Robert Browning and Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Comparative Study of Their Poetry, Themes, and Attitudes with An Examination of the Frequent Claims Made Regarding Browning's Influence on Robinson

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ROBERT BROWNING AND EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON: A COMPARATIVE STUDY
OF THEIR POETRY, THEMES, AND ATTITUDES WITH AN EXAMINATION
OF THE FREQUENT CLAIMS MADE REGARDING
BROWNING'S INFLUENCE ON ROBINSON

BY

Alice Fitzpatrick

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JUNE
1947
On Browning

"Since Chaucer was alive and hale
No man has walked along our road with step
So active, so enquiring eye and tongue
So varied in discourse."

Walter Savage Landor

On Robinson

"There is no royal road to Robinson.
The summit though is worth the ascent."

Carl Van Doren
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Introduction

American poetry as a vehicle of human expression and a major form of art has never been unaware of the great tradition of English literature behind it. Many of the ideas, forms and even turns of phrase which Americans have used can be traced to English writers who preceded them or, in some cases, flourished at approximately the same time. Too much importance should not be attached to this, for often the ideas, forms and turns of phrase, or at least turns of thought, did not originate in English literature but are part of the whole western heritage.

The process of comparison and analysis can be enlightening if the field is limited to two men who have at the least certain surface resemblances — especially if these resemblances have led some commentators to claim that the earlier or the elder of the two exercised a definite influence on the other.

The Englishman, Robert Browning, and the American, Edwin Arlington Robinson, seem to lend themselves especially well to a comparative study. There are undoubtedly some resemblances between them, and an examination of these resemblances with a view to determining whether they are superficial or essential, whether they are fortuitous, or whether they indicate that the earlier poet influenced the latter, is an engrossing task for any student of literature.

It was thought best for the purpose of this study first to view the two men, Browning and Robinson, in the light of their theories of the art of
poetry. From that point the study proceeds to their poetic themes to observe how far they practised their theories.

The second chapter depicts the inner conflicts of the soul of man on the subject of failure. It was noticed that this theme, which was only one of Browning's many subjects, appears frequently in Robinson's poetry. Following the theme of failure, the use of the idea of light is chosen for comparison. Robinson's treatment of this theme is analyzed and compared to that of Browning. The next chapter examines the two poets' general attitudes.

The comparative comments on both poets made by critics of repute are examined in the following chapter. The frequent claims made regarding Robert Browning's possible influence on Edwin Arlington Robinson are then studied. An examination of external and internal evidence is made, with primary and secondary sources noted. A few letters on this question of influence were received from T. S. Eliot and Robinson's own nieces, and have been added in an appendix. The results of the whole study are considered in a concluding chapter.

Interest was awakened in the subject of this thesis through the reading of both Browning and Robinson alternately. The feeling grew that both poets moved along paths leading in the same direction. The purpose of this study was to ascertain whether Robinson took Browning as a model, or whether independently he paralleled him, or whether he set out definitely to discard earlier poetic influences and created a poetry that owed allegiance to no one.
CHAPTER I

A COMPARISON OF THE THEORIES OF THE ART OF POETRY HELD BY

ROBERT BROWNING AND EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

The ancient theory that art teaches men the pleasures of the spirit was held by both Robert Browning and Edwin Arlington Robinson. They did not say, however, like St. Thomas Aquinas, that art prepares the human race for contemplation, the spiritual joy of which surpasses every other joy and seems to be the end of all human activities. They believed that art was a fundamental necessity in the human state which should serve man to a fuller and freer expression of life. Similarly, they believed that the highest art is the highest truth. Browning explained further in his The Ring and the Book, which contains the essence of his mature poetic thought, that he believed the lofty function of art was not merely to give pleasure (though that were enough), but to breed wisdom and thus "to save the soul." For the most part, their theories on art are contained in their poetry, though there is one prose work of Browning, Essay on Shelley or On The Poet Objective and Subjective, where the author's theories on the poetic nature are expounded. The few personal comments that Robinson made are brief, but they indicate the trend of his thought on art.

I. A Consideration of Robert Browning's Theories.

In Browning's earliest work, Pauline, he defined a poet thus: "A perfect
bard was one who shadowed out the stages of all life." Later he changed "shadowed out" to "chronicled," thus giving a different task to the poet. It was noted that he made no allusion to use of rhyme, rhythm or music. His definition of a poet follows logically his belief that poetry should be "always dramatic in principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine." Browning believed that a poet's duty was to remedy "the misapprehensiveness of his age," but it seems illogical that he could perform his ascribed duty if the imaginary poetic utterance were not his. Perhaps he wanted his audience to use its "spirit-sense" to determine which remarks were those of the imaginary persons he was portraying and which ones were the poet's own words.

He was more explicit, nevertheless, in his explanation of the technical means of apprehension. He believed that the poet, by using his own imagination, passion, and delight in conjunction with a "music at once of the soul and the sense," creates a poetic record of the world of man's life in its "higher reality." Browning relates in his Essay on Shelley that the lyric poet's "Remains" explains

...the whole poet's function of beholding with an understanding keenness the universe, nature and man, in their actual state of perfection in imperfection; of the whole poet's virtue of being un tempted, by the manifold partial developments of beauty and good on every side, into leaving them the ultimates he found them, induced by the facility of the gratification of his own sense of those qualities, or by the pleasure of acquiescence in the shortcomings of his predecessors in art, and the pain of disturbing their conventionalisms—the whole poet's virtue, I repeat, of looking higher
than any manifestation yet made of both beauty and
good in order to suggest from the utmost realiza-
tion of the one a corresponding capability in the
other, and out of the calm, purity, and energy of
nature to reconstitute and store up, for the forth
coming stage of man's being, a gift in repayment of
that former gift in which man's own thought and pas-
sion had been lavished by the poet on the else-in-
completed magnificence of the sunrise, the else-un-
interpreted mystery of the lake, so drawing out,
lifting up, and assimilating this ideal of a future
man, thus described as possible, to the present real-
ity of the poet's soul already arrived at the higher
state of development, and still aspirant to elevate
and extend itself in conformity with its still-im-
proving perceptions of, no longer the eventual Human,
but the actual Divine. 1

He continued in this vein to distinguish between the objective and the
subjective poet; the objective poet is the dramatic poet who tells his story
through the actions and speeches of men upon a stage while the latter is the
unaided narrator who appeals through himself to the absolute Divine mind. In
this essay he placed more importance upon the subjective poet because of the
morality of the artist's aim.

Historically speaking, it is an old theory. Omitting Plato's objection
to the degeneracy of the poets of his day, it was Sidney who set the style of
defending literature from the attack of moralists by surrendering literature
to them as an instrument of moral teaching. Later Thomas Rymer ruled that
the best poet was he who had done most to make men virtuous. It is in this
line of tradition that Henry James stated his belief that all art was "in
basis moral."

1 Browning, "Essay on Shelley," The Complete Poetic and Dramatic Works of
Robert Browning (Boston; Houghton Mifflin Co., 1895), 1010-11.
Likewise Browning points out:

Greatness in a work suggests an adequate instrumentality; and none of the lower incitements, however they may avail to initiate or even effect many considerable displays of power, simulating the nobler inspiration to which they are mistak enly referred, have been found able, under the ordinary conditions of humanity, to task themselves to the end of so exacting a performance as a poet's complete work. 2

According to Browning, every true artist is animated by a noble aim. None of the lower incitements, such as the love of displaying power for the display's sake, the love of riches, of distinction, of notoriety, or the desire for a triumph over rivals, will result in a great work. He adds:

Assuming the proper moral aim to have produced a work, there are many and various states of an aim; it may be more intense than clear-sighted, or too easily satisfied with a lower field of activity than a steadier aspiration would reach. 3

He digresses here to give expression to his idea of bad poetry, explaining that it results from a discrepancy in the poet's soul which occasions a lack of correspondence between his work and the verities of nature. This type of poetry lives its brief minute simply through the indolence of the reader who accepts it, or through his incapacity to denounce a cheat. Browning was impatient of revision and would not recast his work. It was not a case of indolence with him. He sought to retain a variety in expression and thought inspired by his original impetus.

2 Ibid., 1010.
3 Ibid.
To return to the moral aspect of his work, it can be observed that Browning used the poetry of situations not for their picturesque qualities but solely for their moral interest. He did wander from the subject but he always returned to the moral starting point. Naturally, this necessitated a coherent philosophy on Browning's part. Aside from his Christian philosophy, the poet's ethical decision, either oblique or direct, was implied or stated in the poem itself.

Next, Browning was definite in saying that the artist's gift, truly of divine inspiration, is of first importance. He contended that the artist's medium, whether it is poetry, music, sculpture or painting, is subordinate. In other words, what the poet creates will be, in one sense, a product of the Divine Hand.

Next in importance is the belief that the poet sees the whole of life and the future. Naturally, human limitation hinders an absolute vision in this world, although Browning has a theory that poets are permitted a continual approximation to it that exceeds that of the layman. Thus the poet has a clear advantage.

Lastly the true artist, because of his divine inspiration, handles and combines things in such a manner as to invest them with his own power of truth and beauty. Browning's statement of this fact recalls St. Thomas' conception of beauty, which is that beauty resides in the object and the subject. Beauty is in the subject according to a person's capacity to receive and to apprehend the proportions of the thing. The words "with his own power of truth and beauty" give Browning an excuse for treating the grotesque elements
of real life as poetic substance. It is true that the grotesque is a necessary part of his theory of art, but it is not treated here, since a previous thesis, "Browning, the Grotesque Artist", has studied this aspect. His method is important because it foreshadows the realistic, modern type of poetry. Browning has produced the unmistakable exaltation of poetry through the very exaggeration of his unpoetical method. An illustration of Browning's indirect, oblique approach occurs just before the climax in Cleon. The ancient Greek poet, writing "from the sprinkled isles, Lily on lily, that o'erlace the sea," answers certain queries of Protus the Tyrant. He stresses the insufficiency of the artistic life, and laments bitterly the vanity of pursuing ideal beauty when the end is only death:

   It is so horrible,
   I dare at times imagine to my need
   Some future state revealed to us by Zeus,
   unlimited in capability
   For joy, as this is in desire for joy.
   --------------------------But no!
   Zeus has not yet revealed it; and alas, 4
   He must have done so, were it possible!

In this monologue, suspended delicately between self-examination and dramatic confession, Browning has focused in one individual heart the doom of the great civilization that is passing away and the splendid triumph of the new. The climax follows, as if it were an afterthought:

And for the rest,
I cannot tell thy messenger aright
Where to deliver what he bears of thine
To one called Paulus; we have heard his fame
Indeed, if Christus be not one with him—
I know not, nor am troubled much to know.
Thou wrongest our philosophy, O King,
In stooping to inquire of such a one,
As if his answer could impose at all!
He writeth, doth he? well, and he may write.
Oh, the Jew findeth scholars! certain slaves
Who touched on this same isle, preached him and Christ;
And (as I gathered from a bystander)
Their doctrine could be held by no sane man.

Paul Elmer More believes the underscored lines touch on the sublime for
"the individual is involuntarily rapt into communion with the great currents
that sweep through human affairs, and the interest of psychology is lost in
the elevation of poetry." 5

II. Consideration of Edwin Arlington Robinson's Theories.

Another poet, Robinson, left only his poetry to speak for him. So, if
one erects a theory of art for Robinson out of his works, his letters, and a
few comments made in an interview, one realizes his worship of the poetic
ideal that lasted throughout his entire life. His definition of a poet is
typically brief. He stated that a poet is "an interpreter of life, if he is
to be anything." 6

Robinson gave a very significant definition of poetry when he was inter-
viewed by Joyce Kilmer for the New York Times in 1916. Robinson said:

5 Paul Elmer More, "Why is Browning Popular?" Shelburne Essays
(Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.,1905) III, 158.

6 Ridgely Torrence (ed.), Selected Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson
(New York: Macmillan Company,1940), 15.
Poetry is a language that tells, through a more or less emotional reaction, something that cannot be said. All real poetry, great or small, does this. And it seems to me that poetry has two characteristics. One is that it is, after all, undefinable. The other is that it is eventually unmistakable. 7

His premise that poetry cannot be defined may be erroneous, but that it is unmistakable is certainly correct. He further defined real poetry, saying:

I think it is safe to say that all real poetry is going to give you at some time or other, a suggestion of finality. In real poetry you find something has been said, and yet you find also about it a sort of nimbus of what can't be said. 8

Thus it is easy to understand why Robinson permits his poems to speak for themselves. If his poem "Rembrandt to Rembrandt" were taken as an example of a suggestion of finality as well as a sort of "nimbus of what can't be said," his definition can be clearly understood. In this poem the artist is faced with the question of the rightness of his belief in his own ability and in what he is doing as an artist. Did Robinson himself believe that the true artist knows the "taste of death in life" so that his work would live after him? Evidently he does, for Rembrandt muses:

She might, as well as any, by this time, Unwillingly and eagerly have bitten Another's devil's -apple of unrest And so, by some attendant artifice Or other, might anon have had you sharing A taste that would have tainted everything,


8 Ibid., 269.
And so had been for two, instead of one,
The taste of death in life—which is the food
Of art that has betrayed itself alive
And is a food of hell. 9

Robinson had a mystic sense of his own calling. He intimates in this
same poem that the artist is the elected servant of the power, "Whatever-it-
is," and the sole duty of the artist is to keep his tools keen and clear for
the power of transmission.

Rembrandt reminds himself:

You are the servant, Rembrandt, not the master,—
But you are not assigned with other slaves
That in their freedom are the most in fear.
One of the few that are so fortunate
As to be told their task and to be given
A skill to do it with a tool too keen
For timid safety, bow your elected head
Under the stars tonight, and whip your devils
Each to his nest in hell. 10

Another example of the function of a poet is expressed in "Octaves," wherein
Robinson himself repeats this idea.

The prophet of dead words defeats himself:
Whoever would acknowledge and include
The foregleam and the glory of the real,
Must work with something else than pen and ink
And painful preparation he must work
With unseen implements that have no names,
And he must win withal, to do that work,
Good fortitude, clean wisdom and strong skill. 11

The poetry of Robinson is so voluminous and reiterative that it is possible
to take any number of quotations to illustrate any one point. This repetition

10 Ibid., 590.
11 Ibid., "Octaves," XX, 106.
could be found in the writings of any mature poet who put out such a volume of work as Robinson did. The conduct of his life is a model of the noble aim of the true artist. The philosophic utterance by Ampersand the cat, in *Amaranth*, leaves no doubt as to the hard road of the artist. Ampersand says "with a red yawn":

```
I came to see the picture. Men go hungry,
And travel far, leaving their homes behind them
And their wives eating scraps, all to see pictures
That hungry men have painted. Art is cruel,
And so is nature; and if both are cruel,
What's left that isn't? 12
```

There is no doubt that Robinson's life was a difficult one in every respect. Here is what he says to a young writer:

```
I never give advice to poets (except not to be in a hurry to publish) but sometimes I wonder if mere "writing" isn't in ninety-nine cases in a hundred about the worst sort of a dog's life. 13
```

Yet Robinson gives another piece of advice which indicates the first importance of the artist's gift.

```
In the great shuffle of transmitted characteristics, traits, abilities, aptitudes, the man who fixes on something definite in life that he must do, at the expense of everything else, if necessary, has presumably got something that, for him, should be recognized as the Inner Fire. For him, that is the Gleam, the Vision, and the Word! He'd better follow it. The greatest adventure he'll ever have on this side is following where it leads. 14
```

One looks in vain for a statement by Robinson himself of a moral purpose.

13 Torrence, op. cit., 177.
14 Herman Hagedorn, Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York: Macmillan Co. 1938), i.
in his poetry. His New England austerity brings out a moralistic tradition which predominates in his work. Yvor Winters contends that this ethical aspect was seen in his choice of material and in the moral curiosity with which he regarded each particular case; also in the realm of style, in his honesty of statement, and clarity of form; and finally, in his immutable adherence to a purpose. 15 It is apparent that there is an implied moral in his shorter poems, but there is definite moral retribution in the Arthurian legends, which is brought about by two supernatural agencies, Time and Fate. In analyzing Robinson's art, Dr. Zabel points out clearly:

Robinson's substance is not sensation but intuition; his method is not metaphorical but syllogistic; his material is not that of analogy and allegory but of abstract formulation. Thus his typical poem does not strike out for concrete substance in external reality; it drives towards the center of moral consciousness for its certainty, even when the process involves an exploration that leaves sensory logic and the external world behind for the sphere of pure notion. His salvation lies in his never forgetting that the search is a moral one, not an intellectual exercise. 16

Robinson never assumed that the poet could see the whole of life and the future. He believed "nothing of an infinite nature could be proven or disproven in finite terms—meaning words—and the rest is probably a matter of one's individual ways of seeing and feeling things." 17 When he tried to picture the world of a hundred years from now, he did not like the picture

17 Torrence, op cit., 165-6.
and was happy that he would be out of it.

Robinson's art consists in handling his poetic subjects in such a manner as to invest them with his own power of truth and beauty. It is derived from his talented use of plain speech. He objected to the "thee's", "thou's", and "forsooth's" which were currently the poetical language. At the age of fourteen, he conceived the idea that the language of verse should be likened to that of the country-store clerks. He writes of those early eager ideas:

In those days, time had no special signification for a certain juvenile and incorrigible fisher of words... There were strange and iridescent and impossible words that would seize the bait and swallow the hook and all but drag the excited angler in after them but... they were generally not the fish he wanted. He wanted fish that were smooth and shining and subtle, and very much alive, and not too strange; and presently, after long patience and many rejections, they began to bite. 18

Ultimately, he resolved to use an English style of language midway between the purely logical and the obviously colloquial. Dr. Zabel praises his subtle influence when he says:

He brought form and toughness of language into modern verse long before most of his contemporaries, and he corrected by modest example a slow drift toward slovenly habits and facile impressionism in poetic thought. 19

In this connection Robinson himself says:

Ten years ago I was called a radical and most readers looked sideways at my work on account of its unconventional use of so-called simple language. I

suppose that I have always depended rather more on context than on vocabulary for my poetical effects, and this offense has laid me open to the charge of over-subtlety on the part of the initiated and of dullness on the part of the dull. 20

Yet, Robinson was a model of patience in revising and reworking his poems until they suited him. In a letter to L.N. Chase, Robinson wrote that he worked an immoderate length of time on a sonnet called "On the Night of a Friend's Wedding," and he tinkered with others, such as "The Clerks," for a month. He adds:

I thought nothing when I was writing my first book of working for a week over a single line; and while I don't do it any more, I am sure that my technique is better for those early grilling exercises. In fact, I am now more than inclined to believe that the technical flabbiness of many writers is due to the lack in earlier years of just such grilling - in the years when one is not conscious of how hard he is working and of how much time he is wasting - unless he is ready to gamble his life away for the sake of winning the possible conjunction of a few inevitable words. 21

His comment on bad poetry is very characteristic: "I imagine, that the worst poetry in the world has been written in the finest frenzy of inspiration; and so probably has the best." 22

Robinson has some exalted lyrical passages in his poetry, but it is difficult to choose the passages that one would like; for in Merlin especially, the quotations would take more space than is possible here.

20 Torrence, op. cit., 102
21 Ibid., 103.
22 Ibid.
Instead, the ending of this short poem "The Sheaves" indicates the extravagant beauty of some of his work.

Where long the shadows of the wind had rolled,
Green wheat was yielding to the changes assigned;
And as by some vast magic undivined
The World was turning slowly into gold.
Like nothing that was ever bought or sold
It waited there, the body and the mind;
And with a mighty meaning of a kind
That tells the more the more it is not told.

So in a land where all days are not fair,
Fair days went on till on another day
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. 23

CONCLUSION: BROWNING VERSUS ROBINSON.

It may be said then that Browning expressed a more profound theory of art than Robinson. Yet Robinson actually practised a greater poetic theory of art than did Browning. In comparing their definitions of a poet, Robinson places a greater responsibility on the poet. It is evident that Browning taught the technical means which a poet used in creating his poetry, better than did the non-committal Robinson. Furthermore, though Browning pointed out the moral aspect of a work of art, and Robinson did not allude to it, it was shown that both poets never forgot this important phase. A difference between the two is that the nature of Browning's method of discourse is that of excited and consistent distraction on the part of his characters, while Robinson's is a mechanical kind of hallucinated concentration. They differ on another important point; namely, the artist's gift, which was of divine inspir-

23 Robinson, op. cit., 870-1.
Ation, being of the first importance, his work was only secondary to it. Even Browning's poem, "Abt Vogler" implies it. Now Robinson believed that an artist should carry out his great work at any cost. In other words, it is not the gift itself, but how the gift is handled that matters with Robinson. Thus he gives first importance to the work itself and the gift becomes secondary.

Finally Browning's "Essay on Shelley," his one prose work, indicates two inadequacies: One, his prose style was diffuse; two, his theory of art, if compared with Coleridge's, was definitely insufficient. On the other hand, Robinson's prose remarks are scanty, but inasmuch as he left his poetry to be his eternal witness his probable theories on art may be reconstructed from it.

The importance of Robinson's contribution to the advance of poetry must not be underestimated. Mr. Van Wyck Brooks lauds Robinson saying:

As for poetry, he had broken up the "roof of heaven,"--the cotton-batting roof it had become,--and the "new forms" followed as a matter of course. 24

In the pre-war years, Robinson became the poetic prophet for a new state of mind which resulted in free verse, new rhythms, imagism, realism, the characteristic forms of verse of the coming decade, and even of the classicism that was to reappear in America.

To the average person failure has such a sinister and negative meaning that he dreads the personal application of the word to himself or his works. Yet to the two poets, Robert Browning and Edwin Arlington Robinson, the concept of failure had a positively stimulating effect. As the oldest, yet newest, of poetic themes, it records the failures who "went begging" but really "went giving." On this subject, both poets' intellectual attitudes were similar, for each saw the variety of experiences which life proffered and each attempted to find some ideal or standard which made the happy acceptance of inevitable inconsistencies possible. The illustrations which are used in this appraisal are chosen from both their early and later works, since their later poems are usually a recasting and redevelopment of already expressed concepts and suggestions.

A CONSIDERATION OF THE THEME OF FAILURE
IN ROBERT BROWNING'S POETRY

Browning's characteristic slogan, "perfection in imperfection", is contained in many of his poems. He believed that every noble soul must fail in life because every great soul aims at an unattainable ideal. He gave us some optimistic advice, saying that we may be encouraged by temporary successes but we must be inspired by failure. He held that it was possible to achieve suc-
cess through failure, adding that if a man kept his ideas untarnished his bank account mattered little.

This favorite doctrine, "Success in Failure", is repeated in many of his poems, but the scenery, the situations, and the characters are never alike. For this purpose of this study, "Cleon" will be taken as the intellectual failure; "Andrea del Sarto" as the artistic failure; "Abt Vogler" as the musical failure; "Cristina" as the worldly failure who yet experiences spiritual success; and "Apparent Failure" as the type of external or social failure.

Browning depicts Cleon as rich, honored, successful, the friend of princes and the chief artist of his time, but a failure inasmuch as life was dust and ashes to him. Cleon is an imaginary character typifying the epoch of Greek culture in his intellectual prowess, his many-sided charms, and his total inability to save himself. His hedonistic philosophy of life saw nothing in his belief to warrant the hope of immortality; nor were his works a source of life to him, either now or in the future, since the thought of people singing his songs after his death was but a mockery.

It is so horrible,  
I dare at times imagine to my need  
Some future state revealed to us by Zeus,  
Unlimited in capability  
For joy, as this is in desire for joy,  
-To seek which, the joy-hunger forces us;  
That stung by straitness of our life, made strait  
On purpose to make prized the life at large-  
Freed by the throbbing impulse we call death,  
We burst there as the worm into the fly,  
Who, while a worm still, wants his wings.  

---

1 Browning, op. cit., "Cleon," 361.
The irony of his failure consisted in his avoidance of St. Paul's preaching which emphasized the very conceptions that caused Cleon's despair and would have transformed his life into a strong, hopeful one.

Andrea del Sarto, whose artistic achievements rated him the title of "The Faultless Painter," was a bitter failure because his wife, Lucrezia del Fede, had ruined him. His pictures were technically superior to those of his great contemporaries, Rafael, Michelangelo, and Leonardo da Vinci. Yet their imperfect works have a celestial glory which is lacking in his perfect productions. His beautiful wife was devoid of soul, and was also unfaithful to him. She valued her husband's art for what she could get out of it. Remorse was added to his sense of artistic failure. In the quiet intimacy of the evening, Andrea revealed to her the one secretly cherished compliment that he had received from Michelangelo on the possibilities of greatness in his work. It was a symbol to him of what he might have become. Lucrezia was oblivious to him, asking him a moment later whose word it was. For a minute, a rush of feeling came to Andrea's lips and eyes, but instantly he repressed it, and a wave of great despair engulfed him as his wife left him to meet another man. His acquiescence in his fate brings out his lack of masculine character and self-direction. His despair rings out in his final words:

What would one have?
In heaven, perhaps, new chances, one more chance-
Four great walls in the New Jerusalem,
Meted on each side by the angel's reed,
For Leonard, Rafael, Agnolo and me
To cover­ the three first without a wife,
While I have mine. So- still they overcome
Because there's still Lucrezia, - as I choose.

... ...
Again the Cousin's whistle! Go, my Love. 

Thus failure resulted, in his own point of view, from his unattained ideal, his reach exceeding his grasp.

Abt Vogler, a composer, is extemporizing on the musical instrument of his invention. Suddenly, he becomes the channel chosen by the Infinite God to compose music of such beauty and harmony that he feels the irreparable loss when it fades like a wonderful cloud. His hunger that his marvelous achievement might last is a natural expression of that longing for permanence that is one of the two deepest desires of the human heart. Abt Vogler is considered a failure because the loss of that divinely-inspired music can never be restored to the world - "tis we musicians know." Abt Vogler reflects:

And what is our failure here but a triumph's evidence
For the fulness of the days? Have we withered or agonized?
Why else was the pause prolonged but that singing might issue thence?
Why rushed the discords in, but that the harmony should be prized?

From this point of view, it is possible to accept even the moral darkness and the shadows of life as we know it. The positive aspect of his "success in failure" theme is contained in the following:

All we have willed or hoped or dreamed of good shall exist;
Not its semblance, but itself; no beauty, nor good, nor power
Whose voice has gone forth, but each survives for the melodist
When eternity affirms the conception of an hour.
The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth too hard,
The passion that left the ground to lose itself in the sky

---

Are music sent up to God by the lover and the bard; 
Enough that he heard it once, we shall hear it by and by. 4

"Cristina" is one of Browning's dramatic love poems that depict love as the special gain of life. While it is not remarkable as poetry, it tells the story of a man and a woman who fall in love at first sight and both recognize in this union the predestined object of their life. The woman wants worldly honors, and ignores the man. Though she has drifted away from him, the man's existence is enriched because of his love for her. In losing her, he has found a guiding principle for his own life. Again, this poetical paradox brings out the fact that it is through failure we reach success. Browning believes that the important objective is not to have our hopes fulfilled in life, but that it is necessary for us to keep hoping. Each of our lives has moments which seem longer than years in the lives of others:

Oh, we're sunk enough here, God knows! 
But not quite so sunk that moments, 
Sure, tho' seldom, are denied us 
When the spirit's true endowments 
Stand out plainly from its false ones, 
And apprise it if pursuing 
Or the right way or the wrong way, 
To its triumph or undoing. 
There are flashes struck from midnights, 
There are fire-flames noondays kindle, 
Whereby piled-up honours perish, 
Whereby swollen ambitions dwindle. 5

"Apparent Failure" is the only poem of Browning in which suicides are discussed. Browning's verdict on the suicide of the three drowned men whose

4 Ibid.
bodies were placed in the Paris Morgue was due to his observation of the sto-
tories of struggle and disappointment that he reach on their faces.

"Poor men, God made, and all for that!" 6

Though anyone might class these nameless suicides as obvious failures, yet
Browning records them as seeming failures only. His conviction is that their
doom is not final, that the life God blessed in the beginning cannot end ac-
cursed of Him. Browning reasons that these poor outcasts abandoned life be-
cause their aspirations were so tremendously high that dull reality overpow-
ered their spirits.

A CONSIDERATION OF THE FAILURES IN
EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON'S POETRY.

Robinson, too, was interested in life's derelicts, hoboes, castaways, -
and he sought by a natural impulse, the despised and rejected, the lost, the
maladjusted, and the lonely because he was a poet. His own sense of failure
made him sympathetic to failure in other lives and "avid of indications of
spiritual victory behind the worldly defeat." 7 Robinson himself admitted his
predilection for the study of failure when he confessed he was more interested
as a poet in those who struggled and failed than in those who succeeded "There
is more there to write about," he said. 8 His lost souls possessed some spir-
ituality, and it was definitely for this reason that they were lost.

6 Ibid. "Apparent Failure," 413.
7 Hagedorn, op. cit., 49.
8 Rollo W. Brown, Next Door to a Poet (New York: Macmillan Co.,
1937), 80.
His motif, "successful failure", is repeated throughout his work. For the purpose of this study, Captain Craig will be taken as the intellectual failure; Amaranth as the artistic failure; The Man Who Died Twice as the musical failure; "John Brown" as the worldly failure who experienced spiritual success; Natalie in Matthias at the Door as the type of external failure.

Captain Craig is a story of an intellectual ne'er-do-well who is rescued from starvation in a New England town. He repays his benefactors with long philosophic comments upon human problems. He has had much desultory learning, especially Greek mythology and Platonic dialogues, but he is quite impractical and unable to battle with the stern realities of life. He has passed through darkness but he has saved some of his original power because he is a philosopher. He knows that failure is of the flesh, not of the spirit, and that throughout ruin and failure beats unheard the rhythm of God which is fulfillment unexpressed.

There would have lived, as always it has lived,  
In ruin as in failure, the supreme  
Fulfillment expressed, the rhythm of God  
That beats unheard through songs of shattered men  
Who dream but cannot sound it. 9

It is believed that he failed in everything except in saving a sense of humor. Finally, Captain Craig bequeathed to his young friends the wisdom he had purchased with a lifetime of defeat, hoping that the light he found too late might yet be effectual through them.

9 Robinson, op. cit., Captain Craig, 134.
Amaranth is a kind of nightmare-epic of failure which tells of the artist, Fargo. He is a painter, who, at the age of thirty-five, realizes that he is a failure and destroys all his paintings save one, which he knows is mediocre. Fargo falls asleep and dreams. He finds himself in three different lands — one for each section of the poem. He meets Amaranth, "the flower that never fades," who introduces him to poets, painters, writers, musicians and ministers, all of whom have chosen the wrong profession and made wrecks of their lives. At the end, Fargo realizes that Amaranth represents Truth. Amaranth comments on everyone, bids farewell to Fargo, now free because he has faced the truth wholly, and disappears. He awakens to undertake a career for which he is fitted. He knows that many of us are happier with our illusions than with the truth. As Amaranth said:

"Dreams have a kindly way,
Sometimes if they are not explored or shaken,
Of lasting glamorously. Many have lasted
All a man's life, sparing him, to the grave,
His value and his magnitude. 10

The Man Who Died Twice is a soul-biography which repeats Robinson's success in failure theme. It is the record of a great soul, self-ruined and self-betrayed. Fernando Nash, born to be of the line of Bach and Beethoven is the man of genius who never fulfilled his genius, a grand but pathetic figure in his ruin. Nash realized his potential ability as a great composer but through debauchery has ruined his talent. He becomes converted to a Salvation

10 Ibid. Amaranth, 1324.
Army type of religion, beating the drum in a street revival meeting. The poem tells of the awful soul-conflicts that he has in his hallucinations. An "innovation of orchestral rats" plays a kind of symphony of the damned in the room in which he is dying. Later he hears another, celestial symphony, which he realizes is the music he might have written. The sense of his sin and the realization of genius are equally great. At the end:

Fernando Nash is dead;  
And whether his allegiance to the Lord  
With a bass drum was earnest of thanksgiving,  
Confusion, penance, or the picturesque,  
Is not the story. There was in the man,  
With all his frailties and extravagances,  
The caste of an inviolable distinction  
That was to break and vanish only in fire  
When other fires that had so long consumed him  
Could find no more to burn; and there was in him  
A giant's privacy of lone communion  
With older giants who had made a music  
Whereof the world was not impossibly  
Not the last note; and there was in him always,  
Unqualified by guile and unsubdued  
By failure and remorse, or by redemption,  
The grim nostalgic of the great  
For glory all but theirs. 11

John Brown, one of the most extreme of American abolitionists, is chosen as the type of worldly failure with implications of spiritual success. The poem consists of a speech by John Brown to his wife the night before his death, in which he justifies himself, expresses pity for his wife and faces the end. His failure is a matter of history. He tried to free the slaves with a small band of followers at Harper's Ferry after seizing the national

11 Ibid. The Man Who Died Twice, 956.
arsenal. He hoped that there would be an immediate uprising but no such thing occurred. Later, the United States troops, under Robert E. Lee, regained the arsenal and took Brown and his few remaining followers prisoner. Brown was tried, convicted of treason, and hanged. Robinson imagines the scene in which Brown tells his wife and sons not to mourn for him; this is one of the finest passages in the poem. At the end of his adjuration to his wife, he speaks one of Robinson's few spiritual remarks:

When the silence comes,
I shall in faith be nearer to you then
Than I am now in fact. What you see now
Is only the outside of an old man,
Older than years have made him. Let him die,
And let him be a thing for little grief.
There was a time for service and he served;
And there is no more time for anything
But a short gratefulness to those who gave
Their scared allegiance to an enterprise
That has the name of treason—which will serve
As well as any other for the present.
There are some deeds of men that have no names,
And mine may like as not be one of them.
I am not looking far for names tonight.
The King of Glory was without a name.
Until men gave Him one; yet, there He was,
Before we found Him and affronted Him
With numerous ingenuities of evil,
Of which one, with His aid, is to be swept
And washed out of the world with fire and blood. 12

One of the several suicides that Robinson depicted in his poetry is that of the fickle Natalie in Matthias at the Door. She has complicated the lives of three men who love her and whom she almost loves; Garth, who was pitifully weak; Timberlake, who was unreliable and would probably have been unfaithful

to her; and Matthias, whom she married for practical reasons. This poem is a record of a succession of catastrophes, especially Natalie's by means of which Matthias, complacent over his material success, is made to know himself and through self-knowledge to be reborn. His instruction begins when his friend Garth, who has grown desperate through failure, one day crawls into a dark cave by the rocks to die by his own hand. Matthias' friend, Timberlake, whose life the former had saved as a youth by pulling Timberlake out of a burning building, has deliberately thrown himself and his talents away in order that Natalie, whom they both love, might marry Matthias. She marries Matthias and is unhappy for twenty years; after Garth's death, the secret is revealed. A few months later, she commits suicide in Garth's cave, leaving Matthias dejected and bitterly scornful:

His pride of unbelief had strength in it
Of a new tonic that must give him strength
Because it was so bitter. There was pride
In bitterness for him who must be proud
Of one thing or another if he would live,
And for Matthias pride was more than life.
So, on a chilly Sunday afternoon,
Alone there with a winter-laden wind
Whirling dead leaves over a darkening floor,
Matthias heard their message and was proud
That he could meet with patience and high scorn
A life without a scheme and to no purpose-
An accident of nameless energies,
Of which he was a part, and no small part,
His blindness to his insignificance
Was like another faith, and would not die. 13

Natalie, as the central cause of failure, finally finds through death the end of her life of futility with Matthias. "Nothing is wasted, though there's

13 Ibid. "Matthias at the Door" 1127.
much misused." 14 The story ends with Matthias' better self being born out of the ruins, with the aid of Timberlake, himself dying a slow death; and by his assistance, too, Matthias looks to the future with renewed hope.

A COMPARISON OF THE TWO POETS' USE OF THE FAILURE THEME.

There is a decided difference in the manner in which each poet treated the subject of failure. In contrasting Browning's "Cleon" with Robinson's Captain Craig, the former chose a distant era of decadent Greek culture in which to depict his intellectual; while Robinson gave his philosopher a modern setting in a confused, chaotic world, thus Robinson's character was more difficult to portray. On the other hand, the failure of Cleon is a greater failure because it is a matter of the salvation of his soul. Whereas Captain Craig depicts the tragedy of light and the problem of salvation does not trouble him, the whole poem is lightened by the Captain's faculty for mirth. Cleon finds no consolation in honor, fame, or works that will live after him, whereas the Captain wills his self-knowledge to his benefactors hoping that they may profit by it. Browning's arraignment of a hedonistic philosophy of life contrasted against the idealistic philosophy of Robinson gives his Cleon greater dramatic power. Browning's theory of growth can be read in Cleon's words, "Why stay we on the earth unless to grow." 15 Yet Cleon is struggling

14 Ibid., 1148.
within a closed circle of ideas and is limited in growth. Robinson's theory of growth can be read in the positive advice that the Captain gives:

...so climb high,
And having set your steps regard not much
The downward laughter clinging at your feet,
Nor overmuch the warning; only know,
As well as you know dawn from lantern-light,
That far above you, for you, and within you,
There burns and shines and lives, unwavering
And always yours, the truth. Take on yourself
But your sincerity and you take on
Good promise for all climbing; Fly for truth,
And hell shall have no storm to crush your flight
No laughter to vex down your loyalty. 16

Robinson has a double meaning in his Roycean philosophy here, as his idealism is compounded of loyalty and pessimism. 17 Browning and Robinson agree on their philosophy of the value of life though both express themselves differently; Browning, in an indirect manner and Robinson taking a more direct way. For example Captain Craig speaks to the youths at his bedside:

The truth is yours, God's universe is yours. 18

It is a truism that the universe belongs to those who are willing to live in it and be amenable to its laws, rather than to those who are content to withdraw themselves and merely speculate upon its genesis and meaning as Captain Craig did.

Captain Craig has the typical Browning situation; that of an old man on his deathbed talking to a group of young people who listen with mingled ridi-

16 Robinson, op. cit. Captain Craig, 151.
17 Estelle Kaplan, Philosophy in the Poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), 44.
18 Robinson, op. cit., 167.
cule and respect. It is similar to another poem of Browning, that of "The Bishop Orders his Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church." It is significant that the old men in each poem get confused. Robinson's Captain miscalls the names of the young men, calling them Euthyphron and Cebes, which indicates a knowledge of the Platonic dialogues on the part of the old man who believes himself to be Socrates. He says:

Ten men, my Euthyphron? That is beautiful
But never mind, I wish to go to sleep 19
Tell Cebes that I wish to go to sleep.

Now Browning's Bishop has all of his sons, nominally nephews, around his bed except Anselm. Later he believes Anselm is present:

Draw round my bed, is Anselm keeping back?
Nephews - sons mine...oh God, I know not!
... . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
Ye mark me not! What do they whisper thee,
Child of my bowels, Anselm? 20

He also confuses the saint of his church, who was a woman, as he muses:

Saint Praxed at his sermon on the Mount. 21

The Bishop is very worldly in bargaining for his luxurious headstone, but he is not less proud than the Captain who orders Trombones to be played at his funeral.

Again, the Bishop has a love of good Latin, yet he shows his dislike of the classic form of the word "elucebat", so he dictated:

19 Ibid., 164.
20 Browning, "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church," 348.
21 Ibid., 349.
And marble's language, Latin pure, discreet,
-- Aha, ELUCESCEBAT, quoth our friend? 22
No Tully, said I, Ulpian at the best!

Likewise, the Captain repeats from the lips of another vagabond the opening words of Cicero's Catiline Orations "Quo usque tandem." Somehow, Robinson's "Captain Craig" brings out the poet's basic contention that a judgment on a man's success or failure cannot be passed by fellow men.

When Browning's "Andrea del Sarto" is compared with Robinson's Amaranth, it is evident that the latter poem tells of a greater artistic failure, as Amaranth had never known any degree of success, while Andrea had some measure of it in his perfect paintings. Their yearnings for perfection in art were similar but in Robinson's poem one questions whether the truly creative artist presumes that he will receive material success. The artist's lot is a struggle and he knows it and loves it. Robinson himself would not trade his talent for an office position.

If Fargo had the true artistic nature and impulse in him, he would be more content to make "small song", as Evensong did, than to revert to pump-building. All of the characters are portrayed with a desire to be something other than what they are; and like Lawyer Figg had:

... followed them because I saw them shining;
And without asking whether or not the fuel
In me was one to make their sort of fire
And light .... 23

22 Ibid., 349.

23 Robinson, op. cit., Amaranth, 1384.
Andrea, however, lacked strength and loftiness of purpose and he is painfully conscious of his deficiencies. Again, Browning declares through Andrea that in art, as in all else, "A man's reach should exceed his grasp." Browning believes that man has infinite possibilities; therefore, he would object to an artist being content to make "small song." Somehow, Browning has caught the spirit of the artist when Andrea says "So free we seem, so fettered fast we are." Browning could not forgive Andrea for being called "The Faultless Painter" so he used him as the text for a sermon on the glory of the imperfect. Robinson does not preach; rather he depicts this down-and-out and lovable old man in such a way that we know he sympathizes with his tragic struggle.

He continues his sympathetic portrayal of failure in The Man Who Died Twice. When this lengthy poem is compared to the brief "Abt Vogler" of Browning it can be observed that Robinson's poem depicts a greater musical failure. Due to the psychological effect that failure had on the life of Fernando Nash, the effect is more enduring than the temporary loss of the eternal music that Abt Vogler experienced. Though Robinson portrays the failures better than Browning does, yet Browning depicts the nature of the artistic or musical person better than Robinson. For one never gets the conviction that Fernando Nash is a great man; the story is tinged with the grotesque. In "Abt Vogler," the creation of the heavenly music, as if it were liquid architecture, partakes of the essence of music itself. By comparison, the celestial music that Fernando Nash hears, while it is dramatic and vigorously presented, is inferior in quality.
In the latter part of *The Man Who Died Twice*, Robinson has given a complete outline of a symphony. In fact he numbered the successive passages in Mabel Daniel's copy where each movement began. His language is very appropriate, especially when he describes the "choral horns;" the "golden choral fire of sound," and above all, the "drums of death" which beat persistently throughout the poem.

The failure of Cristina's lover is taken in the way that Browning believed a person should take it - in the spirit of glad acceptance. This attitude is not Victorian, nor is it applicable to our times. For one looks in vain, for a similar theme so treated by Robinson. John Brown, although he has a more restricted intelligence, is very impressive in his worldly failure. It was noted also that Robinson deals more kindly than history does with his failure as a father and husband. The failure of Cristina's lover is more direct in his actual loss, but John Brown has greater spiritual importance, so it is judged that Brown was the greater failure.

Finally, Browning's "Apparent Failure" compares well with Robinson's portrayal of Natalie's suicide. Both poets agree on the seeming failures, declaring that God's mercy intervenes in their behalf.

Thus, their theme of failure is treated in different ways but Robinson's failures have more depth and sincerity in them. He has touched off the psychology of failure successfully, for his failures suffer greater spiritual defeat than Browning's failures. Robinson's characters are in a special kind of hell, one of vagueness and indifference, where irony is their only intelligent weapon of defense. Horace Gregory believes that Robinson's portrayal of the
American failure (a failure arrived at through a misapplication of New England pragmatism) was so complete that the fact that many of his books became best-sellers must be a source of quiet amusement to him. "There is an irony more profound than anything Robinson has written." 24

CHAPTER III
A COMPARISON OF THE POETIC USE OF LIGHT IN THE POETRY
OF ROBERT BROWNING AND EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

Poets of all ages have testified to the divinity and primacy of Light. One needs only to recall the masterly use of this symbol by Milton and Dante. Milton's poem "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" is resplendent with light. The Divine Comedy of Dante, that marvelous account of the wanderings of a poet's soul, gives witness of the excess of Light which surrounds God in His celestial paradise. Though the two poets of this study never attained so great a degree of perfection in their treatment of Light, yet they employed this poetic image very effectively.

A CONSIDERATION OF ROBERT BROWNING'S USE OF LIGHT

Poetic imagery is one of the characteristic elements of Robert Browning's art. He implied in The Ring and the Book that the poetic image was for him the oblique way of telling a truth, of doing the thing that shall breed the thought:

Art may tell a truth
Obliquely, do the thing shall breed the thought
Nor wrong the thought, missing the mediate word.
So may you paint your picture, twice show truth,
Beyond mere imagery on the wall,— 1

An investigation of his imagery requires a person's "cooperating fancy" to weld it into a unified idea. As Robert Browning himself said in a comment on

1 Browning, op. cit., The Ring and the Book, 601.
his artistic method in the introduction to Paracelus:

It is certain, however, that a work like mind depends on the intelligence and sympathy of the reader for its success,—indeed were my scenes stars, it must be his cooperating fancy which, supplying all chasms, shall collect the scattered lights into one constellation—a Lyre or a Crown.  

It can be deduced that he took pleasure in poetic images of light and was interested in the relationship of imagery to a total poetic form. The first poet who carefully noted Browning's imagistic preoccupation was Swinburne.

A definition of light, as Browning used it, would be the vision of truth through the power of spiritual perception. He employed light sparingly in a fractional part of the poems. Aesthetically, the image of light has symbolic meanings.

The frequency with which he used this poetic symbol was found in the Browning concordance. The references to light (omitting the numerous variations such as beacon-light, firelight, lantern light, meteor light, moon-light, morning light, rose light, snow light or torch-light), were counted. It was revealed that Browning used the symbol three hundred and ninety-five times in all his works. A mere count seems unimportant when it is compared to the symbolic and structural functions of the word. Mr. W. C. Smith, in his book, Browning's Star-Imagery says:

We may assume, at least that an interest in the frequency with which Browning employed images of light, has perhaps led us to focus attention upon one of the most significant images in his poetry. When the uses of the star are compared with the uses of other images of light, it becomes clear

2 Ibid., Paracelus, 12.
that the source of all Browning's imagery of light was a spiritual, rather than a realistic vision of the white light of eternal truth. It was this vision that sprang naturally, but with severe effort, from a mind that was preoccupied with the quest of ultimate reality. 

Pauline his earliest work, though it is avowedly dramatic, reveals this pre-occupation; but it can only be classed as confessional poetry. In fact, he called it a fragment of a confession which shows how much he left unsaid.

Browning introduces his goddess at the beginning:

To one so watches, so loved and so secured,
But what can guard thee but thy naked love?
Ah dearest, who so sucks a poisoned wound
Envenoms his own veins! Thou art so good,
So calm— if thou shouldst wear a brow less light
For some wild thought which, but for me, were kept
From out thy soul....

Browning proclaims and renews his admiration for Shelley in the line, "Sun-treader, life and light be thine forever!" When he uses light in this way, he expands the symbol to include the conceptions of inspiration, mortal achievement, and the law of God.

The poem continues:

As on the works of mighty bards I gazed,
In the first joy at finding my own thoughts
Recorded, my own fancies justified,
And their aspiring but my very own.
With them I first explored passion and mind—
All to begin afresh! I rather sought
To rival what I wondered at than form
Creations of my own; if much was light
Lent by the others, much was yet my own. 

4 Browning, op. cit., Pauline, 2.
5 Ibid., 4.
6 Ibid., 5-6.
Thus Browning has symbolized his poetic yearnings in the clear image of light.

In the second part of Pauline, Browning employs such words as "a hue," "a glance of what I sing," "bright sights," "dazzle," "radiance," "fade," "rise as fair," "dim gleams transferred," and "influence" to add complexity to the image of light, and to signify the conflict between passion and restraint.

The termination of the struggle is symbolized as follows:

And tree can smile in light at the sinking sun
Just as the storm comes, as a girl would look
On a departing lover—most serene. 7

Paracelsus, the second work of Browning, depicts in five scenes the life of this well-known physicist. It is poetical drama of a character in action, and as such, light becomes a catalytic agent in the development of the plot. Paracelsus debates whether he shall obtain wisdom through knowledge or through love. In the beginning, Paracelsus prophesies for the future:

'Tis time
New hopes should animate the world, new light
Should dawn from new revealings to a race
Weighed down so long, forgotten so long. 8

Paracelsus falls in love with Aprile. Light and hope are confused, so his period of indecision is prolonged. Browning represents this conflict symbolically, freighting Paracelsus with light, as Aprile is filled with magical music. Thus the poet brings ideas of music and light frequently together without losing the distinction between them:

If they have filled him full
With magical music, as they freight a star
With light, and have remitted all his sin
They will forgive me, too; I too shall know. 9

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7 Ibid., 8.
8 Ibid., Paracelsus, 15.
9 Ibid., 41.
The urge for perfect knowledge was the initial motive of Paracelsus' life. He calls it "my primal light," in these lines:

I never glanced behind to know
If I had kept my primal light from wane
And thus sensibly am—what I am. 10

In other words, his reach was beyond his grasp. It is here that he realizes that he has lost the capacity for human love.

Paracelsus points out that light is truth and he shows that it cannot be acquired from without:

There is an inmost center in us all,  
Where truth abides in fulness; and around,  
Wall upon wall, the gross flesh hems it in,  
This perfect, clear perception—which is truth.  
A baffling and perverting carnal mesh  
Binds it, and makes all error; and, to know,  
Rather consists in opening out a way  
Whence the imprisoned splendor may escape,  
Then in effecting entry for a light  
Supposed to be without. 11

Browning employed the symbol of light in a transcendental manner when he related it to man's inner life of passions and volitions.

At the end Festus, his dear friend, prays for the dying Paracelsus, who is on the threshold of a spiritual triumph:

Save him, dear God; it will be like thee; bathe him  
In light and life! 12

Festus hopes that light will reveal what is to be, so that Paracelsus will pierce the gloom. Festus believes:

10 Ibid., 21.
11 Ibid., 18.
12 Ibid., 41.
A light
Will struggle through those thronging words at last
As if in angry and tumultuous West
A soft star trembles through the drifting clouds. 13

Light ultimately brings final power to Paracelsus, for the prayer of Festus is answered. The prophetic death-bed vision of the great physicist makes Paracelsus disclaim all striving after absolute knowledge. He asserts the value of limitation in every field of activity. Browning resolves the story when it is realized that Paracelsus was

Preserved and sanctified by inward light. 14

Though Browning used light in a spiritual way in nearly all of his poems he occasionally treated it in its physical aspect, that is, as the opposite of darkness. "Fra Lippo Lippi," which reveals the worth of the human soul as revealed in the human body, illustrates this phase:

Well, all these
Secured at their devotion, up shall come
Out of a corner when you least expect
As one by a dark stair into a great light,
Music and talking, who but Lippi! 15

Also, the poet regards light as a physical and spiritual element in "Balaustion's Adventure," the poem that vindicates the power of poetry in the giver and the receiver:

The world goes on, goes over, in and through,
And out again o' the cloud. We faced about
Fronted the palace where the midhall gate

13 Ibid., 42.
14 Ibid., 43.
Opened not half, nor half of half, perhaps—
Yet wide enough to let out light and life,
And warmth, and bounty, and hope, and joy, at once. 16

Another spiritual but dramatic exploitation of light occurs in "Ned Bratts"
Ned, about to be hanged, wants to be taken out of this world while he is in a
penitent mood. He believes in another moment, that instead of going up to
heaven in a chariot with his wife, Tab, as he desired, he will end up as the
Lost Man in an Iron Cage. Suddenly, as if by an act of grace, he cries out:

Where's hope for such as wage
War against light? Light's left, light's here, I hold
light still, 17

One of the most beautiful lines in Browning's poetry concerns the abundance of light — "Delirious with the plenitude of light." 18

Finally, it can be observed from a study of Robert Browning's poetry
that the poetic image of light is predominant throughout all his poetry from
his first work to his last. It has a spiritual significance related to such
qualities as resolution, aspiration, hope, and intellectual and poetic de-
cision. It is a symbol of truth as well as an image of man's will in action.
In its false forms, it represents the glittering enticements of illusion and
the will o' the wisp of ignorance. Nature might reflect the light of truth,
but only because Nature was created by God, whence come all original beauty.
As Sordello says:

Light had birth ere moons and suns,
Flowing through space a river and alone,

16 Ibid., "Balaustion's Adventure," 617-8.
17 Ibid., "Ned Bratts," 891.
Till chaos burst and blank the spheres were strown
Hither and thither, foundering and blind:
When into each of them rushed light

Thus they are charged with the poet's imagination, which transforms a physical object into a symbol of spiritual reality.

For Browning, the opposite of light was darkness, which could become hard, unnatural, and evil in its aspect. "Pan and Luna," the story of the mythical adventure of the moon, Luna, and her lover, Pan, depicts the solidity of darkness in the following:

Mountains and valleys mingling made one mass
Of black with void black heaven: the earth's confines,
The sky's embrace,--below, above, around,
All hardened into black without a bound.

Fill up a swart stone chalice to the brim
With fresh-squeezed yet fast-thickening poppy-juice:
See how the sluggish jelly, late a-swim,
Turns marble to the touch of who would loose
The solid smooth, grown jet from rim to rim,
By turning round the bowl: So night can fuse
Earth with her all-comprising sky.

To dispel the darkness, Browning relies on his firm faith in God, as Festus points out in Paracelsus:

If this mood
Shall pass away, if light once more arise
Where all is darkness now, if you see fit
To hope and trust again, and strive again,
You will remember--not our love along--
But that my faith in God's desire that man
Should trust on his support....

19 Ibid., Sordello, 79.
20 Ibid., "Pan and Luna," 909.
21 Ibid., Paracelsus, 34.
A CONSIDERATION OF EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON'S USE OF LIGHT

The light motif assumes major predominance in the poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson. Ultimately, it acquired supernatural qualities for him and strangely enough, became his form of faith. Through his friend, Burnham, Robinson had become interested in Oriental philosophy. Burnham explained that the Sanskrit origin of the word divine had the meaning of Light. In this manner, Light became established in Robinson's mind as a symbol of conclusive truth. His refusal to accept Christian philosophical truth hinged on his inability, as he said, "to accept Christ as either human or divine, though I see a glimmer of light once in a while and then meditate on possibilities." 22 Nevertheless, he did an infinite amount of grooping and searching after God in his lifetime.

As far back as his early "Credo," he acknowledged his incompetence to find his way when there is not a star "In all the shrouded heavens anywhere," yet he maintained an intimation of "the coming glory of the Light." 23 In "Sainte-Nitouche," Robinson says that he may

Stumble at first. I may do that;
And I may grope, and hate the night;
But there's a guidance for the man
Who stumbles upward for the Light. 24

Light is used similarly in "Richard Cory," the favored of the gods:

So on we worked, and waited for the light.
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;

22 Torrence, op. cit.,13.
23 Robinson, op. cit.,94.
24 Ibid., 214.
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head. 25

His concept of light in these formative years could be defined as merely a vision- 
ary goal to be achieved. Light and a brief bit of philosophy, which is typi-
&n Robinsonian, but has an illusive Browningesque quality, (especially 
in the two lines about the lark) are found in Robinson's "Ben Jonson Entertai-
a man from Stratford":

He knows how much of what men paint themselves
Would blister in the light of what they are;
He sees how much of what was great now shares
An eminence transformed and ordinary;
He knows too much of what the world has hushed
In others, to be loud now for himself;
He knows now at what height low enemies
May reach his heart, and high friends let him fall;
But what not even such as he may know
Bedevile him the worst; his lark may sing
At heaven's gate how he will, and for as long
As joy may listen....  26

Light plays an important part in depicting character very simply, as in "Uld
King Cole":

He beamed as with an inward light
That had the Lord's assurance in it; 27

In Captain Craig, Robinson was still uncertain about light and viewed it with
doubt and skepticism:

Now the question is,
Not which was right and which was wrong, for each,
By virtue of one-sidedness, was both;
But rather—to my mind, as heretofore—

25 Ibid., 82.
26 Ibid., 27-8.
27 Ibid., 19.
Is it better to be blinded by the lights,
Or by the shadows? By the lights, you say?
The shadows are all devils, and the lights
Gleam guiding and eternal? Very good;
But while you say so do not forget
That sunshine has a devil of its own,
And one that we, for the great craft of him,
But vaguely recognize. 28

There are evidences of a deliberate search for an integrated conception of life
in his poetry, as he writes of light or its absence:

What does the whole thing mean?—What are we—
Slaves of an awful ignorance?—puppets
Pulled by a friend? or gods without knowing it?
Do we shut from ourselves our own salvation,—
Or what do we do? I tell you, Domine,
There are times in the lives of us poor devils
When heaven and hell get mixed...
   And I,—I am going
Into the light?—or into the darkness? 29

Behind Robinson's eternal questioning it can be observed that light was for him
a positive force. His Captain Craig declares:

Look east and west
And we may read the story: where the light
Shone first the shade now darkens; where the shade
Clung first, the light fights westward—through the shade
Still feeds, and there is yet the Orient. 30

In "Isaac and Archibald," old Archibald assures the boy:

But there's a light behind the stars
And we old fellows who have dared to live,
We see it—-and we see the other things. 31

28 Ibid., 130.
29 Hagedorn, op. cit., 90.
31 Ibid., 95.
In the succeeding volume, *The Town Down the River*, light is beginning to take on additional personal elements. One illustration in "But for the Grace of God" will point this out:

And yet he brought a kind of light
Into the room;
And when he left, a tinge of something bright
Survived the gloom. 32

The most complete utterance of his philosophical conception of Light is contained in *The Man Against the Sky*. In the poem at the end of this book, it was found that the poet employed words such as "gleams," "shines," "sees," "eyes," "look," "illuminate," "a lighted highway," and "orient Word" to add complexity to the image of light and to signify the conflict within him between belief in a godhead and a stoic attitude. The former belief can be read in the following:

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. 33

The stoical Robinson hopes for the immortality of the soul as he climaxes his poem with:

What have we seen beyond our sunset fires
That lights again the way by which we came?
Why pay we such a price and one we give
So clamoringly, for each racked empty day
That leads one more last human hope away,


As quiet friends would lead past our crazed eyes  
Our children to an unseen sacr'ifice?  
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?
'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. 34

This Tennysonian view that unless we survive death, there is no point or value to life, is not held consistently or dogmatically by Robinson. Mr. Beach believes that:

"the general tone of his writing, at any rate, is such as to suggest that he regards ethical values as having an absolute sanction in the nature of things and as giving its significance to life. 35"

A contrary opinion is Amy Lowell's, for she decides that:

"His preoccupation is with the unanswered question: 'Is the Light real or imagined, is man dupe or prophet, is faith unbolstered by logic an act of cowardice, or an expression of unconscious, pondering intellectuality?" 36"

Though Amy Lowell found none of the answers to these questions, yet it can be observed that the symbolic use of Light, as Robinson used it, aids considerably to a better understanding of his poetry.

34 Ibid., 68-9

35 Joseph Warren Beach, Concept of Nature in Nineteenth Century Poetry (New York: macmillan Company, 1936), 539

The volume of Collected Poems was used for a numerical count of the word, light, (omitting the numerous variations of twilight, candlelight, sunlight, moonlight, and firesight.) It was found that the poet had used the word light nearly four hundred times. The number of times appears to be unimportant when compared to the symbolical and mystical significance which he gave to the word.

Light has mystical meaning in the golden and forever-lost horizons of Camelot. "Merlin," the first of the three Arthurian legends, has a double plot. Merlin's love affair with Vivian is combined with the disintegration of Arthur's kingdom. One action is connected only to this extent, that Merlin's love for Vivian prevents his coming to Arthur's aid until too late, yet the theme of the poem is that the catastrophe was inevitable. Merlin, however, is so distressed over Arthur's situation that he brings about the end of his relations with Vivian. Light begins their love story and forms a framework about it:

"With a long-kindling gaze that caught from hers
A laughing flame, and with a hand that snook
Like Arthur's kingdom, Merlin slowly raised
A golden cup that for a golden moment
Was twinned in air with hers; and Vivian,
Who smiled at him across their gleaming rims,
From eyes that made a fuel of the night
Surrounding her, shot glory over gold
At Merlin, while their cups touched and his trembled,
He drank, not knowing what, nor caring much
For kings who might have cared less for themselves,
He thought, had all the darkness and wild light
That fell together to make Vivian
Been there before them then to flower anew
Through sheathing crimson into candle-light. 37

37 Robinson, op. cit., 276.
Later, light is used in a metaphor to depict love's death which is "frozen moment of a woman's life," when Merlin admits:

"I was wrong that other day,
For I have one more story. I am old."
He waited like one hungry for the word
Not said; and she found in his eyes a light
As patient as a candle in a window
That looks upon the sea and is a mark
For ships that have gone down. 38

Merlin returns to Arthur's desolate kingdom and philosophizes to Dagonet, the fool:

"Now Arthur, Modred, Lancelot, and Gawaine
Are swollen thoughts of this eternal will
Which have no other way to find the way
That leads them on to their inheritance
Than by the time-infuriating flame
Of a wrecked empire, lighted by the torch
Of woman, who, together with the light
That Galahad found, is yet to light the world. 39

Robinson comments on those last two lines in a letter to Herman Hagedorn, saying:

"Galahad's "light" is simply the light of the Grail, interpreted universally as a spiritual realization of things and their significance. I do not see how this can be made any more concrete, for it is not the same thing to any two individuals. The "torch of woman" is to be taken literally. 40

To return to Merlin, who had seen too much light:

And through the dark that lay beyond myself
I saw two fires that are to light the world. 41

38 Ibid., 297.
39 Ibid., 307.
40 Torrence, op. cit., 113.
41 Robinson, op. cit., 313.
Here, it must be realized that this poem is incomplete without "Lancelot" with which it is inextricably interwoven. "Merlin" prepares us for tragedy, but "Lancelot" plunges us into the tragedy itself.

Light initiates the motivation in the story of Lancelot and has the same spiritual significance that it had in Merlin. Lancelot questions his own existence and contemplates the choice of a religious life with the consequent abandonment of his love for Guinevere, the Queen:

Who is this Lancelot that has betrayed
His king, and served him with a cankered honor?
Who is this Lancelot that sees the Light
And waits now in the shadow for the dark?
Who is this King, this Arthur, who believes
That what has been, and is, will be forever,—
Who has no eye for what he will not see,
And will see nothing but what's passing here
In Camelot, which is passing? ........


When are the women who make toys of men
To know that they themselves are less than toys
When Time has laid upon their skins the touch
Of his all-shrivelling fingers? When are they
To know that men must have an end of them
When men have seen the Light and left the world
That I am leaving now. 42

Yet, he does not leave her. Later Arthur, goaded by Gawaine, makes war on Lancelot who has the stronger army but refuses to use it to end the war. He explains to Guinevere:

... For it was Gawaine
Who gave to Bors the word that might have saved us,
And Arthur's fading empire, for the time
Till Modred had in his dark wormy way
Crawled into light again with a new ruin

42 Ibid., 383-4.
At work in that occult snake's brain of his

What I said once to you I said for ever--
That I would pay the price of hell to save you.
As for the Light, leave that for me alone;
Or leave as much of it as yet for me
May shine. 43

Whenever Robinson left the word light uncapitalized in this way, he meant the physical aspect of the image, so that the word, when capitalized, meant the spiritual realization of Truth, or Knowledge--of Good or of Self.

Lancelot feels that their love has been morally wrong and in addition he is haunted by thoughts of the Grail. He has to make the decision now.

Your phantom happiness were a ghost indeed,
And I the least of weasels among men,--
Too false to manhood and your sacrifice
To merit a niche in hell. If that were so,
I'd swear that was no light for me to follow,
Save your eyes to the grave; and to the last
I might not know that all hours have an end;
I might be one of those who feed themselves
By grace of God, on hopes dryer than hay.
Enjoying not what they eat, yet always eating.
The vision shattered, a man's love of living
Becomes at last a trap and a sad habit,
More like an ailing dotard's love of liquor
That ails him, than a man's right love of woman
Or of his God. 44

The use of Light and Vision in this excerpt has been commented on by Yvor Winters, who criticised it thus:

The recurring use of the terms Vision and Light to represent that for which Lancelot is turning from the world is very weak; the effect is that of a somewhat

43 Ibid., 407-8.
44 Ibid., 417.
sentimental cliche, partly because the words themselves are stereotyped, partly because their use represents an evasion of exact statement. The analysis of Lancelot's state of mind as he hesitates between his two discrepant modes of life is rich and perceptive; the mode of life which he wishes to leave is fully indicated; but that which he wishes to find is marked only by a stereotype, and the effect is bad. 45

To return to the story, Guinevere pleads with Lancelot to remain with her. She says that they can live together in hiding in France, that God cannot begrudge them what little is left of their love, and that he can turn to his Vision when she is dead. He answers her, saying:

The Light that I have seen,
As you say true, is not the light of Rome,
Albeit the word of Rome that set you free
Was more than mine or the King's. To flout that word
Would sound the preparation of a terror
To which a late small war on our account
Were a king's pastime and a queen's annoyance;
And that, for the good fortune of a world
As yet not over-fortuned, may not be. 46

The "light of Rome," which has been used three times in the poem, is an anachronism because of the imaginary location of the legend. Later Guinevere has seen the Light, while being imprisoned in the Tower, so she entered a convent. She explains:

I, who have not prayed much,
May well pray now. I have not what you have
To make me see, though I shall have, sometime,
A new light of my own. I saw in the Tower,
When all was darkest, and I may have dreamed,
A light that gave to men the eyes of Time
To read themselves in silence. 47

45 Winters, op. cit., 78.
46 Robinson, op. cit., 421
47 Ibid., 445.
The dignified ending of the poem has Light coming finally to Lancelot in his realization that one must renounce life, in order to win life.

Once even he turned his horse, And would have brought his army back with him To make her free. They should be free together. But the voice within said: "You are not free. You have come to the world's end, and it is best You are not free. Where the Light falls, death falls: And in the darkness comes the Light." He turned Again; and he rode on, under the stars, Out of the world, into he knew not what, Until a vision chilled him and he saw, Now as in Camelot, long ago in the garden, The face of Galahad who had seen and died, And was alive, now in a mist of gold. He rode out into the dark, under the stars, And there were no more faces. There was nothing. But always in the darkness he rode on, Alone; and in the darkness came the Light. 48

Finally, the study of Light, as Robinson used it, brings out the fact that the richest connotation of the Light image is its ultimate relationship with man's spiritual transfiguration. It will be seen that the Light concept finally refutes the idea of Robinson's pessimism. Estelle Kaplan and Lloyd Morris would link the Light to the "inspirational intuition" of transcendentalism, to Schopenhauer, to the absolute concept of Royce, but, in any case, the line between Light as a poetic image and the Light as a logical concept is extremely thin, as Miss Kaplan's study shows. In the chapter on Robinson's failures, it was seen that Light was a basic factor, as it became a character reagent. According to their degree of perception of the Light, Robinson's characters fail, socially or spiritually. Thus Light gives a unification to this thesis, whether it is studied as a poetic image, as in this chapter, as a logical concept as in

48 Ibid., 449.
the study of failures, or in the succeeding chapter on Robinson's optimism and pessimism.

Light is so interwoven with the contrasting words "dark" or "night" or "darkness," indicating its absence, that it takes on deeper significance. One realizes that the world of darkness was more real and actual to him than the occasional glimpses of "Light." He prophesies that "We've each a darkening hill to climb." 49 He flaunts his banner of darkness, saying:

Let us, the Children of the Night
Put off the cloak that hides the scar! 50

There is apt use of darkness as a symbol in "Luke Havergal":

But there, where western glooms are gathering,
The dark will end the dark, if anything:
God slays himself with every leaf that flies,
And hell is more than half of paradise,
No, there is not a dawn in eastern skies. 51

The darkness that surrounds Robinson was for him life; to pierce it one must look carefully.

Louise Dauner declared that if the Light for Robinson is revealed as the ultimate knowledge of Self, of Good, of Evil, so the Night becomes the all-embracing sin of ignorance of the often tragic potentialities of our moral natures and ignorance of what constitutes moral action. She explained that the Ignorance can take two forms,—that of complete and irremediable betrayal of Self or the betrayal of a fellow man; but, in either case, spiritual failure

50 Ibid., "Children of the Night," 108
results; the triumph of Night is established in the devastation of all moral values. 52

In conclusion, Light had a greater significance for Robinson than for Browning, because he had a dogged desire for a deeper faith and a need for greater Light. Browning did not need to search for faith. Thus Browning used light more often as a spiritual reward, whereas Robinson used it more often in quest of truth.

Both poets stress its spiritual symbolism. Though they both employed Light to mean Knowledge, Browning treated it more often in this way than Robinson did. All his life, Browning aspired to greater knowledge of ultimate reality.

The numerical count of the use of the poetic image Light by both poets, which gives a figure of nearly four hundred for each, is not important. It is significant, however, that they used light as much as they did. The final decision is that Light was more of a Robinsonian characteristic. In his Memorial it was said that:

Robinson's faith was clear and assured, though its terms were his own, the Light, "the Light that Galahad found," "Galahad who was dead and is alive," "the light beyond the stars." He had no frame for his faith, no orthodoxy to be a plank for the intellect in waters which were beyond its depth. All that he knew was that there was a Light; a Light that somehow played upon the life of the individual and gave it direction and security. Its brightness, steady, though remote, made it possible for him, like the 'one' whom Nicodemus loved and dared not follow, to be, for the greater part of a lifetime, "Alone in a bare room and not afraid." 53

52 Louise Dauner, "Avon and Cavender--Two Children of the Night", American Literature, XIV (March 1942, January 1943), 65.
53 Edwin Arlington Robinson Memorial, IV, 10.
CHAPTER IV

A COMPARISON OF THE OPTIMISM AND PESSIMISM OF ROBERT BROWNING
AND EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

Many volumes have been written on Robert Browning's optimism. Very little has been said, on the other hand, about Edwin Arlington Robinson's optimism. A cursory glance would give one the impression that the two poets were not at all alike in this regard. On further consideration, however, one finds that there is a similar basis to their optimism, notwithstanding their keen consciousness of evil in the world.

A CONSIDERATION OF THE OPTIMISTIC AND PESSIMISTIC
ATTITUDES OF ROBERT BROWNING.

Robert Browning was, without exaggeration, the foremost optimist of the nineteenth century. His clear, triumphant voice is a refreshing contrast to the wailing, lamenting poets of his time. His optimism, which reckons with facts, has been called both spontaneous and labored. If it is classed as spontaneous, the critics credit his optimism to temperament, or good physical digestion. If it is classed as labored, they say its basis is a set of rational principles.

His vigorous and happy nature forbade him to succumb to the evil that he saw and plainly recognized around him. His keen and powerful intellect compelled him to find assurance for his instinctive hope of victory.

1 Thomas Marc Parrot, Studies of a Book Lover (New York: James Potts & Co., 1904), 299.
Browning's zest for life combined with the enormous vitality apparent in his poetry must have irritated the patrician Mr. Santayana, who wrote of Browning's poems:

They not only portray passion which is interesting, but they betray it, which is odious. 2

This nineteenth century poet always had a message to convey. It is the triumph over all obstacles of the individual will, which says "I can and I will." He believed that adversity, disappointment, and unrealized ambition would bring forth salutary fruits. The thoroughly wholesome tone of the man could never be mistaken. There is little of the merely sentimental in his poems, and nothing of the mawkish.

The spirit of his whole life is well-expressed in his own lines, in the Epilogue of his last book:

One who never turned his back, but marched breast forward,
Never doubted clouds would break
Never dreamed tho' right were worsted, wrong would triumph
Held we fall to rise, are baffled to fight better,
Sleep to wake. 3

2 George Santayana, "The Poetry of Barbarism," Interpretation of Poetry and Religion (New York: Charles Scribner's Son, 1900), p.188. Edwin Arlington Robinson's comment on Santayana's writing are interesting "He has enough to say, and he says it well; but somehow it seems like something written by a highly sophisticated corpse. If Santayana every cuts himself in your presence, try to get some of his blood." (Selected Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York: Macmillan Company, 1940), 21.

The elements which give an assured vitality to Browning's poetry may be briefly summed up under three heads: (1) His extraordinary grasp upon reality; (2) his humanity and wide sympathy with all forms of life; (3) his buoyant and undaunted optimism. Mr. Parrott believes that man, in his struggle against the powers of evil, cannot afford to reject the aid of so strong and fearless a fighter as Browning.

An illustration of Browning's optimism is found in "Pippa Passes", which records the story of a little silk weaver who goes out in the morning to enjoy her one holiday of the whole year. As she thinks of her own happiness she vaguely wishes that she might share it. She exerts an unconscious influence upon the lives of four people, as she goes on her way merrily singing:

The year's at the spring
And day's at the morn;
Morning's at seven;
The hillside's dew-pearled;
The lark's on the wing;
The snail's on the thorn
God's in his heaven-
All's right with the world!

Another example, "Fra Lippo Lippi," illustrates a love of life in the story of a half-starved orphan who enters a Carmelite convent at the age of eight in order to get enough to eat. Later, he develops an extraordinary talent for drawing, so he is given the cloisters and the church to paint. The Prior objects to his worldly conception of the saints and requests that he show no more of the human body than is needed to portray the image of the soul. Fra Lippo Lippi resents this and replies to the Prior:

5 Browning, op. cit., "Pippa Passes," 133.
God uses us to help each other so, 
Lending our minds out.....

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•••••••••••••••••

This world's no blot for us, 
Nor blank: it means intensely, and means good! 6

Thus Browning through Fra Lippo Lippi is convincing in the belief that the world, with all its life and beauty, means good intensely.

The cheerful assertions that "All's right with the world" and "The world's no blot for us" precede the most optimistic pronouncement of all Browning's poems, "Rabbi Ben Ezra," which begins:

"Grow old along with me 7
The best is yet to be."

Yet it is in this poem that Browning confesses that our joy may be "three parts pain" and dearly bought at that with strain and "throe." See how the hard consonants and short clipped vowels, all the energetic jerkiness of the rhythm in this verse, convey the parallel of active vigorous moral effort:

Thou welcome each rebuff
That turns earth's smoothness rough
Each sting that bids nor sit nor stand but go!
Be our joy three parts pain!
Strive, and hold cheap the strain;
Learn, nor account the pang; dare,
ever grudge the throe.

The whole message of "Rabbit Ben Ezra" is glad acceptance of youth and age, of pain and joy, and of body and spirit. They are described as parts of the growth toward the image of God in which we are potentially made.

6 Ibid., "Fra Lippo Lippi," 345.
7 Ibid., "Rabbi Ben Ezra," 383.
8 Ibid, 384.
In the game of life Browning believes in deifying activity per se. Whether it is good or bad, so long as it is positive, it will partake of the good. That is the underlying idea of the lines in "The Statue and the Bust:"

Stake your counter as boldly every whit,
Venture as warily, use the same skill,
Do your best, whether winning or losing it,
If you choose to play! - is my principle.
Let a man contend to the uttermost
For his life's set prize, be it what it will! 9

The poet's opinion of immortality was not so much a religious dogma, as Thomas Marc Parrott explains, as it was a habit of mind. It was impossible for Browning -

... to view the world except as it were, sub specie aeternitatis. This belief inspired much of his loftiest and strongest verse, and the optimism which sprang from this belief gives his work as a whole its strengthening and elevating power. 10

In his poem, "Abt Vogler," he proclaims:

There shall never be one lost good!
What was, shall live as before;
The evil is null, is naught, is silence implying sound; 11

or in the words of the learned grammarian:

"What's time? Leave now for dogs and apes!
Man has forever." 12

10 Parrot, op. cit., 300.
He culminates his optimistic statements by his insistent emphasis on love. As the hero of "In a Balcony" says:

There is no good of life but love - but love!
What else looks good, is some shade flung from love,
Love gilds it, gives it worth. 13

Again as Fra Lippo Lippi asserts:

Take away love, and our earth is a tomb. 14

Browning has written many lyrical poems (such as "One Word More," and "Pros-pice," ) as well as dramatic love poems in which love conquers time (such as "Evelyn Hope.") Love is the one lasting reality in "Love Among the Ruins." It is no wonder then, that Browning is labelled the Poet of Love.

The false assertion that Browning was just an optimist who lacked true poetic insight caused his works to be neglected. It was, and still is, faulty reasoning to identify optimism with shallow immaturity and to consider pessimism the mark of profundity of thought. Browning's poetry has been reevaluated in this century and his position has gained strength and security. It was found that he was both optimistic and pessimistic, for he did not overlook the misery and evil that exist in the world yet held a strong conviction that man would be the victor if he persevered until the end of life.

From a study made of Browning's poetry, it was found:

The twin discoveries bagged from this hunt, report that Browning's optimism is romantic and labored, his pessimism realistic and spontaneous. Moreover, the latter in actual amount outweighs the former a hundred to one.

13 Ibid, "In a Balcony," 367.
14 Ibid., "Fra Lippo Lippi," 342.
From the youthful agonizings of "Pauline" to the aged sadness of the "Prologue to Asolando," the poet pours forth a forceful stream of testimony to the unlivable-ness of life. His indictments are specific and general, and are filed against both camps in the cosmic battle - the visible pygmy and the hidden giant.

His earliest writing, "Pauline," "Paracelsus," "Strafford" and "Sordello" are a quarette which exhibit pessimism, as well as skepticism, atheism, cynicism and even that particularly dark state when the mind reacts upon itself. Some critics believe Browning's cure was complete after "Paulina," but others claim it was not until after "Sordello" was finished that his natural optimism returned. Frances T. Russell does not agree with the latter general opinion, for she points out that "Pippa Passes" has everything in it, including adultery, murder, ingratitude, vulgarity, and the blasting by a vile practical joke of an artist's exquisite idealism. Another young idealist is made the tool of selfish demagogues; and a high ecclesiastic hearkens to a scoundrel's malignant plots. She points out the contrast thus:

The brilliance of Pippa's passing dazzles into obscurity the scenes through which she passes.  

The poet has shown in this poem a skillful technique in letting an optimistic view of life supersede the pessimistic one. This method became more characteristic of him.

Pessimism, nevertheless, is apparent as he mourns:

All of life's a cry just of weariness and woe.

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16 Ibid., 72.

17 Browning, op. cit., "Epilogue" Feristah's Fancies, 946.
Whether he considers it evil or not, is not certain. In the following passage, note how his optimism and pessimism are combined.

Wide our world displays its worth, man's strife and
strife's success;
All the good and beauty, wonder crowning wonder,
Till my heart and soul applaud perfection, nothing less.

Only, at heart's utmost joy and triumph, terror
Sudden turns the blood to ice: a chill wind disencharms
All the late enchantment! What if all be error — 18

In Browning's works, the blight that falls on innocent and wise people alike is due to selfishness and cruelty. Mobs and crowds arouse the poet's contempt and sarcasm. It is further explained that:

Out of his battalion of men and women, the poet produces a scant corporal's guard of the spiritual aristocracy, and of these, none is nobly triumphant: all meet with defeat or a discontented victory. Out of man's weakness springs his selfishness and from this under pressure is derived his deceitfulness, injustice and cruelty. Strafford, Luria, Mildred Tresham and Henry Mertourn, Anael the Druse, Leonce Miranda, the Duchess of Ferrara are some of the many victims of this human incapacity for the large perception and the same course, whereby the innocent, and often the superior are sacrificed to the blind or the vicious. 19

The best example of the poet's pessimistic poetic subjects is "Caliban upon Setebos" whose picture of an acute but half-savage mind builds up the Deity on its own pattern. Caliban worships Setebos, god of the Patagonians. Caliban sees this god as a capricious and wilful being like himself; and he

18 Ibid., 947.
19 Russell, op. cit., 75.
believes that human beings were made half in impatience and half in sport, so that they could be mocked at, as playthings. Caliban wants to know how to please his god but since no answer is forthcoming, he sneers:

Not He!
There is the sport: discover how or die!  

Caliban continues:

He doth His worst in this our life,
Giving just respite lest we die through pain,
Saving last pain for worst - with which, an end.
Meanwhile, the best way to escape His ire
Is, not to seem too happy.  

Browning satirizes an anthropomorphic idea of God and he is ironic over divine intimations which fail in clearness rather than in energy.

One of this poet's last poems, "Reverie" is very pessimistic about our terrestrial existence:

Head praises, but heart refrains
From loving's acknowledgment-
Whole losses outweight half-gains:
Earth's good is with evil blent:
Good struggles but evil reigns.  

One could argue that Browning contradicted himself, as the above poem is not in agreement with an earlier statement about the world's goodness. It could be answered that Browning is only human and is a good normal mixture of optimism and pessimism; so that his statements at different times of his life will be influenced by age, environment, sorrow or other factors as would those of any other individual.

21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., "Reverie," 1005.
A CONSIDERATION OF EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON’S

OPTIMISTIC AND PESSIMISTIC ATTITUDES

Defining optimism as a hopeful outlook, it can be said that Robinson is only a skeptical optimist, at best. His first book, The Torrent and the Night Before published in 1896 was criticized by Harry Thurston Peck, editor of Bookman, who declared:

His humor is of a grim sort, and the world is not beautiful to him, but a prison-house. In the nighttime there is weeping and sorrow, and joy does not come in the morning. 23

Robinson quickly defended himself very characteristically, saying:

I am sorry to learn that I have painted myself in such lugubrious colors. The world is not a ‘prison-house!’ but a kind of spiritual kindergarten, where millions of bewildered infants are trying to spell God with the wrong blocks. 24

One wonders what blocks Robinson himself used! It is just as difficult to find what blocks he used to spell optimism in his poetry. From the sadness and melancholy of his life, one realizes that his optimism will be of a thoughtful kind, sometimes touched with mellow wisdom or colored with stark realism, now and then illumined with flashes of lyrical beauty.

One of the happy emotional states which Robinson describes in "Captain Craig" contains the essence of friendship:

There came along a man who looked at him
With such an unexpected friendliness,
And talked with him in such a common way,

23 Hagedorn, op. cit., 112.

24 Ibid.
That life grew marvelously different:
What he had lately known for sullen trunks
And branches; and a world of tedious leaves
Was all transmuted: a faint forest wind
That once had made the loneliest of all
Sad sounds on earth, made now the rarest music;
And water that had called him once to death
Now seemed a flowing glory. 25

It can be noted how his intellectual acumen coupled with his emotional sympathy
gives depth and color to his doubts and questionings.

Our American poet uses the simile of life as a game requiring both the
skill and the good spirits of the players, as he declares:

Life is the game that must be played:
This truth at least, good friends, we know;
So live and laugh, nor be dismayed
As one by one the phantoms go. 26

In a spirit of sportive merriment, Robinson wrote "Momus," which is full
of genuine mirth. The tripping rhythm, the echo-like rhymes, the doggerel fla-
vor, and the pretended impudence all enhance the quality of the stingless fun.
It is the only place in his poetry where he mentions Browning.

"Who reads Byron any more"—
Shut the door,
Momus, for I feel a draught:
Shut it quick, for some one laughed.—
"What's become of
Browning? Some of
Wordsworth lumbers like a raft?

"What are poets to find here"—
Have no fear:
When the stars are shining blue

---

26 Ibid., "Ballade by the Fire," 77.
There will yet be left a few
Themes availing—
And these failing,
Momus, there'll be you. 27

One of the poet's funny masqueraders is Old King Cole, a white-haired widower, who is cursed with two scapegrace sons. He finds consolation and forgetfulness in his pipe and bowl, so

...with many a puff
That haloed his urbanity,
Would smoke till he had smoked enough. 28

Some officious friends plague him with reports of the scamps' evil-doing and he answers without bitterness:

"Though mine," the father mused aloud,
"Are not the sons I could have chosen,
Shall I, less evilly endowed,
By their infirmity be frozen." 29

He suggests to them an inward source of strength:

Or, like One whom you may forget,
I may have meat you know not of.
And if I'd rather live than weep
Meanwhile, do you find that surprising? 30

Robinson's kind of optimism is not the sort to say "All's right with the world," nor does it believe in surrender. If one goes beneath the surface of his poems to find the spirit animating his words, it will be observed that his optimism is the basis of a belief that courage and wisdom are necessary for practical behavior in this life.

27 Ibid., "Momus," 337.
28 Ibid., "Old King Cole," 19.
29 Ibid., 19.
30 Ibid., 20.
Another aspect of Robinson's optimism is his emphasis upon man both as an individual and as a member of a social group. He bent his efforts towards making man conscious of an arrogant Juggernautish ignorance in society. He strove to find in mankind those enlightened tendencies, that conscious ethic, that deliberate "clean wisdom" by means of which social amelioration may become a reality rather than a dream.

There are too many sleepers in your land
And in too many places
Defeat, indifference, and forsworn command
Are like a mask upon too many faces.
There are too many who stand
Erect and always amiable in error,
And always in accomodating terror
Before the glimmering imminence
Of too insistent a sincerity;
Too many are recommended not to see,
Or loudly to suggest,
That opulence, compromise, and lethargy
Together are not the bravest or the best
Among the imaginable remedies
For a young world's unrest; 31

Thus it is seen that Robinson does not believe in laxity. He lays the blame on the able but indifferent man for the unpleasant situation in which our modern democracy finds itself.

He is not always so denunciatory. On one occasion Robinson praised the splendor of the universe, and in so doing, he thought that he pleased the Most High better than by mechanical or selfish prayer:

I turned a little furrow of my own
Once on a time, and everybody laughed-
As I laughed afterwards; and I doubt not
The First Intelligence, which we have drawn

31 Ibid., "Dionysus in Doubt," 865-866.
In our competitive humility
As if it went forever on two legs,
Had some diversion of it: I believe
God's humor is the music of the spheres...

The provocative image of "God's humor" being "the music of the spheres" is
beautifully expressed, and is typical of this poet's optimism. Laughter became
of more importance in Robinson's later life. As Miss Kaplan points out, he had
A positive joy in facing reality and laughing. 33

Robinson used to refer to himself as an "insane optimist" because he saw
the possibilities of good in thwarted lives that seem wholly evil. While fully
recognizing life's actual horrors, he believed in the power of the human mind to
overcome, in time, most of the difficulties that beset mankind. Man will be
able to build a better world eventually, through knowledge. It is in Robinson's
own words that the best explanation of his optimism is to be found:

I've been called a fatalist, a pessimist and an optimist
so many times 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 or desirable, I can only say
that he doesn't see what I am driving at. 34

Robinson grows out of his early pessimism, as Estelle Kaplan points out:

Robinson ridiculed the pathos of his earlier sentimental
pessimism, according to which, life is completely evil,
a state to be painfully resented rather than peacefully
endured. 35

32 Ibid., "Captain Craig," 118.
33 Kaplan, op. cit., 44.
34 Hagedorn, op. cit., 286.
35 Kaplan, op. cit., 44.
This pessimistic idea about life was expressed in his early work, "Captain Craig," as he says:

..........Yes, I have cursed
The sunlight and the breezes and the leaves
To think of men on stretchers or on beds,
Or on foul floors, things without shapes or names,
Made human with paralysis or rags;
Or some poor devil on a battle-field,
Left undiscovered and without the strength
To drag a maggot from his clotted mouth;
Or women working where a man would fall-
Flat-breasted miracles of cheerfulness
Made neuter by the work that no man counts
Until it waits undone; children thrown out
To feed their veins and souls on offal...Yes,
I have had half a mind to blow my brains out
Sometimes; and I have gone from door to door,
Ragged myself, trying to do something-
Crazy, I hope. 36

Again, he stated his sceptical attitude toward the world in one of his classic monologues, "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford." The despairing Shakespeare, who yearned for a dukedom down in Warwickshire, says to Ben Jonson:

Your fly will serve as well as anybody,
And what's his hour? He flies, and flies, and flies,
And in his fly's mind has a brave appearance;
And then your spider gets him in her net,
And eats him out, and hangs him up to dry.
That's Nature, the kind mother of us all
And then your slattern housemaid swings her broom,
And where's your spider? And that's nature, also.
It's Nature, and it's Nothing. It's all Nothing.
It's all a world where bugs and emperors
Go singularly back to the same dust,
Each in his time; and the old, ordered stars
That sang together, Ben, will sing the same
Old stave tomorrow. 37


The fact that some critics insist that pessimism is prominent in his works is probably due to the types that Robinson elected to portray. There is "Richard Cory," who went home one calm summer night and put a bullet through his head; and "Cliff Klingenhagan" who drank the glass of wormwood but gave his guest the glass of wine; and "Flammonde" who was able to inspire everybody to high endeavor except himself. Redman speaks truly when he says:

His preoccupation with humanity was strikingly apparent, and his predilection for certain companionable types was equally so. It was not to the apparently flawless that he turned most readily, but to the flawed; not to the greatly blessed but to the somewhat cursed. 38

Robinson was pessimistic about women. He called them "pernicious ribs", which seems to be his fundamental concept of feminine nature. Louise Dauner comments on Robinson's insistence on love, even if it is

A value which must be realized only through an obscuring veil of sorrow. But whatever the overtones, the tragic principle is unmistakable—Woman, it is— the 'pernicious rib' who proffers to man the golden apple plucked from the questionable Tree of Knowledge and the gates of the eternal garden are closed thereafter to both. 39

This quotation from Tristram indicates Robinson's attitude about woman's position:

Not even when we are most in power
Are women else than slaves to men they honor
Men worthy of their reverence know this well
And honor them sometimes to humor them.


We are their slaves and their impediments.
And there is much in us to be forgiven. 40

Robinson appears to be cynical about the world, nature, men and women, but it is unjust to call him a pessimist. He has never refused to contemplate the suffering of which man is capable or the disillusionment to which man is liable. His gloomy view of life is typical of our present chaotic world. Like Browning, he is human and is a normal mixture of optimism and pessimism. The great tradition of English poetry is to despair without yielding to the emotion. Robinson is in this tradition, although many of his stories after "Captain Craig" start with despair, rise to a tense struggle against fate, come to a realization instead of a renunciation, reach a burning anger which consumes itself, and finally slip back into despair - a sadder and a wiser final despair.

A COMPARISON OF BOTH POETS' ATTITUDES OF OPTIMISM AND PESSIMISM

Both poets treat of life very similarly, depicting its aspirations, struggles, failures, and sorrow. They are interested essentially in the twists of the heart. They record life's unfulfilled ideals, and also the ills to which all flesh is inevitably subject. Both describe life as a game to be played, but Robinson omits the contest element.

It is a known fact that Robinson reacted against Browning's optimism, but so did many other writers. Max Eastman avers that Robinson omitted the homiletic, sentimental, theological philosophy that Browning's poetry had. Also, William Rose Benet believes that it was Browning's gusto that saved him from

sentimentality, a pitfall upon whose edge Robinson has never even stood, for all his sympathy with human nature. Charles Cestre contrasts these two poets' happy natures:

There is, in Browning, an overflowing, buoyant jollity that leads him often to assume a loud boisterous tone, ringing with jocund strains, brimful of the sap of mirth. In another mood, he is carried to the other extreme and loads his humor with caustic quips and lashing gibes. At times, he fuses both manners and revels in capering, travestied farce. Robinson is much less inclined to clamorous exuberance or to sour tooth-grashing. His humor may broaden to a laugh or concentrate in a thrust; but generally it bears the mild tone of subdued merriment or gentle criticism, streaked with delicate feelings or fine intellectual remarks. By the side of Browning's prancing phrases, bounding jokes or biting sarcasms, his form shows a reserve, a finish, which give it a highly artistic flavor and almost classic balance and self-restraint. He is anxious to avoid anything coarse in the expression or too harsh in the conception. 41

It is obvious that Robinson, in gay and somber moods, is far mellower and more adept in subtle shadings than Browning. In addition, the American poet is more speculative and detached in his observations, and less spontaneous in his recounting of emotional experience than the English poet. Yet the optimism of both men springs from a determination to discover what is inevitable. Incidentally, Browning sometimes wavers in his belief in immortality, but his poems on this subject are much more positive than Robinson's, who believes vaguely that life goes on in some form after death. Robinson felt that life itself would be futile otherwise.

In the more somber phases of Browning's poetry it is felt that he

merely records the sorrow, pain, frustration and evil in the matter-of-fact way, whereas Robinson meditates upon them and is deeply concerned about them. The effect on the reader is that he especially notes these meditative, darker, satirical aspects of Robinson.

In conclusion, though Browning's pessimism was earlier than Robinson's, it is less complete and less coherent. Again, Browning's optimism is more characteristic than Robinson's, but Robinson's pessimism is more authentic than Browning's.
CHAPTER V
A STUDY AND ANALYSIS OF THE COMPARISON BETWEEN BROWNING
AND ROBINSON WITH AN EXAMINATION OF THE POSSIBLE
INFLUENCE OF BROWNING ON ROBINSON

Scholars often couple the names of Browning and Robinson. This juxtaposition does not, however, imply that the 19th century dramatic monologist influenced the 20th century dramatic poet. It is true, however, that critics have delighted in making comparisons of the two.

The most obvious comparison made by the critics is that of both Browning's and Robinson's use of the dramatic monologue. They go further, and balance the poets' styles, obscurities, and philosophies.

Mr. Cestre declares that Robinson followed Browning, as Browning himself followed Shelley, without alienating his personality or his power of invention. 1 While Browning borrowed characters and subjects from history, Robinson, Cestre points out, drew them from his own experience and from his knowledge of his neighbors. Thus he contends that the natures of the two poets were so widely separated, while working in the same genre, as to furnish the products of their inspiration with distinctive, individual features. 2

Cestre labels Robinson as a "modern classic," reiterating that Robinson

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1 Cestre op. cit., 148.
2 Ibid., 158-9.
never borrows, but invents with great facility and fertility. This critic lauds Robinson as the "modern classic" because Robinson can translate "intellectual and emotional values into visions, that plain or gorgeous, enchant or thrill by their irresistible witchery. His work is closely related to the sensibility and imagination of a Wordsworth, a Coleridge, a Keats and a Browning." 3

Conrad Aiken, on the other hand, believes that no prototype has been found for Robinson, and adds that Crabbe, Wordsworth and Browning have been invoked for this purpose without success. He admits, somewhat grudgingly, that there are traces of these influences.

William Rose Benet states that no one can fail to distinguish Browning from Robinson at the first fall of the accent. He remarks further that there is less similarity in the speaking voice of their poetry than between Browning and George Meredith. 4 On the comparison of their styles, Benet judges that there is a "robustness, a romanticism, a quiddity to Browning that Robinson entirely lacks."

Yvor Winters eugolizes Browning as the greatest of ingenious versifiers but claims that Robinson, who worked in more or less the same field as Browning, was the superior of Browning at almost every turn.

There are those who see in Robinson the shadow of Browning. In an

3 Ibid., 228.
4 W. R. Benet, "Round About Parnassus," The Saturday Review of Literature (September 20, 1930), 142.
excellent review given Robinson's first book, *Children of the Night*, W. P. Trent praised the "Browning-like verve" of the last poem. Another swift memory of Browning was recalled by Lucius Beebe when he read "Lingard and the Stars" and "Uncle Ananias." 6

Yvor Winters states that

"in the manner of Browning, Robinson endeavors to display the character of his speaker by displaying the mannerisms of his speech; and again in the manner of Browning, he succeeds merely in displaying the unchecked mannerisms of the poet." 7

However, he treats of the techniques of the two poets thus:

"Robinson's method is that of hallucinated concentration as one finds such concentration in earlier New England writers. Browning buries his subject under irrelavancies, till it all but vanishes; Robinson subdivides his subject, and repeats and re-arranges his subdivisions till it all but vanishes. The result in each case is confusion; but the causative states of mind are widely different." 8

On the other hand, Ben Ray Redman, in his study of Edwin Arlington Robinson, makes the assertion that Browning plunges into the heart of his subject, while Robinson sidles up to it. He says:

"Browning taught that a poet may plunge "in medias res"; and still emerge with his singing robes cloaked decently about him; but Robinson at the very outset, began to experiment with an indirect, oblique approach that has since become as characteristic of him as his signature;


7 Winters, *op. cit.*, 134.

8 Ibid., 130.
a technique of poetic narration, description or dramatization not dissimilar to the method that Conrad elaborated in prose." 9

It is this very circumlocution of Robinson that the lyric poet, Amy Lowell, attacks as odd and contradictory. Since Robinson, she contends, is a master of brevity and exact, straightforward speech, she discerns the cryptic quality in his work to be merely a poetic trick, which is due to atavism. It is evidence of the shackling with which she believes Robinson's literary style became burdened. Miss Lowell points to the fact that Browning also was obscure but yet triumphed over a certain difficulty of expression, with his meaning crystal clear. 10

Bruce Weirick is caustic in his comparison of the two poets' obscurity, declaring that Robinson's longer works are dull and will not, like Browning, repay the reader

"with pearls of pleasure for his deep diving into their waters." 11

It has been said that Browning and Robinson were led into devious byways by both their subject matter, man, and their manner of psychological, scientific treatment. Many good poets have used men and women as their subject matter, without the charge of obscurity being made. There are two main theories about Browning's obscurity, one that it was the result of intellectual vanity indulged in as his fame grew, the other that it sprang from a

9 Redman, op. cit., 39-40.
humble belief that the ordinary man was as mentally alert as he. Probably due to his optimism, the latter viewpoint is now generally accepted as true. With some arrogance, nevertheless, Browning wrote in a letter

"I never pretended to offer such literature as should be a substitute for cigars or a game of dominoes to an idle man." 12

The main reason for Robinson's obscurity is not due to intellectual vanity nor to a belief that every man is his equal mentally, but to an excessively reticent personality coupled with a mind difficult to follow in its tenuous curves. All research bears this out. Thus the problem of obscurity does not prove to be a direct influence of Browning on Robinson.

It has been a common habit among "popular" critics to make sweeping generalizations concerning the influence of Browning on Robinson. Men of repute who hold that such an influence existed are few, and even they vary in their statements as to the degree of such influence.

Yvor Winters calls any resemblance between the works of both men "illusory." He states:

"A more obvious and important influence is that of Browning. Browning, like Crabbe and Kipling, is a poet who devotes most of his energies to examining the experiences of persons other than himself; but Robinson frequently follows his methods much more closely than he follows those of Crabbe or Kipling. The resemblance is unmistakable in a number of Robinson's dramatic monologues, both in rimed and in blank verse... There is a superficial resemblance to Browning's method in many

of the long poems, but the resemblance, I think, is largely illusory." 13

A weak claim that Robinson owes something to Browning is made by Charles Cestre who contends that since Robinson was attracted by the dramatic narratives and psychological lyrics for which English literature is particularly indebted to the creative genius of Browning, sections of his work, particularly the humorous, reflect it.

Alfred Kreymborg places any Browning influence only in Robinson's youth. In commenting on the various influences upon Robinson, he avers that

"To these early influences will be added a love of the dramatic lyricism of Browning"... To test this theory, he recommends reading any sonnet of Robinson. Then one will only hear

"the peculiar Yankee twang of the tragi-humorous Puritan,"

Robinson, himself! 14 Mr. Kreymborg also points out that Robinson, though he derived a great deal from Browning, was not influenced by Browning's Christian philosophy but was attracted to the form in which that faith was dramatized. 15

Research on this study took into account historical evidence that might cast a light on any reputed influence of Browning upon Robinson. The library of Robinson was chosen first for an answer to the question, "Did

14 Alfred Kreymborg, Our Singing Strength (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1929), 301.
15 Ibid., 297.
Robinson have any of Browning's works?" It was discovered that in Robinson's home in Gardiner, Maine, there was until a few years ago a well-worn cheap Cambridge edition of *The Complete Poetic and Dramatic Works of Browning*.

Now Robinson's copy of Browning is stored with his other personal effects at Colby College, Waterville, Maine. In a telephone conversation with Robinson's niece, Mrs. Ruth Nivison, on January 27, 1946, it was learned that when she went to Florida for the winter she sent his Browning volume with other things to Colby College.

It is true that Robinson was known to have admired Browning and read him as a young man, but, as Hermann Hagedorn tells in his standard biography of Edwin Arlington Robinson,

"He (Robinson) liked Tennyson, Swinburne, Browning but Matthew Arnold's average seemed to him higher than that of any of the other Victorians." 16

This was the period between 1891 and 1893 when Robinson was at Harvard.

Important historical evidences are Robinson's own criticisms of Browning's works. In a letter to Howard George Schmitt, Robinson advised this young student to read Browning's *Sordello* but warned against writing about it until he (Schmitt) had read an interpretation of it. On another occasion, Robinson appeared to be in a derisive mood concerning the 19th Century poet. He wrote to Josephine Preston Peabody, giving a criticism of her poem, Marlowe, saying:

"Still I can say, or try to say, that your Marlowe has a vital quality that lifts it altogether out

16 Hagedorn, op. cit., 73.
of the common order of 'exceptional verse' and compels me to judge it by the highest standards or not to judge it at all. One would hardly think of applying that test to anything ... in the shape of a play that has been written in English by anyone since Browning. I say since Browning but I am not sure that I know just what I mean by saying; for his plays - so called - are so deadly dull that I have always found it next to impossible to read them." 17

Later on he mentioned Browning's Colombe's Birthday in this letter. He caustically remarked,

"I am willing to be content with what I have tried to read of Browning's other things in 'dramatic form' - an expression which must mean something or nothing." 18

Again, in commenting on Browning's Luria, he said sarcastically that a fairly good trial for dog stealing would make a better play. 19 Later he expressed a dislike for Browning's poem Rabbi Ben Ezra, dismissing it as a poem of easy optimism. This remark he made in a letter to Miss Helen Adams, who had appealed to him while writing a thesis on Browning. He explained to her that he disliked the poem because it reflected Browning's temperament instead of the poet's own experience and observation. 20

In another letter to L. N. Chase dated July 11, 1917, Robinson definitely stated that when he was younger he was under the influence of Wordsworth and Kipling but never under that of Browning. 21 He expressed his

17 Torrence, op. cit., 47.
18 Ibid., 47.
19 Ibid., 47.
20 Ibid., 160.
21 Ibid., 102.
inability to understand an alleged resemblance between himself and Browning, unless it could be attributed to his use of "rather more colloquial language than 'poetic diction' has usually sanctioned." 22 He went further and deliberately denied any influence, stoutly contending

"my style, such as it is, was pretty well formed by the time my first book was published in 1896." 23

About the time this aforementioned letter was written, Edwin Arlington Robinson was interviewed by Joyce Kilmer for the New York Times. Kilmer asked Robinson if the tendency to pay attention to the more sensational poets was as characteristic of our generation as of earlier ones. Robinson replied that it applied to our own times particularly, for oddity and violence were bringing into prominence poets who had little besides these two qualities to offer the world. He referred to Browning to prove his point.

"The eccentricities of Browning's method are the things that first turned popular attention upon him, but the startling quality in Browning made more sensation in his own time than it can ever make again." 24

Although Robinson was speaking in general terms here, his inherent dislike of sensationalism indicates his attitude towards this aspect of Browning's work.

That Robinson deeply resented allusions to any influence on his work was demonstrated at the time that Mark Van Doren's Jonathan Gentry was published. Critics remarked that Van Doren's narrative poem showed a Robinson-

22 Ibid., 102.
23 Ibid., 102.
24 Joyce Kilmer, op. cit., 268.
ian influence. This seemed to perturb Robinson who denied any resemblance and commented that

"he, himself, noticed nothing of the kind. He thought he would use this opportunity to say so because when he was young, he had often been distressed and bored by reviewers who said he wrote under the influence of this or that poet when he knew he did not." 25

In a direct interview with H. B. Collamore, a collector of Robinsonia, on November 11, 1937, Miss Norma Lee Browning asked whether Browning had had an influence on Robinson. She related later that Collamore answered that there was nothing to indicate that Robinson liked Browning, though he read him. Collamore stated that Robinson belittled The Ring and the Book by saying that nine-tenths of it was not poetry. The whole work, Robinson thought, was too individualistic to be great. Collamore remembered Robinson saying,

"Speaking of Browning, I think I have proved to my final satisfaction that I cannot read The Ring and the Book as a sustained poem with any honest pleasure."

George Burnham, Robinson's great friend, in an interview with Miss Browning on November 12, 1937, recollected,

"I can see Robinson scowl when they said Browning had influence on him."

Robinson, Burnham related, explained that things came out of ourselves and our experiences, and thus the product was unlike that of any other person. Mrs. Nivison repeats the same idea in her letter, saying that Burnham told

her that this persistent comparison of Robinson to Browning annoyed Robinson.

In the light of this historical evidence, the poems of both Robert Browning and Edwin Arlington Robinson were examined for any strong similarities. Only one actual textual similarity, which seems to indicate a slight Browning influence, stood out. Robinson, however, might have read these lines some years previously and subconsciously retained them in his memory. It is given here without placing any undue importance on it.

The likeness in phrasing is found in the closing lines of Browning's *Paracelsus*, Part I. Paracelsus speaks thus:

"Are there not .... .... Two points in the adventure of the diver, One - when, a beggar, he prepares to plunge One - when, a prince, he rises with his pearl? Festus, I plunge!"

Festus:

"We wait you when you rise!" 26

Compare the following lines of Robinson's "The Sunken Crown."

"The call is on him for his overthrow, Say we, so, let him rise, or let him drown. Poor fool! He plunges for the sunken crown. And we - we wait for what the plunge may show." 27

This similarity is possibly interesting only from a psychological viewpoint, since it has been seen that,

(1) Robinson's reading of Browning does not appear to have continued persistently throughout his lifetime;


(2) Robinson rejected definitely any influence of Browning upon his work and brusquely stated so in published letters;

(3) Robinson personally commented to men, yet living, that no such influence existed, and

(4) Few critics of repute find any value in the contention that there is a traceable influence of Browning in Robinson's work.
CHAPTER VI
A CONCLUSION TO THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE POETRY
OF ROBERT BROWNING AND EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

If one measures Browning's own work by the poetic standards which he has set up in the course of that work, it is quite evident that he has on the whole lived up to them. He proved, by breaking away from all previous standards of taste in poetry, that he was a pioneer of the evolutionary principles in which he believed. In the Epilogue to "Pacchiarotto and How He Worked in Distemper," Browning defended himself for writing "strong" verse instead of the "sweet" verse which the critics demanded of him.

According to his Essay on Shelley, Browning belongs to that third order of poets which is neither completely subjective nor completely objective, but with the two faculties at times running together. He is often absolutely objective in his expression of a mood or a feeling, but the moment the mood takes upon it the tinge of thought one begins to feel it is Browning himself speaking. If his poem "Reverie" is contrasted with "Fra Lippo Lippi," it is easy to observe almost perfect illustrations of the subjective and objective faculties as they existed in the one poet.

William De Vane sums up Browning's chief importance when he claims that he was:

"A pioneer and a revolutionist in the art of the new psychological poetry a century before his time." 1

In like manner, if we judge Edwin Arlington Robinson by his own standards, it is clear that not only has he lived up to them but that he has exceeded them. He is more than an interpreter of life, for he has added wit, elegance and charm to his life-studies. His use of a simple poetic diction combined with a distinctive craftsmanship resulted in gem-like poems. Morton Dauwen Zabel, the first to make a serious contribution toward a reappraisal of Robinson's work, praises him thus:

Robinson joined passion with judgment, sympathy with prudence, and a tough American loyalty with contempt for the abuses that were defiling the American heritage and giving it over to a brutal materialism that not only worsted the fine hopes of his pragmatic grandfathers, but drove him personally and by sheer revulsion away from the sideshows and vulgarizations of the affluent age around him. 2

Like Browning, Robinson cared little or nothing about writing the "sweet" verse that the critics required. He belongs to the same classification as Browning, but his work has more objectivity than the English poet's. There are, however, portions of his work that are more characteristically Robinsonian than other parts.

Robinson remarked, when he was editing Perry's Letters, that

"art must have its appreciators, or there would be no great writers, or artists of any sort." 3

The MacDowell Colony at Peterborough, New Hampshire, gave Robinson the opportunity to get away from the world, and, as he himself phrases it, to ....

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2 Morton Dauwen Zabel, "Robinson, the Ironic Discipline," The Nation (August 28, 1937), 222.

3 Van Wyck Brooks, op. cit., 236.
...express a part of what the world had given me. The place compels a man to work out the best that is in him, and to be discontented if he fails to do so... For the world must have its art, or the world will be no fit place to live in; and the artist must have his opportunity, or his art will die. 4

Robinson's genuine humility about his great gift is a strong contrast to Browning's self-assured attitude towards his talent. His pleas for art and for the encouragement of artists were very sincere, for such matters were always close to his heart.

Due to his keen sympathy with the struggles and woes of the human derelicts that filled his world, Robinson portrayed the "failures" better than Browning did. The poetic theme of failure was one that both poets thought about in a similar way, as they believed a spiritual victory was behind every so-called failure. Robinson gives this greater emphasis, as it seems to be his favorite theory. In fact, Amy Lowell says that he pushed it too far, in that it borders on the ridiculous, especially in Captain Craig. She softens this statement later, saying:

But in our material day, the spirituality of Mr. Robinson's work is tonic and uplifting. 5

A golden thread weaves in and out of Browning's and Robinson's poetry, as they aspire for an eternal goal. Robinson appears to echo a Browning idea where he says:

4 Kaplan, op. cit., 16.

You quiver and you clutch
For something larger, something unfulfilled,
Some wiser kind of joy that you shall have
Never, until you learn to laugh with God. 6

Browning repeats the theme of infinite unrest again and again, as in

Paracelsus:

August anticipations, symbols, types
Of a dim splendor ever on before
In that eternal circle life pursues.
For men begin to pass their nature's bound,
And find new hopes and cares which fast supplant
Their proper joys and griefs; 7

The English poet believes that the basic problems involved can only be solved in the hereafter:

...I am concentrated - I feel;
But my soul saddens when it looks beyond:
I cannot be immortal, taste all joy.

O God, where do they tend - these struggling aims?
What would I have? What is this "sleep" which seems
To bound all? Can there be a "waking" point
Of crowning life?...

And what is that I hunger for but God? 8

The American poet finds no final answer, so he keeps on striving to analyze the disparity between our ideals and our achievement. Lloyd Morris explains that the failure theme for Robinson was:

...merely the realist's recognition of the

6 Robinson, op. cit., Captain Craig, 119.
7 Browning, op. cit., "Paracelsus," 47.
8 Ibid., Pauline, 9.
ironic discord between material experience and spiritual ideals. 9

Both poets made a similar protest against brutal, unfeeling materialism and a similar plea for high idealism, regardless of any failure that may occur. They saw failure as more than frustrations; saw it as a kind of triumph more splendid than success - the groping endeavor of evolving, emergent man to find a life for himself that should have meaning and goal. In this comparative study it was found that Robinson's Amaranth, The Man Who Died Twice, and John Brown are greater failures than Browning's Andrea del Sarto, Abt Vogler and Cristina. Yet Browning's Cleon is a greater intellectual failure than Robinson's Captain Craig. The spiritual implications of the suicides are dwelt upon equally by both men. The two poets' courageous motto could be summed up briefly as "Success through Failure."

Failure and Light were so interwoven in Robinson's poetry that it was observed that lack of perception of the light sometimes accounted for his characters' failures. Light played a greater part in the American poet's work, but it had a dominant part in the Englishman's work, too. The lack of a positive belief was a flaw in Robinson's poetry. His dependence on the Light for spiritual guidance gave Robinson direction and security but it could never replace the image of a warm and loving God which Browning proclaimed throughout his poetry. Both poets stressed the spiritual symbolism of Light from their first to their last works.

In penetrating the spirit of their poetry, the problems of the optimism

and pessimism of both poets were considered. Like the greater part of thinking mankind, it was realized that both poets were neither unconditionally optimistic nor unqualifiedly pessimistic. Life revealed too many discrepancies for the absolute acceptance of either attitude. It refused to be explained on a basis of a single system. There is evidence of a greater amount of optimism than pessimism in Browning, and of a greater amount of pessimism than optimism in Robinson.

G. K. Chesterton, in his book on Browning, says:

Any one will make the deepest and blackest and most incurable mistake about Browning who imagines that his optimism was founded on any argument for optimism. 10

Now this is not the blackest and most incurable mistake but it is one that is frequently made about him. Equally as important as temperament in determining his optimism is the number and kind of unusual or extraordinary circumstances that may surround him and the choices he makes in his reactions to them. It is a matter of biography, but the great crisis in Browning's early life was his elopement with and marriage to Elizabeth Barrett. It was accompanied with some of the most anxious and serious experiences a man can have, but it resulted in the deepest and most profound joys a man can know. So from childhood until the age of forty-nine, Browning's life was a life of continuous and unbroken joy and optimism. Then Elizabeth Barrett Browning died, but a man of forty-nine meets a calamity differently from one of

twenty-four. Though the spiritual changes wrought in Browning by this loss were great, his heart had been steeled for it. Browning simply never had his joy and unity of spirit taken from him, and consequently was never compelled to struggle for it strenuously, as was Edwin Arlington Robinson. Yet Browning reiterated a score of times this admission:

I must say - or choke in silence-
"Howsoever came my fate,
Sorrow did and joy did
life well-weighed-preponderate." 11

As one author says of the above quotation:

Here you touch the responsive chord, Robert Browning, and for this you shall be saved. Not for your love of garish day, of shawms and trumpets, of C major and the Mode Palestrina, do we welcome and speed you on, but for the wistful minor of your Toccata, the ineffable unfulfillment of your Campagna, your confession that our joy may be three parts pain and dearly bought at that with strain and throe, your recognition that this curse will come upon us; to see our idols perish. 12

Now Robinson, who has been erroneously called by superficial critics both "the poet of futility" and a man without hope, denies these charges when he says:

In point of fact, I recommend a careful reading of my books to anyone who wishes to become an incurable optimist. 13

12 Russell, op. cit., 76.
From the facts of his life one wonders how he managed to be as optimistic as he was. He was the unwanted youngest son. When he was eleven years, his friend Harry Morrell, a boy of rare intellectual promise, died of diphtheria. This death, one cannot but think must have cast a black shadow on the boy's sensitive mind, must have waked the sombre questionings which were never to be stilled. Thus shadowed, he may for the first time have recognized things with which he was to have so much concern through life; suffering, failure, death, tragedy. His schooling at Harvard was stopped after his father died. His family disintegrated after this event. After a little while, the comfortable fortune which the future poet's father had thought secure for his family disappeared. One son, Dean, became a morphine addict. In 1896, the mother died of black diphtheria. Her sons did the things that had to be done. The youngest, every super-sensitive fibre of him a-quiver with his own anguish of body and mind, brought the casket in from the porch where the undertaker placed it, and laid in it the treasure of their hearts. In 1899 Dean Robinson found rest from his suffering; ten years later, Herman, the other son, died in what should have been the prime of life. The rest of Robinson's early, and much of his later history is of his struggle for publication of his poetry. After his first success he proposed to the only girl he seems ever to have really loved, and did it so unexpectedly that nothing ever came of it except his famous attempt to console her for so upsetting a scene. Poverty, inebriety, and inability to get his poems published dogged his footsteps, until his recognition by the first Roosevelt. Then he held a governmental sinecure until he got started writing again. After all that
suffering, came success. 14

Few critics emphasize these early tragedies, which affected Robinson's thought and poetry, so deeply. He did not share that easy optimism which saw St. Michael at every turn ready to save men from the consequences of their follies. In the spiritual vacuity of his time, its materialism, its faith in force, he saw only a promise of fresh disasters.

I heard one who said: "Verily,
What word have I for children here?
Your Dollar is your only Word,
The wrath of it your only fear.

"Are you to pay for what you have
With all you are?" -No other word
We caught, but with a laughing crowd
Moved on. None heeded, and few heard. 15

The problem of the oft-rumored influence of Robert Browning upon the poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson was investigated. Several "popular" critics actually stated this influence but their comments have been omitted from this study, and only the few responsible critics who have something useful to say have been used. After their varied statements were studied, an investigation of historical evidence was made. Robinson's own rejection of this influence is the most important piece of external evidence. No unwarranted emphasis is given the one brief four line poem which is similar to one of Browning's in thought and words. It may have been read by Robinson some years previously, remaining in his memory to be used at a later date without his being aware

14 Hagedorn, op. cit., passim.

that its source was Browning. The fact that Robinson had a copy of Browning, which is stored with his other books, proves nothing. Summing up, it can be said that there is no worthwhile evidence for the statement that the poetry of Robert Browning influenced the poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson.

Throughout this comparative study, an effort has been made not only to indicate similarities but to emphasize differences, explaining the essential individual traits wherever necessary. Though the two men had a medium and a subject in common, the heart and mind of man, they were actually as far apart as the two centuries they represented. Their poetic "failures" bring out their essential difference, for Browning considers the subject from a spiritual viewpoint and Robinson from a materialistic. Their treatment of "Light" makes it plain that Robinson used light as a philosophical anchor to try to compensate for his lack of faith, while Browning employed it as a positive spiritual force. Their technical, verbal and rhythmical equipment differed as much as their optimistic and pessimistic natures. The fact that Browning was English and Robinson an American did not make the difference, as Robinson used the traditional English verse forms, as Padrieo Colum says, to "mark a mockery."

A life-long devotion to the Muse ultimately repaid both of them with fame and renown. Their achievements in poetry, and their part in helping create a realistic psychological method, make them inspiring models for future generations.
These statements were not included in the chapter on the examination of historical evidence because they concern matters of personal opinion only.

Mr. Robinson's two nieces were questioned as to whether they believed that Browning influenced Robinson. Mrs. Nivison remarked in her letter that in all seriousness she does not think that Browning influenced Robinson. She said, "Robinson studied Browning as he did all poetry of all time, but in his own work, he held true to the style and message to which he set himself in the beginning." ¹

In a telephone conversation with Mrs. H. W. Holt, Barbara Robinson Holt, sister of Mrs. Nivison and daughter of Herman Robinson, said that she often heard Browning and Robinson "linked together." In her letter of February 2, 1946, she qualifies this statement saying "I personally would not say he was influenced by Browning but I think he did admire his poetry." ²

There are a few letters appended to this study which contain varied statements on the degree of the influence. Mr. Lawrence Thompson, a co-editor on the private collection of Robinson's letters in the Bacon Collamore library and author of Problems in the Bibliography of Edwin Arlington Robinson states that Browning probably influenced Robinson more strongly in his early works - particularly the Tilbury Town poems - than any other poet.

¹ See letter in Appendix.
² See letter in Appendix.
It shows in the striking directness with which Robinson plunges into the middle of a narrative and compresses so much of the story into the climactic moment. That seemed to be a distinctive Browning technique. He adds that it also shows in the rhythms of his early poems and in the deliberately odd juxtaposition of words. 3

Similarly Mr. Wells, in his letter of March 13, 1946, believes that Robinson's shorter poems, i.e. Rembrandt to Rembrandt are clearly in the Browning tradition. He suggests that their blank verse and their syntax be compared. He recommends that their vague, religious idealism as well as the familiar theme of spiritual frustration should likewise be studied. He believes that the latter theme goes deeper than just a personal problem, for it is one of the great issues of the age. He remarks that a comparison of Robinson's political poems like Demos and Dionysus with some of Browning's didactic and political pieces would be of value. 4

Mr. T. S. Eliot in his letter of March 28, 1946, makes a general statement that anyone of his generation is expected to have been influenced by Browning. He explains that he is not sufficiently familiar with the work of Edwin Arlington Robinson to pronounce an opinion on the degree of actual influence. He concludes that poets are not always completely conscious of all the influences which have acted on them. 5

3 See letter in Appendix.
4 See letter in Appendix.
5 See letter in Appendix.
Miss Alice Fitzpatrick,
8042 South Saint Lawrence Avenue,
Chicago 19
Illinois,
U.S.A.

Dear Miss Fitzpatrick,

I have your letter of March 6th and am sorry to have to reply that I am not sufficiently familiar with the work of Edwin Arlington Robinson to be able to pronounce an opinion on the degree of influence of Robert Browning. Mr. Robinson belonged to a slightly older generation than mine and his poetry was of a different type from that which I and my contemporaries were trying to discover. In general, I should expect anyone of my own generation to have undergone some influence from Browning. The only other comment I am in a position to make is that poets themselves are not always completely conscious of all the influences they have experienced.

With many regrets,

Yours sincerely,

T. S. Eliot.
Dear Miss Fitzpatrick

I am sending your letter on to my sister to answer your questions regarding E. A. Robinson and Browning if she is able and hope you will hear from her soon.

I personally would not say he was influenced by Browning but I think he did admire his poetry.

To answer your first question he most certainly did not consider himself a pessimist. I happened to be with him one day when someone asked him that question and he seemed to feel quite hurt that anyone should consider him pessimistic! He considered himself an optimist although strictly speaking I should say he was a fatalist as is shown in his poetry.

As to his attitude on love - I think he had a very normal one and believed marriage to be the ideal life for anyone although he himself was never married.

I am sorry I can't help you out concerning his interest in Browning but I never discussed it with him. I hope my sister can help you.

Sincerely,

Barbara R. Holt.
Feb. 6, 1946.

Miss Alice Fitzpatrick,
Chicago, Ill.

Dear Miss Fitzpatrick:

My sister has passed the buck of Browning's influence on the poetry of our late uncle E.A.R. on to me, and in all seriousness, I can only tell you that I do not think it exists - Robinson studied Browning as he did all poetry of all time, but in his own work, he held true to the style and the message to which he set himself in the beginning. Countless people have tried to trace the influence of Browning on his poems, and one girl from the University of Missouri or Kansas came here and went through his copy of Browning (now stored at Colby College) looking for marginal notes, but found nothing. The only similarity I can see is in their common use of the dramatic monologue. I have looked again through his letters to my sister and find no references, but his great friend George Burnham, who died in 1940, told me that this persistent comparison annoyed him. Held to belief in the ultimate triumph of good, paraphrased as light and love, but he was a realist and did not reduce it to the simplicity of Browning, as the poetry tells us.

He was a very spiritual person with a deep compassion for humanity and a beautiful, though subtle, sense of humor. As for his religion, he told me once that the Christian religion had come to stay, but that Christian Theology, as we know it to-day, must go.

I am sorry not to be of more help to you, but there are no other relatives.

Sincerely,

Ruth Nivison.
Dear Miss Fitzpatrick,

It's backed on first-hand knowledge: I was one of the "group of young poets". The interview took place about 1921 or 1922 - I've forgotten exactly when. The phrase "if they liked to think so" was used because of E.A.'s insistence always that each individual reader must do his own interpretation. I met E.A. only on this one occasion. But at the MacDowell Colony I have talked with many of his intimate friends, and even Browning's idealism (philosophical) was not remote from his * I mention this, because it might start you on a track you haven't thought about. All good luck to you. You have a good subject.

Sincerely,

Vernon Loggins

*One of these informers is a good Catholic, is devoted to E.A., and can't stand the idea that he's a pessimist. I don't agree with her, except partially. Idealism and pessimism, as Schopenhauer so well showed, are in no sense incompatible.
Dear Miss Fitzpatrick:

Although I am very happy to reply to your letter, I am sorry to say that my answer will bring no very definite knowledge of the matters in question. Engaged in many literary projects, I have neglected to think much of late about Browning, and I have no notes at hand to which I can refer.

It seems to me that the matter is pretty clear sailing, and that you should have relatively little trouble with such a comparative simple theme. My feeling is that Robinson's long poems are for the most part remarkably like Greek dramas, and do not owe much to Browning, so far as specific indebtedness goes. But the score of pieces similar in form to *Rembrandt to Rembrandt* are clearly Browning's tradition. The syntax and blank verse of the two men will bear comparison. The same holds true for some of the rather vague, religious idealism found especially in the early work of the two men. One other point of comparison might attract you: the familiar theme of spiritual frustration in the two. Browning, the happier man, treats this more objectively; Robinson, personally the unlucky man, treats it more subjectively. In both cases the problem goes beyond the personal to the public issues of the age. How about comparing Robinson's political poems, such as the dialogues between Demos and Dianysus, with some of Browning's more didactic and political pieces?

With all sincerity I heartily wish you the best of luck in your researches and wish that conditions made it possible for us to discuss the matter rather than write. At the moment I can write no more.

Yours truly,

Henry W. Wells.
Dear Miss Fitzpatrick,

Your letter chased me all over the eastern seaboard from Connecticut to Florida before it caught up with me this morning, hence my delay in answering it.

You have a good subject for a Master's thesis, but you're going to have a hard time. Usually they want you to quote chapter and verse in such a thesis, to prove each statement you make. In your case, however, you're going to find very few direct quotations from either Robinson's letters or his poems to prove Browning's influence. On the other hand, there is ample evidence in the poetry, so don't be discouraged. Just take the bull by the horns and assume what you can't prove!

You ask me whether I believe Robinson was influenced by Browning. I'd go so far as to say that Browning probably influenced Robinson more strongly in his early works -- particularly the Tilbury Town poems -- than any other author. It shows in the striking directness with which Robinson plunges into the middle of a narrative and compresses so much of the story into the climactic moment. That seemed to be a somewhat distinctive Browning technique. It also shows in the rhythms of the early poems, in the deliberately odd juxtaposition of words.

This is your thesis, and I don't see why I should say any more except that it's a swell subject, and here's wishing you good luck.

As for the unpublished letters, I suppose I've read most of those in obvious places and I can't remember any references to Browning -- any direct acknowledgements as to his indebtedness to him. But don't give the thesis up just because you can't get Robinson -- or me -- to help you as much as you'd like.

Very cordially yours,

Lawrance Thompson.
Miss Alice Fitzpatrick
8042 So. St. Lawrence
Chicago, Ill.

Dear Miss Fitzpatrick:

In reply to your questions regarding my research into the poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson, I regret that I have not kept my notes and manuscripts so that I might be more helpful.

I spent a year at Radcliffe College in Boston working toward my Master's degree, using Robinson as my subject. You asked about my visit to his home. I made two trips to the Robinson home in Gardiner, Maine, during the year 1937-38. Since his death the place has been occupied by an aunt of his whose name I have forgotten, but who at the time was most cordial to me, allowing me to browse lengthily through Robinson's personal library which she has kept intact. This, as you can see, has been a good many years ago, and I cannot possibly venture to say definitely what passages he had marked in his books.

My interest at the time was in the influence of Browning on Robinson. I had definite proof from personal letters of EAR'S and from talks with his close friend, George Burnham, that Browning was one of Robinson's favorite authors. This was substantiated also by talks with loving members of Robinson's family and by his Browning library. The margins were copiously marked up with criticisms and other comments in EAR's personal handwriting. There can be no mistake about the books being his own -- as well as the handwriting which I recognized from the many original letters of his I had seen, and which was verified also of course by his relatives.

His books were kept in the study downstairs. His bedroom was upstairs, overlooking, as you may know, a cemetery. In addition to Browning, I believe Robinson's other favorite authors were Dickens, Hardy, Emerson and George Crabbe.

If I can be of any further help to you, please let me know.

Very truly yours,

Mrs. Russell Ogg
(Norma Lee Browning)
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The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America, XXXV: New York: Bibliographical Society of America, 1941, 115-144.
The thesis submitted by Alice Fitzpatrick has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

February 2, 1948

Signature of Adviser