's life are recorded on the following table:
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<th>Month-Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<td>December 22, 1869</td>
<td>Birth at Head Tide, Maine.</td>
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<tr>
<td>September, 1870</td>
<td>Removal of family to Gardiner, Maine.</td>
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<tr>
<td>June, 1888</td>
<td>Graduation from Gardiner High School.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1888-1891</td>
<td>Residence in Gardiner, doing odd jobs and writing verse.</td>
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<tr>
<td>September, 1891</td>
<td>Matriculation at Harvard as a special student.</td>
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<td>July, 1892</td>
<td>Death of his father.</td>
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<tr>
<td>June, 1893</td>
<td>Conclusion of study at Harvard.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1893-1897</td>
<td>Residence in Gardiner, writing poetry, short stories (later destroyed), and a translation, with Harry de Forest Smith, of Sophocles' &quot;Antigone&quot; (fragments published in &quot;Unstringulated Stars&quot;).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November, 1896</td>
<td>Death of his mother.</td>
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<tr>
<td>December, 1897</td>
<td>First visit to New York.</td>
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<td>1898</td>
<td>Residence in New York, Cambridge, Gardiner, and Winthrop, Maine.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jan.-June, 1899</td>
<td>Employment in administrative office at Harvard.</td>
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<td>September, 1899</td>
<td>Death of his brother, Dean.</td>
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<tr>
<td>October, 1899</td>
<td>Return to New York.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Autumn, 1903-</td>
<td>Employment on New York Subway project.</td>
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<td>August, 1904</td>
<td>Employment in drygoods store of his friend William E. Butler in Boston.</td>
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<td>Jan.-May, 1905</td>
<td>Appointment by Theodore Roosevelt to sinecure in the office of the Collector of Customs, New York.</td>
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<td>June, 1905</td>
<td>Review of The Children of the Night by Theodore Roosevelt in the &quot;Outlook.&quot;</td>
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<td>August 12, 1905</td>
<td>Attempts at commercial play writing and later at writing novels (which he destroyed).</td>
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<td>1906-1913</td>
<td>1909. Death of his brother Herman.</td>
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<td>June, 1909</td>
<td>Resignation of his position in the Customs Service.</td>
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<td>July-Sept., 1911</td>
<td>Residence at the MacDowell Colony, Peterborough, New Hampshire (where he spent each succeeding summer until his death).</td>
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<td>1922</td>
<td>Award of Pulitzer Prize for Collected Poems.</td>
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<td>April-July, 1923</td>
<td>Visit to England.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>Award of Pulitzer Prize for The Man Who Died Twice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1927</td>
<td>Sensational success of Tristram. Award of Pulitzer Prize.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 5, 1935</td>
<td>Death from cancer.</td>
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CHAPTER III

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF A POET

Many of the reviews of Robinson's writings are contemporary with the original publication of the poems. While it is realized that these earlier reviews have not been able to incorporate some of the perspective naturally inherent in the later criticisms, nevertheless, the fact that there is a certain freshness, charm, and excitement accompanying the original reaction to the poetry, warrants its inclusion.

Thus both the early and recent criticism is contained in the section dealing with the critics' appraisal of Robinson's poetic stature.

My evaluation of representative poems, as well as a personal statement appraising Robinson's poetic worth, is included.

A. HIS WRITINGS

Period of shorter poems (1890-1921). More than twenty volumes of poetry, two prose plays, and a publication of Robinson's selected letters, give the reader ample material to evaluate his writings. His poetry, in a general sense, may be divided into the earlier publications of shorter lyric poems and the later, longer narration poems. His shorter poems which appear as an aggregate of his first
seven volumes in Collected Poems, 1921, were written prior to any serious recognition from the critics or public. Ten of his twelve longer poems, which include the Arthurian legends, were published after 1921. Most critics seem to agree that Robinson's poetic power lies within his shorter lyrics; however, serious consideration has been given the longer narratives in books by Estelle Kaplan, Ellsworth Barnard, and Mark Van Doren.

At the age of twenty-seven Robinson published his first collection of poems, which he entitled, The Torrent and the Night Before. The following year, 1897, The Children of the Night, a 121-page collection came out. Of this publication President Theodore Roosevelt wrote:

It is rather curious that Mr. Robinson's volume should not have attracted more attention. . . .

And to a man with a poetic temperament it is inevitable that life should often appear clothed with a certain sad mysticism. In the present volume I am not sure that I understand 'Luke Havergal' but I am entirely sure that I like it.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

Mr. Robinson has written in this little volume not verse but poetry. Whether he has the power of sustained flight remains to be seen.1

Robinson did have the power of sustained flight, for thirty-seven years later, Louis Untermeyer writes of the same book:

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1Theodore Roosevelt, "The Children of the Night," The Outlook, LXXX (August, 1905), 913.
As early as 1897, in "The Children of the Night," Robinson anticipated the brief characterizations and etched outlines of Master's "Spoon River Anthology"; he stressed the psychological element with unerring artistry and sureness of touch. His sympathetic studies of men whose lives were, from a worldly standpoint, failures, were a sharp reaction to the current high valuation on financial achievements, ruthless efficiency, and success at any cost.²

The next published book of poems, Captain Craig, was in 1902. Untermeyer states, speaking of the title poem, "This richly detailed narrative, recalling Browning's method, increased Robinson's audience, and his work was brought to the attention of Theodore Roosevelt."³

This same similarity of Robinson's writing to Browning's is stated by Yvor Winters, who traces the literary influences upon Robinson's style, seeing some influence of Emerson, a slight influence on the part of George Crabbe, various traces of Hardy, Kipling, Browning, and possibly W. M. Praed, an early nineteenth-century British writer of society verse.⁴

In 1910, Robinson published a collection of thirty-one poems, The Town Down the River, which included such well-known ones as "The Master," "Uncle Ananias," "Miniver Cheevy," and his tribute to Theodore Roosevelt, "The Revealer."

³Ibid., p. 135.
The Man Against the Sky, with its famous title poem and twenty-five others, was published in 1916. Most critics regard this as his most significant, single volume. Foerster commented in 1925, at a time when Robinson held the poetic spotlight:

Then, in 1916, appeared a little book of 149 pages that has generally been regarded as the summit of Mr. Robinson's achievement,—"The Man Against the Sky." The book contains two of his best longer poems, 'The Man Against the Sky' and 'Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford,' the latter a fine recreation of Shakespeare, the former one of the most penetrating readings of life in the whole of American literature.5

Yvor Winter's comment on "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford" was, "... A much praised poem, seems largely garrulous, occasionally brilliant, and always brittle..."6

Robinson's first Arthurian legend, Merlin, was published in 1917 and was followed, in 1920 by Lancelot.

The Three Taverns and Avon's Harvest in 1920 and 1921, were Robinson's next two publications.

The Pulitzer prize was awarded Robinson for the first time with the publication of Collected Poems in 1921. This marks the minimizing of attempts toward shorter lyrics, and


the beginning of a fourteen-year period in which Robinson wrote his longer narratives, including *Tristram*.

**Period of longer poems (1922-1935).** Up to the time of his first winning of the Pulitzer prize, Robinson was still comparatively unknown, and even during his last fourteen years, the period of the longer poems, he enjoyed dubious success. Despite additional public recognition for *The Man Who Died Twice* and *Tristram*, Robinson remained the target of most critics, whose reviews maintained that the longer poems portrayed a marked drop in ability. The usual supposition was that the rapidity of composition probably influenced their inferior quality. To most biographers, Robinson's last fourteen years were as bitter and lonely as his earlier ones.

His poem entitled "Quatrain" in *A Wreath for Edwin Markham*, a tribute for his seventieth birthday, was published in Chicago in 1922.

*Roman Bartholow*, 1923, and *The Man Who Died Twice*, 1924, received favorable reviews. Dorothy Dudley says of *Roman Bartholow*, "The wisdom of it seemed locked within language difficult and suave, the moments of emphasis hidden, as if elegance disdained emphasis." Untermeyer is favorable in his impression of the two books, particularly in his praise of *The Man Who Died Twice*.

---

'Roman Bartholow' (1923) is a single poem of almost two hundred pages; a dramatic and introspective narrative in blank verse. 'The Man Who Died Twice' (1924), which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for that year, is likewise one long poem: A tale which is a cross between a grotesque recital and inspired metaphysics. Curiously enough, the mixture is one of Robinson's greatest triumphs; none of his portraits, either miniatures or full-length canvases, has given us a profounder insight of a tortured soul than this of Fernando Nash, 'the king who lost his crown before he had it.'

Tristram, published in 1927, was sensationally received, and enabled Robinson to receive his third Pulitzer prize. Louise Bogan, however, in 1931, speaks disparagingly of it and the other Robinson legends. "The style fails the matter. The philosophy that can bear only the weight of disillusion breaks down and a kind of dispirited mysticism is the result." 8

The next three of Robinson's longer poems include, Cavender's House, 1929, The Glory of the Nightingales, 1930, and Matthias at the Door, published in 1931.

Robinson's Nicodemus, in 1932, received little acclaim. His final three narratives include Talifer, 1933, Amaranth, 1934, and King Jasper, published posthumously in 1935. Untermeyer states that Nicodemus "attempts to revive earlier spirits, but the summoned 'Annandale,' 'Ponce de Leon,' and 'Toussaint L'Ouverture' are little more than garrulous ghosts." 10

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8Untermeyer, 1942, op. cit., pp. 136-137.
9Louise Bogan, "Tilbury Town and Beyond," Poetry, 37 (January, 1931), 219-220.
Allen Tate holds the position that *Tarifer* only accents the proposition that it is in the lyrics that one should search for Robinson's genius:

... the new narrative, *Tarifer*, being, I believe, the least satisfactory of them all. ...

The story as it is told is hardly more than anecdotal; Mr. Robinson turns his plot, at the end, into a commonplace joke about the delinquent powers of marriage on the pretensions of human nature. 11

He concludes his review with the statement, "It is hoped that Mr. Robinson will again exercise his dramatic genius where it has a chance for success: in lyrics." 12


'I cannot speak of E. A. Robinson's work,' wrote Jeffers. 'Better critics than I have praised its qualities, and will again. Let me notice instead the debt we owe him for the qualities of his life; for the dignity with which he wore his fame, for the example of his reticence and steady concentration, for the single-mindedness with which he followed his own sense of direction, unbewildered and undiverted. ... We are grateful that he was not what they call 'A good showman,' but gave himself to his work, not to his audience, and would have preferred complete failure to any success with the least taint of charlatanry.' 13

A table of Robinson's major publications follows:

12 Loc. cit.
13 Untermezy, 1942, op. cit., pp. 138-139.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Publication</th>
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<tr>
<td>1922</td>
<td>&quot;Quatrain,&quot; in A Wreath for Edwin Markham; tributes from the Poets of America on his seventieth birthday. Chicago. p. 20.</td>
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### TABLE II (continued)

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<th>Year</th>
<th>Publication</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;The First Seven Years,&quot; in the Colophon--Part Four (December), pp. 71-78. Not printed elsewhere.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>The Valley of the Shadow. San Francisco. 7pp.</td>
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</table>
B. HIS POETIC STATURE

Critics' appraisal. Criticism of Robinson breaks down into four general categories: opinion as to his writing technique, as to his message, as to his position, and composite opinion summarizing widespread reaction and attitude toward his poetry.

Speaking of his writing technique, Untermeyer, in 1925, states:

Technically, Robinson is as precise as he is dexterous. He is, in company with Frost, a master of the slowly diminished ending. But he is capable of cadences as rich as that which ends 'The Gift of God,' as pungent as the climax of 'Calvary,' as brilliantly fanciful as the sestet of his recent sonnet, 'The Sheaves,' in which he pictures a landscape where

A thousand golden sheaves were lying there,
Shining and still, but not for long to stay—
As if a thousand girls with golden hair
Might rise from where they slept and go away.15

Two years earlier, in 1923, Wilkinson, a contemporary poet, had said, "The precision of meter in Edwin Arlington Robinson's exquisitely wrought stanzas is the natural accompaniment of the keenness and subtlety of his thought."16

Neff gives a full description of the style and techniques of the poet, speaking of his being influenced stylisti-

cally by Hawthorne, George Moore, Daudet, Maupassant, and Flaubert. 17

Opinion as to Robinson's message varies. I found two critics, Estelle Kaplan and Louis Untermeyer, stressing Robinson's transcendental, optimistic idealism while two others, William J. Long and Grant C. Knight, point out his pessimistic, negativistic, drab nature. Mrs. Kaplan brings out the idealistic side in her statement, "The continental critics include Karl Arns, who sees Robinson progressively stripping off his faith in life and reality but clinging to a faith in truth." 18

Robinson's position among American poets is always a subject for conjecture. Critics have considered him alongside Frost, as the "uncle" of modern American poetry, and as "the foremost" American poet. Nathaniel Burt, in a very recent article, examining American literary culture, considers the traditionalists and regards ". . . Robertson, a sort of elder statesman and uncle of them all." 19 Mrs. Wilkinson maintained, in 1923, that, "In shrewd understanding of Mankind and as a brilliant analyst of character, Mr. Robinson has no superior among American poets." 20

17 Neff, op. cit., p. 70.
20 Wilkinson, op. cit., p. 67.
Neff is a little more cautious, but, nevertheless, kind in his consideration:

Edwin Arlington Robinson is the outstanding poet between Emily Dickinson and the poetic revival immediately before the First World War. In itself, this might be a pallid distinction, for the 'nineties and the opening years of the twentieth century were among the least fruitful decades in American verse. But Robinson's distinction is more positive. With Robert Frost, he shares the foremost place in the first half of this century, and he will remain beside Frost among the greatest American poets.²¹

Kaplan, summarizing critical comments, mentions Mather's and Benet's opinions:

F. J. Mather said that Robinson maintains 'along with his tragic sense of life a wistful and expectant hopefulness.' William Rose Benet, who knew Robinson in New Hampshire, found him 'laconic and Olympian,' as kind, generous and lovable as his poem on Lincoln.²²

Of additional criticism:

Percy MacKaye said no other poet has 'revealed a soul more nakedly New England even when most universal in its vesture.' Amy Lowell observed his 'Puritan weakness in fighting sorrow' and his 'protest against brutal unfeeling materialism.' Charles Cestre called Robinson a Descendant of the Puritans, a moralist, a mystic like Emerson.²³

Hagedorn mentions a rather favorable review in which Robinson is considered 'A Greek, matured in the New England tradition.' The review written by J. L. French in the New England Magazine went on:

²¹Neff, op. cit., p. xvii.
²²Kaplan, op. cit., p. 21.
²³Ibid., p. 22.
More nearly a Greek than any singer of note whom we have amongst us today... one of the very few genuine poets that New England has produced within the generation and, in his stark affinity with the soil and tradition, perhaps the most important of all... The note is original and striking—the frank, naked, democratic view of life is the inheritance of the Puritan ideal. No man has struck it with quite the same union of simplicity and force... It is the fulfillment of the Christian ideal as nourished by generations of New England thinkers, the stern law of personal accountability, united to the large charity of the Golden Rule.24

Investigator's appraisal. Although many criteria exist with which to evaluate poetry, my evaluation is guided by a preference for traditional poetry and a belief that when a poem has traditional form, that when it has unusual quality and tone, as well as a universal theme, and that when it evokes a powerful emotional response, then it becomes a great poem.

Hospers comments on the importance of feeling to poetry, "A poem, like any work of art, 'means' to us simply what it evokes in us."25 Richards says the same thing in commenting upon the analysis of a poem, "for it is the attitudes evoked which are the all-important part of any experience."26

Working from the premise that valid aesthetic value

24 Hagedorn, op. cit., p. 220.


is individual and subjective, and on the additional premise that the source of Robinson's power lies in his ability to achieve an emotional response in the sense of universalizing experience through a dramatic momentary insight, as does Bergson in philosophy, the investigator believes that Robinson's stature as a major traditional poet is destined to rise to the point that he will be recognized as having made a serious contribution to that poetry that has become classical, universal, and perennial.

Robinson's use of vocabulary is one of his outstanding characteristics as a writer. With the exception of Shakespeare and Milton, the investigator has been unable to find any poet with a more interesting or comprehensive array of words. Quite often he combines a concrete adjective with an abstract noun or reverses the effect.

He has the touch of a master in the fine, terse, exquisite quality of his lines. He doesn't always give the details of his story. He has the trait of making "intuitive" rather than literal sense.

Robinson has a terrific change of pace from the universal and philosophical to the immediate and perceptive, brought about through a consistent and pleasing rhythm.

Robinson's subject, the man who failed, has important ethical inference. Hegelian ethics incorporate the theory that the modern bourgeois state affects not just current
mores but the ethical tradition itself.\textsuperscript{27} In a sense, this preoccupation on the part of Robinson with the man who failed serves as an indicative forerunner to the era of industrial expansion and the rise of the working man, socially and economically, in the early 20th century. Other poets, Frost, Masters, and Sandburg reflect the same trend, but Robinson published some years ahead of them. Robinson's views on the dignity of failure and his negation of materialism make him particularly sympathetic to this social phenomenon.

I found a hint of subjectivity in Flammonde's "cleansing heritage of taste" and in Flammonde's borrowing graciously, as well as in Robinson's exquisite description of Shakespeare:

\begin{quote}
I don't know whether he needs a dog or not--Or what he needs. I tell him he needs Greek; I'll talk of rules and Aristotle with him, And if his tongue's at home he'll say to that, 'I have your word that Aristotle knows,' And you mind that I don't know Aristotle. He's all at odds with all the unities, And what's yet worse, it doesn't seem to matter; He treads along through Time's old wilderness As if the tramp of all the centuries Had left no roads--and there are none, for him.\textsuperscript{28}
\end{quote}

On first reading, "John Gorham" seems to be just another boy-girl story, but later readings bring out Robinson's

\textsuperscript{27}\textsuperscript{See G. W. H. Hegel, \textit{Philosophy of Right} (London: Oxford University Press, 1943).}

\textsuperscript{28}\textsuperscript{Robinson, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 22-23.}
genius in controlling tone. There is a gradual crescendo in John's callousness of expression inversely proportional to the diminuendo in Jane's coquettish attitude.

The opening of "Eros Turannos" is superb:

She fears him and will always ask
What fated her to choose him;
She meets in his engaging mask
All reasons to refuse him;
But what she meets and what she fears
Are less than are the downward years,
Drawn slowly to the foamless weirs
Of age, were she to lose him.29

The last three lines quoted above are particularly powerful.

There is the haunting fluidity of the "Ballade by the Fire," the stanza in "Her Eyes":

But he wrought them at last with a skill so sure
That her eyes were the eyes of a deathless woman,—
With a gleam of heaven to make them pure,
And a glimmer of hell to make them human.30

...and the poem "Boston" which rather adequately represents a sample of Robinson's magical pen. "Boston," because of its emotional quality, is presented in totality.

My northern pines are good enough for me,
But there's a town my memory uprears—
A town that always like a friend appears,
And always in the sunrise by the sea.
And over it somehow there seems to be
A downward flash of something new and fierce,
That ever strives to clear, but never clears
The dimness of a charmed antiquity.31

29Ibid., p. 32. 30Ibid., p. 79.
31Ibid., p. 83.
Robinson at times should be felt rather than interpreted, as in "The Story of the Ashes and the Flame" or in the sestet in "Reunion."

Robinson's sombre side is seen in "Amaryllis" or in "The Pity of the Leaves" which begins,

Vengeful across the cold November moors,
Loud with ancestral shame there came the bleak
Sad wind that shrieked, and answered with a shriek,
Reverberant through lonely corridors.32

His portraits, the man "with eyes like little dollars in the dark," his man who was "familiar as an old mistake and futile as regret," his "loveliest" of all "authoritative liars," and the touching Mr. Flood, give him an unapproachable position in American literature. His rhyme is at its best in "The Town Down the River," and his ending of "Vain Gratuities" anticipates the reader's desire,

She . . . . would have laughed had she been there
And all they said would have been heard no more
Than foam that washes on an island shore
Where there are none to listen or to care.33

There is little doubt in the investigator's mind that this sombre New Englander will grow and surpass in stature both his contemporaries and the non-traditional moderns, whose writings have become as complex and warped as the super-structure of humanity that they are so "non-traditionally"

32 Ibid., p. 85.
33 Ibid., p. 577.
attempting to delineate.

The recognition of the polarity in method between, for example, T. S. Eliot and Robinson was brought out by Winfield Townley Scott who stated:

Through Robinson's life as still through ours, the world appears to be wading deeper into every kind of bankruptcy; one way of modern poetry--Eliot's way--was to orchestrate the tide; Robinson's way was to oppose it. 34

An Fussell points out that Robinson and Eliot had different literary backgrounds, saying, "Robinson's tradition, to put the matter crudely is that of romantic naturalism, whereas Eliot's is primarily that of a symbolic classicism." 35

Paul Elmer More, in a review of a 1932, Harcourt, Brace publication of T. S. Eliot's Selected Essays, comments on the traditionalists' conflict in trying to understand Eliot:

Now all this points to a curious discrepancy in Mr. Eliots' position. I find a good many poetry lovers of the older tradition simply neglecting him as unintelligible and unimportant; and this difference I can understand, though I do not share it. 36

While Eliot's particular position of critical analysis of the "hollow" modern man is certainly a penetrating one, and while his technique and depth are as freshly innovating as

they are worthwhile; nevertheless, the investigator feels that Robinson more nearly fulfills the traditional standards of genius.

An important critic, Winfield Townly Scott, feels the same way.

I may yet be famous or disgraced among my generation for insisting that Robinson is America's greatest poet. Before the time is right for an extensive attempt at demonstrating the reasons, at least a few approaches are clear. A comparison of 'In Memoriam' and 'The Man Against the Sky' will show a nearly identical conception of the necessity of believing in man's spiritual being. To Tennyson, add the mysticism of Royce, and Emerson's Transcendentalism, perhaps; and add Yankee Protestantism. The sum is individualism, but not rugged, like Emerson's; the respect for oneself is part and parcel of respect for mankind.37

Scott has not only established serious consideration for Robinson's rightful stature, he has in addition made an excellent summation of Robinson's philosophical position.

There is "a downward flash of something new and fierce" in this traditionalist, Edwin Arlington Robinson.

37 Scott, op. cit., p. 99.
CHAPTER IV

THE PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF A POET

Thus far, many factors have contributed to an understanding of the statement that will summarize Robinson's philosophical attitude. His biographical background, his contribution to American literary culture, and the consensus of critics' appraisal offer valuable insight into his general reaction to the dire circumstances of his life.

This chapter, summarizing his philosophical implications, has been divided into two parts: the findings of the critics and the findings of the investigator.

Because Robinson has been more consistently considered both an idealist and a pessimist, rather than an optimist or a realist, a section dealing with his affinity to Royce and Schopenhauer has been included.

My findings are subdivided into a summary of the philosophical implications from selected poems and a summary of Robinson's peculiar philosophical values, ideas, and judgments.

Because of the obvious pitfall of mistaking the thought in the poems as representing his own message, particular emphasis has been placed on those documented quotations and statements directly attributed to Robinson, in order to evaluate his general philosophical attitude more
carefully and intelligently.

A. FINDINGS OF THE CRITICS

Philosophical attitudes within the poems. Robinson's philosophical position is illusive. Critics have called him an ascetic, an idealist, a mystic, a pessimist, a rationalist, a transcendentalist, and have implied that he is an existentialist and an agnostic in the sense of critical idealism. The difficulty in making a concise statement is that all of these labels are, in a sense, true. Barnard lists additional adjectives describing Robinson, as he gives us a glimpse of the happier side of Robinson's personality:

But at no time did he indulge in bitterness or self-pity, never did he lose his sense of humor, never was he deserted by his faith in the Light. 'Admirable, all through this time,' says his friend Mason with reference to one of the most painful of the periods mentioned, 'were his half-serene, half-humorous detachment from his surroundings, the long stride and quizzical smile with which he walked through all incongruities.' 'The great art of life,' he told this friend, 'is to suffer without worrying.'

Barnard continues:

This side of Robinson's character has been too often overlooked. The critics who have exhausted their vocabularies in applying to his personality, or to his style, or to the kind of people whom he pictures, or to his view of the world in general, such adjectives as "negative," "bleak," "bare," "starved," "cold," "wintry," "withered," "black," "shriveled," "blighted," "chilly," "forlorn," "thwarted," "stunted," "meager," "under-

1Barnard, op. cit., p. 197.
The consensus of the critics seems to be that metaphysically, Robinson is near to an idealist, but that this is mitigated by a pessimistic realism. His pessimism is one without the ultimate end of evil; his realism is qualified by a Bergsonian-like, mystic intuitionism.

The critics accented his poetry more than his personally-attributed views in determining his philosophical attitude, and the critical reviews of his poems ranged from general to specific expressions of his implied philosophy.

The success-failure theme in Robinson was brought out often, and the poet seemed to be obsessed with the dignity of failure. Failure to Robinson was merely the antithesis of fraudulent, relative, materialistic, socially-enforced ethical judgments.

F. J. Mather, Jr. brings out this aspect of Robinson in a 1930 review:

Primarily, Mr. Robinson seems to me the prophet of human splendor in occultation. Our surroundings are ever seeking to minimize us, but we prevail, against misunderstanding and frustration. No man is as common as he seems. Look deeper and you will find amid overt failure and public ridicule, the tremendous fellow. This, I think, is Mr. Robinson's 'ethos' and denotes his singularity.²

²Ibid., pp. 197-198.
Some critics are less convinced of Robinson's pessimism, but equally sure as to a quality of detachment in his philosophy, a forlorn idealism. Brown, in a 1936 review, states, "But Robinson grew with the years in the conviction that men's eyes are best turned forward in hope, even if in forlorn hope."4

A more dramatic summation of his philosophical attitude appeared in 1921 in Poetry: a Magazine of Verse, prior to Robinson's serious acceptance as a poet by the public. Harriet Monroe comments:

But it is in Mr. Robinson's meditative poems that one tastes most keenly the sharp and bitter savor of his high aloof philosophy. He is not for Demos:

'Having all,
See not the great among you for the small,
But hear their silence; for the few shall save
The many, or the many are to fall--
Still to be wrangling in a noisy grave.'
He offers no solution to the problem of creation, either in general or in detail, but he presents it in vivid lines:

'They were seekers after darkness in the Valley of the Shadow
And they alone were there to find what they were looking for.
He insists--
'That earth has not a school where we may go
For wisdom, or for more than we may know.'
But meantime,
'Say what you feel, while you have time to say it--
Eternity will answer for itself.'5

The one aspect of Robinson's philosophical attitude that nearly all critics agree upon is his negation of materialism. Ample references to both his poetry and his statements

to friends and in letters, were quoted delineating his position. Untermeyer states, typically:

It has been said that Robinson's pessimism alienated part of his audience. But Robinson always took pains to refute this charge, not only in his private protests—in his letters and conversations—but in his poems. He denied that life was merely a material phenomenon.6

This same central negation can be seen in a letter written to Dr. Will Durant by Robinson in 1931.

If a man is a materialist, or a mechanist, or whatever he likes to call himself, I can see for him no escape from belief in a futility so prolonged and complicated and diabolical and preposterous as to be worse than absurd. . . . But if life is only what it appears to be, no amount of improvement or enlightenment will ever compensate or atone for what it has inflicted and endured in ages past, or for what it is inflicting and enduring today. . . . Our teleological endowment spares most of us from worrying over such matters to any great extent, or from disturbing ourselves unduly over the freedom of the will. There is apparently not much that anyone can do about it except to follow his own light—which may or not be the light of an 'ignis fatuus' in a swamp.7

Further aspects of Robinson's thought are brought out by other critical comments, including his resignation, his bitterness, his somberness, and his tendency toward mitigated transcendentalism. Estelle Kaplan says of Matthias at the Door:

The poem presents two extremes of complacency—the younger self-satisfied Matthias, who has wealth, position, and a wife whom he loves and who seems to be as sincere as he is, and the older, wiser Matthias, who becomes resigned

6Untermeyer, 1925, op. cit., p. 139.

to life when he attempts to face its truth. The manifest poles of his development are his comfortable complacency at the outset and his resignation at the poem's conclusion. The theme of the poem in its barest statement is that resignation is the fruit of knowledge. 8

Yvor Winters cautions against the easy labeling of Robinson as a transcendentalist, particularly on the basis of "Captain Craig."

Craig is an Emersonian philosopher, and the poem could no doubt be quoted at length to illustrate Robinson's transcendentalist sympathies, but I cannot avoid feeling that it ought to be quoted with caution. Craig is described as a helpless failure. . . . I see no reason to believe that Craig is offered as a genuine embodiment of wisdom. 9

Neff remarks that "The Man Against the Sky" contains Robinson's central vision of life. He declares,

Light does not flood in from the traditional and material conceptions of popular revealed religion. Glimmers come to those and those only, who have faced the uttermost challenge of doubt and darkness and been cleansed by suffering. Its full splendor is reserved beyond the grave:
Never until our souls are strong enough
To plunge into the crater of the scheme,
shall we know how much of it our frailty, and cowardice have hidden ('Two Sonnets'). Precisely because life is horrible, it must have meaning. Stated badly, here is the central vision of life which Robinson was to clothe in the majesty of his nature style in 'The Man Against the Sky.' 10

Untermeyer makes the general comment, after a long discussion of Robinson's major poems:

Although he has often been accused of holding a negative attitude toward life, Robinson's philosophy is essential positive; a dogged desire for a deeper faith, a greater light, keeps him plunging through a darkness

8Kaplan, op. cit., pp. 110-111. 9Winters, op. cit., p. 98
10Neff, op. cit., p. 67.
which most of his contemporaries cannot even face.\textsuperscript{11}

Hagedon, considering Robinson a mystic, cites the reviewers' reactions to the publication of \textit{Amaranth}.

Some declared the theme 'sentimental,' others found the material 'workable' enough, but the treatment 'vague and superficial.' It was ironic that the most savage assault on the fame of the one conspicuous mystic in contemporary American poetry, the creator of the reborn Matthias, the interpreter of the Christ-hungry Nicodemus, should have been published in the 'Christian Century.'\textsuperscript{12}

Early in Robinson's period of recognition, Mrs. Wilkinson considered his "The False Gods" as an indication of his idealism.

'The False Gods' is a poem of well-founded idealism— not the easy, sentimental idealism of the soul that has never fought a battle in life, but the idealism of the soul that sees through shams. The keynote of the poem, I believe, is to be found in the line, 

\textit{For the False Gods are mortal, and are made for you to kill.}\textsuperscript{13}

Estelle Kaplan sees a corollary to the Kantian imperative in \textit{King Jasper}, in her statement, "With the Kantian imperative 'do your duty' as a problem, 'King Jasper's becomes a study of character growth and moral development varying according to the extent and direction of the individual's sense of responsibility and value."\textsuperscript{14}

\textbf{Affinity to Royce and Schopenhauer.} As many critics

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11}Untermeyer (Harcourt-Brace, 1925), \textit{op. cit.}, p. 144.
\item \textsuperscript{12}Hagedorn, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 371.
\item \textsuperscript{13}Wilkinson, \textit{loc. cit.}
\item \textsuperscript{14}Kaplan, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 129.
\end{itemize}
have pointed out, there is a great deal of risk in identifying Robinson's position with that of any formal philosopher; nevertheless, Lloyd Morris and Mrs. Kaplan both see a great deal of affinity between Robinson and Royce and Schopenhauer. Simply stated, Royce is an idealist, and Schopenhauer is a pessimist; hence, the strong trends of idealism and pessimism in Robinson's poetry beget the conclusion. Barnard, however, points out Robinson's insistence that he not be identified as a philosopher:

'It annoys me to hear talk about my philosophy of life. I am not a philosopher. I don't intend to be one.'

This attitude is characteristic. We need not doubt that he is in sympathy with 'The Contented Metaphysician' in 'The Burning Book' who, after years of labor on a projected masterpiece, sees that it is not for him to save the world, and burns the manuscript; thereby escaping, like Fargo, from

'The wrong world; where
There are philosophers who delve and starve
To say again what others have said better;
There are wan moralists and economists
Who write with screaming blood to save a world,
That will not read them and will not be saved.'

Of course, the fact that Robinson didn't wish to be considered a formal philosopher doesn't deny the existence of definite philosophical attitudes within his poetry nor the evidence of a general viewpoint upon life from his poetry and conversations. In the sense of interpreting experience, it is often the poet who is more philosophical than the analytic thinker.

\[\text{15Barnard, op. cit., pp. 189-190.}\]
By common consent, it is the poet who has most successfully caught and expressed this complex, living human experience, not the analytic thinker or scientist. And it is in its choice of principles of interpretation, its grasp of those insights that can then be imaginatively extended to embrace all man's ideas and activities, that the organizing or speculative function of philosophic thinking most closely approaches the function of the poet or artist. 

Mrs. Kaplan, recalling Robinson's Harvard days, maintains:

... it would hardly be safe to infer that he picked up nothing from his course in Philosophy I and from Royce's 'The Spirit of Modern Philosophy.'

and in a letter, Robinson says, "We are to study Royce's 'Spirit of Modern Philosophy' for the rest of the year. It ought to be interesting, but I have not much courage."

The basis for most of the identification of Robinson with Royce and idealism lies within the fact that he takes a distinct and opposing position to materialism. Hence, to a considerable extent, his idealism is negative idealism. Estelle Kaplan states, along a similar vein:

The point is not so much that Robinson is an idealist, as that, perhaps, through the influence of Royce, he is willing to allow full range to the skepticism implicit in idealism rather than to the dogmatic fatalism of materialism. ... This combination of puritanism, transcendentalism, and pessimism (Hawthorne, Emerson, and Hardy) gradually crystallized into a permanent pattern for his poetry, but it was at the same time an expression of his 'New England conscience.'

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17 Kaplan, op. cit., p. 8.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., p. 11.
In her chapter tracing the influence of Royce and Schopenhauer upon Robinson's poetry, Estelle Kaplan states:

All seem to agree that the New England transcendentalists exerted a strong influence on Robinson, though few concur on the nature of that influence. The controversy over the influence of Royce on his idealism leaves the question rather obscure and in addition makes his relation to the Puritan tradition all the more debatable.

Lloyd Morris has made the most ambitious attempt to reveal the poet's connection with Puritan tradition and with transcendental idealism and, finally, with the idealism of Royce.20

Morris defines idealism and asserts that it strongly influenced Robinson's reflection on life:

One of the doctrines which undoubtedly has coloured much of Mr. Robinson's reflection on life is that which the philosophers, in their professional terminology, call idealism. Stripped of its various critical implications, the position of the idealists has very much in common with the philosophy of Emerson and the transcendental school.21

Ben Ray Redman, in his book, speaks of Robinson's "old, intuitive, mystical optimism that can never quite win the suffrage of reason."22 Robinson maintained that his position was basically optimistic. However, critics were quicker to point out the Schopenhauerean pessimism in his poetry and position. Mrs. Kaplan states that the course in philosophy that Robinson took at Harvard was dominated by the problem

20Ibid., p. 25.
of pessimism as formulated by Schopenhauer. She quotes a passage in Royce's *Spirit of Modern Philosophy* (p. 230) beginning with, "The world is, on the whole, very nearly as tragic as Schopenhauer presents it to be," and ending with, "Let us thank Schopenhauer, then, for at least this, that in his pessimism he gives us an universal expression for the whole negative side of life."²³ She then concludes:

There may not be very much similarity between Schopenhauer and Robinson, but there certainly is between Robinson and the Roycean interpretation of Schopenhauer, particularly in the point of view that solution of evil lies in endurance, not in defining it. The mirror of life, reflecting its 'whole negative side,' caught at the same time the innate courage and guidance of an enduring light; and, looking at the dark glass, Robinson saw the shadow and the beam.²⁴

And she adds, summarizing the influence of the two philosophers:

Robinson must have been influenced to some extent by Hardy's critiques, as well as by those of Royce and Schopenhauer, in repudiating Emerson's optimistic idealism. Royce believed that good and evil, which are infinite and contradictory, cannot be reconciled; therefore it follows that we can understand only formally the meaning of the phrase 'God eternally reconciles them.' Emerson took the meaning in life to be whatever meaning any individual finds in it; Royce took it to be whatever God finds.²⁵

B. FINDINGS OF THE INVESTIGATOR

Poems of hope, despair, and detachment. I find more philosophical implication in Robinson's shorter poems than

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²³Kaplan, *op. cit.*, pp. 27-29.
²⁴Ibid., p. 29. ²⁵Ibid., p. 31.
in his longer ones, and I believe the shorter ones more nearly represent his claim to greatness. One critic, Yvor Winters, was of the same opinion, stating, "I have expressed my belief that Robinson's long poems are mostly unsuccessful and represent a waste of effort."  

The shorter poems reveal in Robinson a general humanistic ethic and idealistic metaphysics, complicated by numerous contrasting philosophical attitudes that may arbitrarily be classified into moods of hope, despair, and detachment. This poetry is itself thus a complex not subject to simple classification.

In his poems of hope, "The Corridor," "The Garden," "The Altar," "Credo," and others, Robinson deals with light, music, and success, and he comes closer to the idealistic position. The general tenor of these poems is that of an intuitive, mystical interpretation of the world of the poem.

In his poems of despair, "Lorraine," "King Jasper," "Amaryllis," "Bewick Finzer," "Reunion," and others, Robinson treats darkness and failure as central themes, and his position is close to Sartre and Schopenhauer. The general tone of these poems is a pessimistic, anguished, futile view of the surroundings.

Some of his poems escape classification as hopeful or 

26 Winters, op. cit., p. 143.
despairing, and these have been considered as his poems of detachment. Among them are "Cassandra," "Hillcrest," "Zola," and "Octave III." His philosophical position in these poems is close to the realist's, and occasionally, even the naturalist's position. His central themes in these poems are social issues, the condition of humanity, faith, time, and death. The general attitude of these poems expresses itself in a skeptical, questioning atmosphere.

A few poems were discovered the philosophical implication of which is illusive, yet apparently there. These poems will be discussed without any attempt at classification. 27

The hope, or idealism, in Robinson is evident in "Cliff Klingenhagen," a poem of Christian altruism, as it is in "The Corridor," a humanistic poem that approaches altruism from the negative side. In "Sonnet" he postulates the cosmological proof of God's existence in order to justify humanism. Robinson states:

Oh, brother men, if you have eyes at all
Look at a branch, a child, a bird, a rose,
Or anything God ever made that grows,—
Nor let the smallest vision of it slip,
Till you may read, as on Belshazzar's wall,
The glory of eternal partnership. 28

In "Octave VI," he states:

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27 See page 58.

28 Robinson, op. cit., p. 96.
That record of All-Soul whereon God writes
In everlasting runes the truth of Him. 29

The Christian attitude of spiritual rebirth in death is seen
in "Octave X":

And when the dead man goes it seems to me
'T were better for us all to do away
With weeping, and be glad that he is gone. 30

He posits the theory that the soul is reality in "Octave XVII":

The soul itself must insulate the Real,
Or ever you do cherish in this life--
In this life or in any life--repose. 31

Hegelian idealism is implied in "The Garden" in which he
postulates thought as Absolute.

In both "Credo," his much-quoted poem, and "The Altar,"
one finds mystic transcendentalism, a reaching out for some-
thing beyond, a saving light that is not quite understood,
but is only felt. In "The Altar":

Alas! I said,--the world is in the wrong.
But the same quenchless fever of unrest
that thrilled the foremost of that martyred throng
thrilled me, and I awoke . . . and was the same
Bewildered insect plunging for the flame
That burns, and must burn somehow for the best. 32

This same mystical faith in the unknown is present in
"L'Envoi" and his "bar of lost, imperial music" from "Credo"
is heard again:

29 Ibid., p. 102.
30 Ibid., p. 103.
31 Ibid., p. 105.
32 Ibid., p. 92.
Now in a thought, now in a shadowed word,
Now in a voice that thrills eternity,
Ever there comes an onward phrase to me
Of some transcendent music I have heard;
... Ah, yes, there is;
And after time and place are overthrown,
God's touch will keep its one chord quivering.33

His general tone of defeatism is present in "The Valley of the Shadow" and in the "Doctor of Billiards," who

Of all among the fallen from on high
We count you last and leave you to regain
Your born dominion of a life made vain
By three spheres of insidious ivory.
You dwindle to a lesser tragedy--...
And for your smile we credit you the least;
But when your false unhallowed laugh occurs,
We seem to think there may be something else.34

Robinson's somberness is accentuated in the magnificent ending of "The Clerks":

And you that ache so much to be sublime,
And you that feed yourselves with your descent,
What comes of all your visions and your fears?
Poets and kings are but the clerks of Time,
Tiering the same dull webs of discontent,
Clipping the same sad alnage of the years.35

The pathos of old age is brought out in "Amaryllis"
and in "Mr. Flood's Party" where Eben was

Alone, as if enduring to the end
A valiant armor of scarred hopes outworn

and as Eben drank from his jug--

34Ibid., p. 345.
35Ibid., p. 90.
There was not much that was ahead of him,  
And there was nothing in the town below--  
Where strangers, would have shut the many doors  
That many friends had opened long ago.36

This same personal despair is contained in "The Long Race"  
and in the men in "A Song at Shannon's," who

    Each to his loneliness or to his kind,  
    Went his own way, and with his own regret.37

In "Calvary," one finds a general criticism of society, a social realism, that exclaims,

    But after nineteen hundred years the shame  
    Still clings, and we have not made good the loss . . .  
    Tell me, O Lord-tell me, O Lord, how long  
    Are we to keep Christ writhing on the cross?38

The transiency of friendship is brought out in  
"Reunion," and the immediacy of subjective failure is re-  
vealed in "Aunt Imogen." Somehow it seems as if the poem  
should have been titled "Uncle Win," for all the tragedy of  
Robinson's life is incorporated in

    . . . How it was  
    That she could make, and feel for making it,  
    So much of joy for them, and all along  
    Be covering, like a scar, and while she smiled,  
    That hungering incompleteness and regret--  
    That passionate ache for something of her own,  
    For something of herself--she never knew.39

Perhaps, the poem that nearly epitomizes Robinson's philosophical attitude is the much-discussed "The Man Against

36Ibid., pp. 574-575.  
37Ibid., p. 509.  
38Ibid., p. 83.  
39Ibid., p. 186.
The Sky." Here Robinson combines both his pessimism and his idealism in a strange combination of hope and futility, of pathos and laughter, of certitude and mysticism.

You know not, nor do I.
But 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 world that will not be erased,
or, save in incommunicable gleams
Too permanent for dreams,
Be found or known.40

Robinson, however, concludes with a note of hope:

If after all that we have lived and thought,
All comes to Nought,—
If there be nothing after Now,
And we be nothing anyhow,
And we know that,—why live?41

The transcendental implication in Robinson's poetry is evident in the closing of "Discovery" and in "Caput Mortuun" where the stranger by the fire,

Unfailing and exuberant all the time,
Having no gold he paid with golden rhyme,
Of older coinage than his old defeat,
A debt that like himself was obsolete
In Art's long hazard, where no man may choose
Whether he play to win or toil to lose.42

In "The Old King's New Jester" he states:

And we go on with none to tell us whether
Or not we've each a tether
Determining how fast or far we go;
And it is well, since we must go together,
That we are not to know.43

40Ibid., p. 66.
41Ibid., pp. 66-69.
42Ibid., p. 580 43Ibid., p. 529.
One of Robinson's poems of detachment is "Cassandra," a poem of social realism in which he criticizes modern civilization.

The power is yours, but not the sight;  
You see not upon what you tread  
You have the ages for your guide,  
But not the wisdom to be led.

Think you to tread forever down  
The merciless old verities?  
And are you never to have eyes  
To see the world for what it is?44

In "Afterthoughts" Robinson implies an ethical realism. In "Hillcrest" he resorts to his recurrent theme of stoical endurance as well as negation of romanticism. There is an affinity to the Epicureanism of Omar Khayyam in the "Three Quatrains."

An undercurrent of amusement, yet a serious implication of naturalism is found in Robinson's "For a Dead Lady." He explains of the dead lady:

The forehead and the little ears  
Have gone where Saturn keeps the years, . . .  
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.45

The same implication is found in "As it Looked Then," and "Zola," which, at least in tone and attitude, expresses an implicit empathy with naturalism.

44Ibid., p. 12.  
In "Siege Perilous," Robinson implies a type of existentialistic confusion, the same type of anguished mysticism that is evident in "Octave III,"

To me the groaning of world-worshippers  
Rings like a lonely music played in hell  
By one with art enough to cleave the walls  
Of Heaven with his cadence, but without  
The wisdom or the will to comprehend  
The strangeness of his own perversity,  
And all without the courage to deny  
The profit and the pride of his defeat.46

The investigator was unable to interpret "Luke Havergal" other than its expression of longing for death, the inability to endure more. This is the poem of which Theodore Roosevelt was quoted as saying that he wasn't sure that he understood it, but he was sure he liked it. "The Pity of the Leaves" is illusive and is similar in tone to "Eben Flood," "Amaryllis," and Frost's "The Death of the Hired Man." "The Wandering Jew," regarded as Robinson's greatest by Yvor Winters, becomes unintelligible in the last five stanzas. The poem "Ben Trovato" is extremely difficult to analyze. Robinson seems clearly great, but equally unclear in message in both "Recalled" and "Christmas Sonnet."

A summation of the poems, delineating Robinson's basic attitudes, hope, despair, and detachment is seen on Table III, following:

46Ibid., p. 101.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poems of Hope</th>
<th>Poems of Despair</th>
<th>Poems of Detachment</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cliff Klingenhagen</td>
<td>The Dark Lady</td>
<td>Cassandra</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Corridor</td>
<td>Bewick Finzer</td>
<td>Afterthoughts</td>
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<td>Octave I</td>
<td>Lorraine</td>
<td>Three Quatrains</td>
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<td>Octave X</td>
<td>King Jasper</td>
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<td>Octave XVII</td>
<td>Richard Cory</td>
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<td>The Garden</td>
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<tr>
<td>Octave VI</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Altar</td>
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<tr>
<td>L'Envoi</td>
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<td>The Town Down the River</td>
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<td>Mr. Flood's Party</td>
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<td>The Long Race</td>
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<td>Caput Mortuum</td>
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<td>Old King's New Jester</td>
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<td>A Song at Shannons</td>
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<td>Calvary</td>
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<td>Octave IV</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Aunt Imogen</td>
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</table>
Robinson's peculiar values. It is a great deal easier to point out fragmentary values, judgments, and theses in Robinson's poetry than it is to construct from these a basic philosophical attitude.

Robinson is varied, and at times, contradictory in his values. At times, he is like Sartre and the existentialist position that one cannot escape from his own isolation. In the "Man Against the Sky," Kierkengaard's position in "Either-Or" is implied in the choice of the man as well as the Heideggerian consciousness of dread concern for the world and the significance of choice. He is a mitigated realist, but he is not quite sure that he doesn't have a mystical intuition of the Real. He is pessimistic, without the ultimate end of evil. He is a transcendentalist, and possesses with it Bergsonian insight. Robinson is not a positive idealist. He is an idealist only in the sense that he positively negates materialism. He is more a critical naturalist, like Santayana, than a Hegelian idealist, but basically his metaphysics are dualistic. In terms of ethical loyalty and mystical temperament, he is a synthetic idealist like Royce.

In terms of his basic philosophical attitude, Robinson appears to me to be primarily a pessimistic realist. He is not aware of reality, although he occasionally thinks he glimpses it. His basic concern is with fraudulent, socially-enforced ethical judgments, and his salvation is merely the
dignity or failure in a world he is not particularly attempting to understand, much less explain.


From the analysis of his poetry, and from his method of presentation, it seems apparent that Robinson's position is primarily realistic. His portraits are drawn with the cool integrity of the realist, rather than with the warm, emotionality of the romanticist. What idealism he possesses is naturalistic like Santayana's; his pessimism is both anguished and realistic, like that of the existentialists and
Schopenhauer. His themes involve the harsh, every-day realities of existence.

A table follows, summarizing the sources of his philosophic position:
# TABLE IV

**SOURCES OF ROBINSON’S PHILOSOPHIC POSITION**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Philosophic Positions</th>
<th>Poems</th>
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<td>Erasmus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negates Existentialism</td>
<td>Octave XXII</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negates Materialism</td>
<td>Dear Friends</td>
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<tr>
<td>Justifies Falsehood by its Pragmatic Social Utility</td>
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<td>Justifies Mercy Killing</td>
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<td>Indicates Christian Determinism</td>
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<td>Questions Existence</td>
<td>Two Sonnets</td>
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<tr>
<td>Postulates Thought as Absolute</td>
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<td>Octave V</td>
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<td>Accents Human Baseness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indicates the Transiency in Value-Judgments</td>
<td>Supremacy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inferential</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER V

SUMMARY

Robinson's life, his personal failure, his poverty and self-abnegation and his continual struggle with the critics offer valuable insight into his basic attitude, pessimistic realism. His life divides easily into four phases; his years of learning, his years of knowing, his years of suffering and his years of achieving. In the first two phases from 1869 to 1897, Robinson is forming his pessimistic attitude. In the last two phases of his life from 1898 to 1935, he achieves the attitude as climaxed by the third phase of his life, the years of suffering from 1898 to 1910. Despite three Pulitzer prizes, Robinson never was completely successful, nor completely at ease in the world. His writings, the shorter poems in the first two phases of his life, and his longer poems, in the latter two phases, reveal the formation and achievement of the attitude.

Critics regard him generally as quite important, but are divided on the worth of his longer poems. The investigator rates Robinson extremely high and regards his shorter poems as truly representative of his genius. Critics rather consistently consider Robinson's philosophic position to be that of an idealist, although many qualify this by stating that his basic view of his immediate surroundings is pes-
simistic. Some critics, particularly, Morris and Kaplan see strong evidences of Roycean and Schopenhauerean philosophy in Robinson's poetry.

The source of Robinson's pessimism is evident in his shorter poems. Although they seem to classify into poems of hope, detachment, and despair, it is the pessimistic quality of the latter that is most in abundance and evidence. Robinson's basic philosophic attitude is illusive; his values are varied and fragmentary. He is somewhat like Royce, somewhat like Santayana, partially Kierkegaardian and Heideggerian, partially mystical and partially a transcendentalist. The only thing definite in his position is that he negates materialism. Yet I feel him in the over-all perspective of his total work to be a pessimistic realist.
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