



A Glimpse of Light in the Mid of Darkness Perspectives of Hope in the poetry of

E. A. Robinson

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of the light as a symbol of hope and a guide in the poetry of E. A. Robinson who is considered to be America's first modern poet. Robinson lived in an age that witnessed the decadence and the disintegration of America and the whole world at all levels: social, political, economic, and spiritual. Unimpeachably, his role as a poet demanded for him to reflect upon the problems arising and to insemminate in the people of his time a glimmer of hope which would help them continue living. Such an optimistic vision manifests itself in his concept of light which is symptomatic of hope. The individuals he portrays in his poetry are led by this guiding light whose absence testifies to the fact that darkness dominates the situation. For example, Credo, Richard Cory, and other characters seem to have lost sight of the inner light, a light that is parallel to faith. They move between moments of despair and hope, pessimism and optimism, darkness and light. Eventually, the paper concludes that Robinson presented in his poetry a kind of optimistic philosophy that was an urgent necessity in his age in order to encounter the pressures of life with bravery, fortitude, and determination.

لمحة من الضياء في وسط الظلام منظور الامل في شعر اي. أي. روبنسون

المستخلص

يتناول هذا البحث فكرة الضياء بوصفها رمزا للامل ودليلا في قصائد مختارة للشاعر أي. أي. روبنسون، الذي يُعد شاعر امريكا الحديث الأول. فلقد عاش روبنسون في عصر شهد انهيار امريكا والعالم بأسره وتفككهما على مختلف الصعد الاجتماعية ، والاقتصادية، والسياسية، والروحية. ولا شك، أن دور الشاعر تتطلب منه أن ينظر في المشاكل الناشئة، وأن يغرس في ناسه بريقاً من الأمل، يساعدهم على مواصلة حياتهم. و تتجلى هذه الرؤية التفاؤلية في مفهومه للضياء الدال على الأمل، و يقود هذا الضياء شخصيات روبنسون الشعرية، وغياب هذا الضياء ما هو الا دليل على حلول الظلام. فعلى سبيل المثال، يبدو أن كريدو، وريتشارد كوري، والشخصيات الأخرى قد غاب عنها رؤية الضياء الداخلي ، فهي تتحرك بين لحظات اليأس والأمل، والتشاؤم والتفاؤل، والظلام والضياء. وأخيراً، يلخص البحث بأن روبنسون قدم في شعره ضرباً من الفلسفة التفاؤلية، والتي كانت ضرورة ملحة في عصره من اجل النهوض بأعباء الحياة بشجاعة، وصبر، واصرار.

The future looks dark and a little too rough to suit me, but sometimes I think I catch a little glimmer of light-though it is so far away that I am not sure of it.¹

E. A. Robinson

E.A Robinson's biography is of a great interest in order to have a clear view of his poetry. He underwent many depressing difficulties that added a pessimistic touch to his poetry. His married life was also disappointing. He had chronic mastoiditis that left him deaf in one ear. Moreover, his family suffered from certain misfortunes: his father died broken, a matter that left Robinson suffering from financial hardships; and both of his brothers were drug addicts.² His acute personal sense of failure, according to the standards not only of Tilbury Town but of his whole New England inheritance, "made him sympathetic to failure in others and avid of indications of spiritual victory behind the worldly defeat."³ This changeability of Robinson's life and his sense of failure colour his poetry and the psychological treatment of his characters is conclusive evidence that consolidates the fact that Robinson reflects himself in his poems. In fact, Robinson's poetry is, as the poet Louise Bogan says in her essay "Tilbury Town and Beyond"(1931), "one of the hinges upon which American poetry was able to turn from the sentimentality of the nineties toward modern veracity and psychological truth."⁴ He draws a truthful picture of the American individual who was overburdened with his social and psychological problems.

In his book *Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Introduction* Wallace Anderson presents a bird's eye view of Robinson's poetry and his outstanding themes:

He [Robinson] was not interested in exterior realism, but in states of mind, the interaction of people, the consequences of action. The people who interested him primarily were the failures, the misfits, the troubled; the wrong jobs, people with the wrong marital partner, people with the wrong goals. Success that fails and failure that succeeds the disparity between appearance and reality- these are dominant themes.⁵

The significance of Anderson's passage lies in the fact that it represents the epitome of Robinson's poetic art. Robinson in his poems is much preoccupied with the people of Tilbury town who face the different hardships of life. Undoubtedly, their problems and their spiritual vacuity mainly spring from the absence of the inner light i.e. faith. Robinson himself makes this point clear in his poem "The Children of the Night", "The faith within the fear is what holds us to the life we curse."⁶

In 1933, Robinson wrote to Hermann Hagedorn Hermann who became a member of Oxford movement, saying that it was good to know he had "a light, for without one a fellow is either comfortably blind or wretchedly astray , adding that "he had always had a light to keep him going, though at times it was "burning pretty low."⁶ Donaldson also states that Robinson "confronted the universe with confidence that he was fulfilling his purpose, with fortitude in the face of its trials, and with hope of a better world to come".⁷ Despite all the darkness, "he also expressed in his poetry his conviction that the universe could be 'a fine thing' if we only had a light to be guided by".⁸ In the letter of 15 March 1897, in which he speaks of the

glimpse of light through the clouds, he adds: “It is that glimpse that makes me wish to live and see it out”⁹

Curiously enough, Robinson knew the materialistic orientation of his age, which created a massive surge of despair and skepticism in the American society. Nonetheless, he set before his eyes the idea that there must be a great guide amidst the prevalent chaos. Davidson comments on this aspect clearly:

On a broader plane, Robinson deplored “the whole trend of popular thought,” not only aimed in the wrong direction but seemingly proud of it. “The age is all right, material progress is all right, Herbert Spencer is all right, hell is all right,” he bitterly spat out the received wisdom of the time. Bad as things were, he assured Smith that he would not succumb to despair as long as he could catch “a glimpse of the real light through the clouds of time.” That glimpse was enough to make him “wish to live and see it out.” Without it, he would be tempted to stick his nose into a rag soaked with chloroform. Here, for the first time, Robinson invoked the transforming power of “the light”—his symbol for salvation in a world gone wrong—that that was to mean so much to him and his poetry.¹⁰

This hoped-for light comes from within to illuminate one’s way in the midst of unfavorable circumstances that paralyze his personal powers. Such an inner light finds best expression in Robinson’s poems on the evidence that

Robinson refers to this light explicitly or implicitly. Sometimes he uses dark-light imagery to illustrate the point. At other times, he tackles the subject by implication. The image of light is often used by Robinson to emphasize the spirituality much-needed in life. The comparison of wisdom to light shows how these two things are intimately affiliated in the poetry of E.A. Robinson, a matter which recalls Waldo Ralph Emerson's idea of compensation underlying the notion that if something is lost, another thing will be gained instead.¹¹

"Credo", which literally means "I believe"¹², is a poem about a man who is totally devastated by the lonely and melancholic life he leads. All things around him seem static, depressing, and meaningless, for he says "I cannot find my way: there is no star/ In all the shrouded heavens anywhere/ And there is not a whisper in the air."¹³ Landini argues that the journey taken by the speaker of the poem is "inner spaced, spiritually and intellectually, and aimed at an understanding of the purpose and meaning of existence."¹⁴ In the world of Robinson's characters, there is a sense of pessimism and darkness that controls these forlorn creatures:

No, there is not a glimmer, nor a call,
For one that welcomes, welcomes when he
fears,
The black and awful chaos of the night;
For through it all--above, beyond it all--
I know the far sent message of the years,
I feel the coming glory of the light.

(ll. 9-14)

These lines are a confirmation made by the speaker to express his inability to figure out his isolation and sense of loss. Robinson draws a scenic view of man's life moving between moments of hope and despair, pessimism and optimism, darkness and light. These moments are mainly incarnated in many reiterative images of darkness and light in the context of the poem.

In spite of the gloomy and hopeless atmosphere that overshadows the lived reality, there is still a sign of hope in the horizon. Darkness must end, thus by indicating a new beginning, "I feel the coming glory of the light." "The night is proof of the coming of the light, though it is fearful in itself."¹⁵ No darkness can last for eternity; a penetrating light is what people must anticipate and see. In this case, light is clearly illustrative of the hope that Robinson is after in his portrayal of the people of Tilbury town. This fictive utopian place represents America at large, a place which is in reality away from being accessible and possible.

The absence of the inner light is what distinguishes the character of Richard Cory in Robinson's "Richard Cory." He is presented as a normal person and having everything at his disposal:

He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean-favoured and imperially slim.
And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;

And he was rich, yes, richer than a king,
And admirably schooled in every grace:
In fine -- we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.

(ll. 3-12)

Nevertheless, this abundance of life does not prevent him from killing himself when darkness, the lack of a guiding light, falls. Richard Cory does away with his life for no apparent reason, "And Richard Cory, one calm summer night /Went home and put a bullet in his head." Cory liquidates himself, for he lives in the illusion of reality. He fails to see the over- soul, to use Emerson's transcendentalist concept. In other words, he is a psychopathic character who is cut off from the self and the society.

Like Credo and Richard Cory, Captain Craig is another Robinsonian archetypal character who exemplifies the availability and the absence of the inner light at the same time. First, he is shown to be a man of social charisma, "By Tilbury prudence. He has lived his life and in his way has shared, with all mankind." Some people observe the personal attractiveness he has, "had found somehow The spark in him."¹⁶ Quite unexpectedly, this magnetic character becomes

Weak, dizzy, chilled, and half starved, he had
laid
Some nerveless fingers on a prudent sleeve,
And told the sleeve, in furtive confidence,
Just how it was: "My name is Captain Craig,"
He said, "and I must eat." The sleeve moved on,
And after it moved others—one or two;
For Captain Craig, before the day was done,
Got back to the scant refuge of his bed
And shivered into it without a curse—
Without a murmur even. He was cold,

(ll. 11- 26)

Worse than that, he seems "a forlorn familiar consciousness, /That he had failed again "(ll. 27-28). His sense of loss and failure emanates from his neglect of the concerns of his society. Yet, gradually he comes to see the light looming largely in him. His dialogue with the narrator affirms the feeling of social responsibility he has. He has a hope that "his inward discipline would prepare a new kind of leadership. This new leadership is built on: what begins in delight and ends in wisdom."¹⁷

This social transformation for having the inner light transmitted to the other members of society lends itself to Robinson's belief that there must be a sort of self- abnegation to create a healthy and well- established society. Hence, Captain Craig is:

Essentially a social man who has found his most satisfying experience in love of life and the world. Where-as he used to curse the afflictions of the unfortunate, he now feels a responsibility to mankind to be a leader toward the Light.¹⁸

The hope in which Robinson is immersed is not confined to the meaning of faith, but also it has much to do with the leadership quality some people have. Curiously enough, such much-wanted trait refers to the possibility of healing society from the ailing conditions of materialism and the spiritual aridity. Captain Craig embodies this hope for a more promising future. It was Robinson's ethical responsibility that motivated him to present such pioneering figures to make a radical change in the America he was desperately seeing scattered before his eyes.

In "The Man Against the Sky," Robinson becomes the philosopher presenting his own vision of life. "I've always told you [the world] is a hell of a place," he wrote to a friend in 1916. "That's why I insist it must mean something. My July work was a poem on this theme and I call it 'The Man Against the Sky.'" ¹⁹ Robinson himself mentioned in another letter that the poem is "a protest against a material explanation of the universe." ²⁰ "The Man Against the Sky" was "not a dirge," he insisted, his purpose "was to try to cheer people up and incidentally to indicate the futility of materialism as a thing to live by—or to die by." ¹⁹ Interestingly enough, Robinson was 45 when he wrote this poem, a matter that underscores Robinson's contemplation of the meaning of both life and death. This poem has at its core the idea that

man must look for a glimpse of hope amidst difficulties, a subject which is typical of Robinson's poetry.

Robinson, the poet- philosopher, puts this philosophical orientation in spellbinding lines when he comes to finalize "The Man Against the Sky:"

All comes to Nought,--
If there be nothing after Now,
And we be nothing anyhow,
And we know that,—why live?
'Twere sure but weaklings' vain distress
To suffer dungeons where so many doors
Will open on the cold eternal shores
That look sheer down
To the dark tideless floods of Nothingness
Where all who know may drown.

(ll. 314-323)

There can be no suspicion about the fact that Robinson is deeply entangled in existential dilemma, "Why live?" It is worthwhile to keep in mind the occasion of this poem, because it has much to do with Robinson's frame of mind. The poem was written as a response to World War I, which left the world asking about the meaning of life.²¹ Under the grave circumstances of this heinous war, Robinson found himself responsible to tackle the crisis of belief, affirming "that life so evidently meaningless and horrible *must* prefigure a world beyond."²² Outstandingly, the grave conditions of this

much- troubled time forced Robinson to write in a way that might help people search for a source of spiritual sublimation.

“The Man Against the Sky” is about man’s destiny when his life ends with death. It starts with the use of the sunset imagery to focus on the inevitability of death:

Between me and the sunset, like a dome
Against the glory of a world on fire,
Now burned a sudden hill,
Bleak, round, and high, by flame-lit height
made higher,
With nothing on it for the flame to kill
Save one who moved and was alone up there
To loom before the chaos and the glare
As if he were the last god going home
Unto his last desire. (ll. 1-9)

The sunset is, literally speaking, the end of day. Still, symbolically, it embraces the meaning of the middle age. The journey Robinson takes in this poem is one of searching an over-soul, faith or self- exploration. The destination is not an easy task to undertake, for man has to pass through the dark soul of the night.

Anderson argues that the man against the sky makes Robinson adopt five different attitudes of men the moment they encounter death, and these attitudes reflect their view of death. Man’s view of life is related to his attitude towards death.²³ These attitudes are mentioned in the following lines:

A vision answering a faith unshaken,
An easy trust assumed of easy trials,
A sick negation born of weak denials,
A crazed abhorrence of an old condition,
A blind attendance on a brief ambition

(ll. 191-195)

More importantly, the sequence of these attitudes is revealing, because it “is one of increasing negation, moving from faith to doubt to denial, from firm belief to nullity.”²⁴ These attitudes represent five kinds of men: the religious man, the contended man, the melancholic man, the desperate man, and the scientific man.²⁵

However strong man is, he is too weak, paralyzed, and powerless in the presence of the annihilating power of death. Man is strong by the faith he has. Robinson refers to “The story about the man of tested faiths [which] closes with a reference to the ‘three in Dura’ who refused to fall down and worship the golden image of Nebuchadnezzar; thrown into the fiery furnace, they were saved by their faith in God.”²⁶ Furthermore, Nahum is a biblical figure who foretold the destruction of Nineveh, for in his prophesy “Robinson saw a parallel to the twentieth century materialism and its consequences.”²⁷

Apart from the pessimistic and gloomy side of life seen by human beings who are, like this man against the sky, led into the unknown, there is a kind of optimism that ushers in spiritual redemption:

Where was he going, this man against the sky?
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 Word that will not be erased,
Or, save in incommunicable gleams
Too permanent for dreams,
Be found or known (ll. 332- 341)

Commenting on these lines, Donaldson maintains that “Robinson asserts the reality of some sort of spiritual experience, outside the realm of proof, that makes it possible for us to take pleasure in our brief existence and to struggle against our demons.”²⁸ Robinson is in a fervent pursuit of the meaning of life and the brevity of life necessitates the presence of hope and self- estimation to enjoy its fleeting pleasures.

In his poem ‘The Children of Night,’ Robinson portrays how it is essential for human beings to have a sense of hope through presenting the image of light. “The poem asserts faith in immortality and evolutionary progress and repudiates agnosticism in a positive way not to be found in the later poems.”²⁹ This poem is a conspicuous description of children who are cloaked in the mystery of darkness. It starts with the lines which reveal that these children find themselves at a great loss:

For those that never know the light,
The darkness is a sullen thing;
And they, the Children of the Night,
Seem lost in Fortune's winnowing (ll. 1- 4)

Robinson's misfit and frustrated characters are challengingly confronted with many stumbling blocks that preclude them from achieving self-realization.

It seems that Robinson is much preoccupied with the problem of existence in a world that devastated man's faith and love for a generous and stable life. In one way or another, Robinson reflects himself and his approach to the crisis of belief in every sense of the word. He is strongly of the opinion that life runs to a halt; therefore, man must prepare him/herself for the other world beyond the lived one. Faith or the inner light is the eternal placebo that behooves to accompany man to the last station of his mundane journey.

To bring this discussion to a close, one can say that the Robinsonian concept of the inner light shows his ideal philosophy at its best. Life is not always paved with roses; thorns are there. So, there must be a guiding and trustful hand. Man must seek deep inside the light that guides her/him to the right path, a matter that makes life endurable and beautiful in the eyes of its beholder. Robinson does believe that poetry aims at "producing a constant lighting and relief and change, with balancing forces against the impending tragedy." ³⁰ [of life]. Robinson's optimistic philosophy was indispensable in his materialistic age. In this sense, Robinson is *not* a poet of his time; rather, he is a poet of a cosmopolitan dimension, for he is much concerned with the problems that occupy man's mind all over the world.

Notes

1. Edwin S. Fussell, "A Note on E. A. Robinson's "Credo" *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 66, No. 6 (Jun., 1951), p. 339.
2. Christopher Beach, *The Cambridge Introduction to Twentieth- Century American Poetry*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), p. 9.
3. Scott Donaldson, *Edwin Arlington Robinson: a Poet's Life*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 223.
4. Beach, p. 9.
5. Anderson, Wallace, L. *Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Introduction*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 103.
6. Beach, p. 9.
7. Donaldson, p. 456.
8. Donaldson, p. 456.
9. E. A. Robinson's System of Opposites Author(s): James G. Hepburn Reviewed work(s): Source: PMLA, Vol. 80, No. 3 (Jun., 1965), pp. 266-274 Published by: Modern Language Association Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4612>, P.268 Donaldson, p. 480 .
10. Donaldson, p. 124.
11. Horn, Kristina K. "The Character Sketches of Edwin Arlington Robinson " Unpublished M.A. thesis, 1987, 75.
12. Walter W. Skeat, *Concise Dictionary of English Etymology*, (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd., 1993), p. 100.
13. All quotations from "Credo", "Richard Cory", and "The Man against the Sky" are taken from *Three Books of Poems by Edwin Arlington Robinson* edited by Jim

Manis. Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University, 1999. Reference is made to the number of lines only. `

14. Richard G. Landini, "Metaphor and Imagery in E.A. Robinson's "Credo" ,*Colby Library Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (1968), p. 21.

15. Fussell, p. 400.

16. All lines of "Captain Craig" are taken *Collected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson*. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1942). Reference is made to the number of lines only.

17. Areej M. Jwaad Al-Khaffaji, " Humour in Selected Modern American Poets: A Study of E. A. Robinson, Wallace Stevens, Robert Lowell, and Allen Ginsberg." Unpublished PH.D. Dissertation, U of Baghdad, 2004. P 63 .

18. Richard Crowder, "Here Are the Men..."; E. A. Robinson's Male Character Types." *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Sep., 1945), p. 358.

19. Donaldson, p. 229 .

20. Quoted in Murphy , Francis(ed.). *Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*. (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), p.160.

21. Donaldson, p. 324 .

22. Anderson, p. 146.

23. Donaldson, p. 229.

24. Anderson, p. 147.

25. Anderson, p. 147.

26. Zaynab Layth Abdul- Jabber,, "Edwin Arlington Robinson's Vision of Life: A Study in Selected Poems". Unpublished M. A. Thesis. U of Baghdad, 2011. pp. 52-54.

27. Anderson, p. 148 .

28. Anderson, p. 148.

29. Donaldson, 74.

30. Al-Khaffaji, p. 53

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