Anna Sabol Blumenthal

Edwin Arlington Robinson's Tilbury Town Poems and William James

I

The philandering John Evereldown, the alcoholic Mr. Flood, and best-known of all, the publicly successful and privately suicidal Richard Cory, all these, like many of Tilbury Town's denizens, retain for the reader a remarkable vividness despite the modest reputation of their creator, Edwin Arlington Robinson: few students of American literature or modern poetry are required to read him. Born in 1869 in Head Tide, Maine where his father Edward Robinson made his fortune in the logging industry, the poet, Edwin Arlington Robinson, moved in that same year with his family to nearby Gardiner, the village which Robinson re-created in the parochial and repressive Tilbury Town of his early short poems. In the discursive poems of his last decade, the poet failed by all estimates to regain the intensity and the inevitability of the early poems, those based on what might be called the matter of Tilbury/Gardiner. But in the early Tilbury pieces, those written between 1890 and the early 1920s, he dramatized the life situations of Tilbury's characters with a remarkable specificity which has helped to keep him from being dismissed entirely as a predictable product of the late nineteenth-century regionalist movement in New England.

Although the poet's forms are traditional ones and his thematic concerns typical of the nineteenth century as he struggles with the debilitating effects of materialism and mechanism, the compressed

intensity and the sharply etched outlines of his dramas in verse link Robinson to one of the most far-reaching intellectual influences of the modern period: the pragmatism of the Harvard psychologist and philosopher William James.[1] The Robinsonian tendency to defer judgment, to take each individual case on its own terms, has long been observed to parallel the Jamesian "pragmatic method" (Coxe 131): the practice of resolving differences by forecasting the consequences of a given solution, and then choosing the course of action with the greatest "cash value" for the particular social situation. And, Robinson's tendency in his more metaphysical poems to balance the claims of faith and nihilism by resorting to an "orient Word" reflects also the Jamesian insistence on breaking down the distinctions between empiricism and idealism, tough- and tender-mindedness. But these well-known parallels represent only general and rather abstract connections between poet and philosopher. I hope to suggest that Robinson knew and dramatized James's epistemological theories in considerably greater detail than has been thought so far by those who have observed James-Robinson connections. Yet even as the poet experimented with James's ideas about the perceptual process—ideas the poet derived largely from his reading of James's *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), particularly the "Stream of Consciousness" and "Attention" chapters, and from James's essay "The Will to Believe" (1896)—Robinson still rejected the larger conclusions James drew from his analyses of the workings of the mind.

Detailed reading of Robinson's major epistemological poems, "The Wandering Jew" (1916), "Eros Turannos" (1916), and "Luke Havergal" (1897), all from the Tilbury Town group, suggests that the poet's limited reading of the pragmatistic philosopher led Robinson to adopt only selected theories, ideas which the poet tended to uproot from the context of James's allied opinions about the relationship of mind to matter and about the duration of the perceptual act. When transplanted into the more conventional and intuitively available soil of Robinson's own underlying assumptions, the Jamesian ideas take on a new character and acquire a set of implications much at variance with the mainstay convictions of their originator. Like most thinkers concerned with matters abstract and philosophical, the poet Robinson did not necessarily develop his views incrementally; rather, he pursued at different points in his career the various implications of his theories about perception and the acquisition

of knowledge. Although this study does not follow a chronological pattern of development, it traces the path leading from Robinson's selective reading of James's early epistemological texts through the poet's development of an individual and essentially anti- Jamesian set of conclusions about the business of knowing.

That Robinson did actually read James has not hitherto been verified. The connection between Robinson and pragmatistic thought was first explored in 1967 by W. R. Robinson in his book, *Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Poetry of the Act*; the topic has remained unexamined since. W. R. Robinson finds the poet a thoroughgoing pragmatist who embraces both materialism and vitalism on issues such as the poet's mission, the function of poetry and the nature of language, and the relation between the individual and society. However, he never overtly connects the poet to William James, or to his predecessor, Charles Sanders Peirce, who, in his influential essay, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," had first suggested a connection between belief and the practical consequences of belief. The critic Robinson simply assumes that pragmatist philosophy had so saturated the intellectual climate of the northeast and especially of the Harvard community that the poet, writing during the crucial last years of the nineteenth century, simply developed what he calls a "parallel" philosophy. Lacking any awareness of the specific James texts which the poet knew, W. R. Robinson's account inevitably fails to discern that the special connection between the two figures centres on questions of knowing.

However plausible or implausible the notion of a parallel development between the pair may be, the evidence contained in the extended correspondence between the poet and his youthful friend Harry de Forest Smith makes it clear that Robinson had read, or read in, both William James's *The Principles of Psychology* and his "The Will to Believe," and that he voluntarily returned to key works some five years after his initial exposure to James at Harvard, apparently in an effort to reassess the substance of the great psychologist in the light of his reading during the later period. The poet's love of Harvard and his fond memories of his two years' study there may have caused him to reread the work of a scholar who had failed to impress him during his Cambridge years.

In a letter to Smith dated 21 February, 1893, Robinson notes:

> Read Mrs. Browning yesterday all through one of Prof. Royce's lectures. This may startle you, but he is not at home in psychology, and I get absolutely nothing from what he says. Prof. James' book is quite enough. (Sutcliffe 87)

Referring here to James's *Principles*, Robinson draws an implicit contrast: William James is thoroughly at home with both the physiological and theoretical aspects of psychology (still part of the discipline of philosophy), and Josiah Royce, whose absolute idealism put him consistently at odds with James's pragmatistic philosophy, is not. Whether "quite enough" ironically signifies an overabundance in James's masterwork or an admiring acceptance of the total sufficiency of the *Principles* remains ambiguous.

Five years later, at home once again in Gardiner, Robinson has obviously been rereading James:

> At any rate, I'll write and let you know among other things that Prof. William James doesn't know anything about Herbert Spencer. I've just been reading *The Will to Believe* along with the *Data of Ethics* [of Spencer] (after *First Principles* and enough of the *Sociology* to make a kind of mental scaffolding for the rest) and have come to the conclusion that James is not a man to take wisdom with him when he dies. (Sutcliffe 297)

Here the suggestion is that Spencer, who generalized evolutionary theory in an attempt to unify the natural and social sciences, is the man of the hour and that William James has failed to take into account one of the most influential philosophers of the late nineteenth century. Yet Robinson has taken James's work seriously enough to reread one of the great pragmatist's central epistemological texts, not less than five years after his first acquaintance with William James's work at Harvard. That Robinson found James unimpressive does not preclude the likelihood that he had a well-reasoned critical opinion of James's theories of the consciousness and its operation, or that he had absorbed more of James's ideas than he cared to admit.

In broad terms William James, writing at the end of the nineteenth century, seeks to dignify the needs of the individual and to celebrate the capacity of the individual consciousness to contribute to the shaping of reality. James, intensely American in the practical emphasis of his

"pragmatic method," in his insistence on freedom of the will rather than determinism, and in his abiding optimism, attempts to bridge the gaping chasm between science and materialism and the opposing Christian view of a divinely ordered universe. Eschewing the dry abstractions of idealism which he terms "vicious intellectualism," James seeks to reconcile "tough-" and "tender-mindedness," or in more general terms, empiricism and idealism. The real and the ideal are no longer opposed in a philosophy which emphasizes the endless relativity of experience, the pervasiveness of process and transition rather than stasis, and the potential for novelty in the universe. For James, it is the particular moment of perception, the particular social situation which requires our attention. No absolutes, whether empiricist or idealist, can adequately account for experience which is so continuously engaged in metamorphosis.[2]

The James texts with which Robinson was familiar, however, treat epistemological issues specifically. Given the poet's reference to the *The Principles of Psychology* and the evidence of the poems themselves, it certainly seems probable that Robinson knew the "Stream of Consciousness" and "Attention" chapters, those chapters of James's two-volume-masterwork which had the greatest impact on literary artists of the early modern period.

In the "Stream of Consciousness" chapter of his *Principles*, James argues that perception cannot occur uncolored by the personal consciousness doing the perceiving. James's pluralism brooks no qualification. Yet within the continuity and fundamental unity of the individual consciousness, change occurs incessantly. For James, no two perceptions match each other exactly; the perception of sameness is merely a kind of mental shorthand to facilitate the cataloguing of experience through language. The passage of time and the accumulation of personal experience alter the quality of one's perception, even of the same object or scene. Every image in the mind, says James, carries "the dying echo of whence it came . . . and the dawning sense of whither it is to lead" (*Principles* I: 234). These "transitive" parts of experience, which James calls the "fringe" or the "feeling of relation," are as significant as the "substantive" moments of mental experience, the moments whose perceptual content is readily named. Further, the mind selects what it will attend to; it only perceives what experience or its preperceptions permit.

In "The Will to Believe," also an early work, the philosopher emphasizes the role of the passions in making the desired outcome of a situation emerge as fact.

> Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds. (*Pragmatism* 200)

The still youthful James values highly what he sees as the power of the individual consciousness to shape the course of experience through its contribution to the perceptual process. As he does in *Pragmatism*, James emphasizes here the importance of epistemological voluntarism: a belief that we choose because the belief compensates us practically by making action possible must also be considered a true belief. James's exuberant optimism about the practical benefits of such an approach to experience also characterizes his informal, conversational style, one which leaves behind the dry logic of the academy.

Since Robinson has left no prose statements in notebook or letter of his epistemological or metaphysical position, we must turn instead to his most abstract poem for the fullest development of his philosophical ideas. "The Man Against the Sky" (1916), though a less successful example of Robinson's art than his later poems on the subject of knowing nevertheless helps to clarify the poet's relationship to James. Those assumptions of James which he accepted emerge here as if to expose the intellectual foundations of Robinson's more successful and more fully dramatized poems on the subject of perception, some of which were written earlier, and some later. "The Man Against the Sky," composed as it is of numerous portraits of individuals who confront ultimate questions about the nature of consciousness and of death in astonishingly diverse ways, shows striking similarities to the Jamesian model of the perceptual process developed in *The Principles of Psychology* and "The Will to Believe."

Like James in his insistence on the insularity of the individual consciousness, the poet also defines a world characterized by multiple, contradictory, and highly individualized perspectives:

> And we, with all our wounds and all our powers,
> Must each await at his own height

Another darkness or another light. (*Selected Poems* 153)

For Robinson, the mystery of death can be approached only within the assumptions characteristic for that individual, as Robinson phrases it, "at his own height." The poet also suggests, by means of the dozen or more diverse portraits, the Jamesian idea that the human consciousness is both "continuous" and "selective":

Why trouble him now who sees and hears
No more than what his innocence requires
And therefore to no other height aspires
Than one at which he neither quails nor tires? (149)

For Robinson, the man who never challenges his own comfortable assumptions is ultimately unable to see beyond those perceptions which experience has taught him to select. New issues are approached and influenced by the departing atmosphere or "fringe" of previous perceptions.

Similarly, Robinson acknowledges the role of the emotions in the process of acquiring knowledge and developing convictions about that knowledge. The poet recognizes, as James does in "The Will," that convictions are only partially rational; temperament is a primary force in the establishment of belief.

Whatever drove or lured or guided him,—
A vision answering a faith unshaken,
An easy trust assumed of easy trials,
A sick negation born of weak denials,
A crazed abhorrence of an old condition,
A blind attendance on a brief ambition,—
Whatever stayed him or derided him,
His way was even as ours. (153)

From the idea that either fear or a trusting temperament conduce to the formation of corresponding convictions about the world, it was only a small step for Robinson to accept also the Jamesian theory of epistemological voluntarism.

The closing lines of Robinson's poem,

'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. (156)

offer an uncanny parallel not only to the voluntarist ideas of "The Will to Believe," but to the famous "corridor" analogy[3] in James's *Pragmatism*. For both James and Robinson, as these lines suggest, some choice, even if limited by experience, is offered the individual; the pluralist nature of reality seems to hold out what is for Robinson a very highly qualified kind of salvation. To some small extent we can shape and fashion the world we inhabit; the choice of doors opening off the corridor is up to us. As a result of this thinking, Robinson allows that the cautious optimism of choosing not to know may be a more satisfying alternative to the "dark tideless floods of Nothingness."

> What have we seen beyond our sunset fires
> That lights again the way by which we came? (156)

Since we cannot know anything beyond our own experience, we do not have to choose a mechanist answer; Robinson leaves room for the tentative possibility of an "orient Word."

The rather abstract and expository treatment the poet gives the theme of perception in "The Man Against the Sky" suggests the degree of consciousness with which Robinson had thought through and accepted many of James's central theories. But the poem also invites us to consider where these similarities end. Although the closing arguments of the poem argue for the suppression of despair, as well as for the optimism and the capacity for action gained from acknowledging the mystery of ultimate truths, the poet seems not to attain to the Jamesian sense of power and freedom derived from his voluntarist account of the perceptual process. For James the creative faculty of the consciousness means that even though experience may shape the individual, he or she, is still capable "by his way of attending to things" of defining for himself the "sort of universe he shall appear to himself to inhabit" (*Principles* 401), and the implications of this kind of control are entirely positive. The fruitfulness of the Jamesian perspective emerges clearly when the philosopher

observes that the mind chooses what it will attend to; it "works on the data it receives very much as a sculptor works on a block of stone" (*Principles* 277). For James, voluntarism implies a thorough delight in the products wrought by the creative faculty of the consciousness. However, each of the briefly sketched characters of "The Man Against the Sky," whether hero or disappointed idealist, seems merely to be swallowed up anonymously by a mysterious and unrelenting larger order. Robinson notes the variety of individual perspectives, but without emphasizing the saving potential James finds in the multiplicity of self-chosen beliefs.

To see more fully how consistently Robinson echoed Jamesian assumptions about the mechanical process of perception, and to understand not only what radically different conclusions about the process he drew from these assumptions, but how he arrived at them, we must turn now to three less prosaic and more fully dramatized poems, all on the epistemological theme. Close study of these poems helps to illuminate the way the poet recombines certain Jamesian ideas with an older group of philosophical assumptions which are essentially non- or anti-Jamesian. It is the resulting hybrid set of ideas which come to constitute Robinson's epistemological postulates.

II

"The Wandering Jew" (1916) is usually taken to be a portrait of the gifted but impecunious Alfred Louis, a compatriot of the poet during his early New York years, but its thematic implications move far beyond the biographical dimension into issues of knowing and the nature of perception. The wanderer's essential difficulty and the axis upon which his personality turns, as the speaker sketches it in the closing stanzas, is the inability to believe in the potential for forgiveness, for "the good" which came "out of Nazareth" as a real possibility, as a significant source of historical optimism. The wanderer, as the speaker sees him, remains locked within the confines of unrelenting racial bitterness, anger, and pride. The broader, more generous perspective, the wanderer "confesses" offers "much . . . to be denied"; but, the speaker speculates, he remains unable to change his deepest convictions because of repeated disappointments. As James puts it in "The Selectivity of Attention," "experience is

remoulding us every moment" (*Principles* 228). Robinson takes much the same view of the wanderer:

> He may have died so many times
> That all there was of him to see
> Was pride . . .
> He may have told, when more than once
> Humility seemed imminent,
> How many a lonely time in vain
> The Second Coming came and went. (163-64)

Robinson's speaker describes the way he became aware of the importance of this relation in the wanderer's life:

> A dawning on the dust of years
> Had shaped with an elusive light
> Mirages of remembered scenes
> That were no longer for the sight.
>
> For now the gloom that hid the man
> Became a daylight on his wrath,
> And one wherein my fancy viewed
> New lions ramping in his path.
> The old were dead and had no fangs,
> Wherefore he loved them—seeing not
> They were the same that in their time
> Had eaten everything they caught. (162-63)

In fancy, the speaker sees in the mind of the wanderer a desire for new lions, for new revenge on Israel's oppressors, and he realizes also that the old man's passion for revenge and his love of Israel's historic avengers is based on the fact that they are dead and cannot live to disappoint the wanderer by themselves becoming oppressors. The lion of stanza seven, the sign of the tribe of Judah, functions in Jewish iconography as an emblem for the most famous members of that tribe, the Maccabee family. Their successful rebellion against Antiochus, remembered in the festival of lights, Chanukah, made them a dynasty of kings. Maccabean descendants, however, became corrupt rulers, themselves eating everything they caught. Robinson has his speaker explain the old man's bitterness in terms of a vivid consciousness of the relentless persecution of Jews

throughout their history, and by a certain static and narrowly defined view of that history, an unwillingness to consider Israel's periods of power and prosperity. Robinson, in Jamesian fashion, has his speaker see the wanderer's character as having been shaped by his sense of his own personal experience. For James, and for Robinson, "our mental reaction on every given thing is really a resultant of our experience of the whole world up to that date" (*Principles* 228).

The final stanza seems to offer the key to the wanderer's dilemma; his repeated inability to conquer pride, even though "more than once / Humility seemed imminent," seems to lie at the root of his incapacity for overcoming crippling bitterness. By contrast, however, the speaker's cautious, inferential methods, so unlike those recommended by James in "The Will to Believe," emphasize the importance of the conscious exercise of humility and detachment in the process of arriving at a judgment. The oblique manoeuvring of the speaker in these early stanzas and his heavy reliance on metadiscourse work consistently to stress the speaker's desire to refrain from allowing his own nature to color his perceptions about the central figure. Because Robinson has his speaker finally convict the wanderer of pride, the speaker himself must of course be made to evade any such charge.

But a larger point is made by the relationship between speaker and central figure, between the story of the speaker's discovery of the wanderer's character and the story of the wanderer himself. The two characters and stories stand as foils for each other; the speaker's humility and the evasive progress of his character study finally result in belief and believability, while the splenetic wanderer remains permanently cut off from any lasting larger understanding, locked into a set of attitudes with which there can be no living. Critics like Yvor Winters have tended to focus on the closing stanzas of the poem, those in which the speaker finally arrives at some insight into the wanderer's disappointments and limitations. The lengthy introductory stanzas in which the speaker demonstrates his anxiety over the making of a judgment about the poem's central figure are seldom discussed even though they comment in a fundamental way on the poem's theme, the effect of pride and anger on the activity of perception. The extended development of these introductory stanzas emphasizes the speaker's—as well as Robinson's—sense of

the caution needed when undertaking the unpredictable business of perception and judgment.

The speaker in "The Wandering Jew" is one of the few not undercut by the poet. It is this speaker's lengthy introductory monologue which provides, in all its hesitant and seemingly meandering attention to detail, a Robinsonian paradigm of the way that perception functions when it functions at its best. Robinson has his speaker refer repeatedly to visible evidence such as the expression in the wanderer's eyes: "I saw by looking in his eyes," or to the reactions and manner revealed during conversation, as for example, when in stanza four, the speaker learns that to listen politely has a negative effect upon the wanderer's frame of mind because it allows him to indulge an "untempered eloquence" "large in manifold anathemas." The ordering of the speaker's remarks is cautious also; he proceeds from outside inward, from inferences made from the wanderer's appearance in stanza one, to possible literary-scriptural analogies in stanza two, through the evidence provided by conversation in stanzas four and five, and finally to an imaginative assumption about the character of the wanderer based on an understanding of Jewish history.

"Before I pondered," and "Before there was an hour for me," are telling clauses beginning stanzas five and six: Robinson has his speaker emphasize that certain crucial impressions about the wanderer *assailed* the speaker; the speaker does not go in search of them, nor does he confidently assert those interpretations which suit his emotional needs, as James recommends in "The Will to Believe." Instead, Robinson has his speaker *test* certain Old Testament analogues against the character of the Jew, and then assure himself that, though they may be similar (each of the figures named—Noah, Nathan, Abimelech, Lamech, and Melchizedek—is an iconoclast, each a representative of a truer faith than that embraced by his society), the answer to the question of the Jew's identity lies not in fact in the analogies brought to bear, nor in the experience or perspective of the speaker-observer, but in the wanderer's own "endless eyes."

The speaker in "The Wandering Jew" employs a curiously indirect quality of statement in certain lines which conveys Robinson's belief—one very unlike James—that caution and hesitancy become the observer who is attempting to assess a character or a situation. The lines about "mirages" and "new lions," quoted above, suggest by their style that the

process of knowing for Robinson is oddly unpredictable, a "dawning," which is to say, a matter of revelation that one cannot always control. James, in "The Will," may well have appeared to the poet to be a simple subjectivist, and unlike the Jamesian idea of a confident faith put forth by each individual consciousness in order to gain the greatest "cash value" out of any specific situation, Robinson charts in these lines a pattern in which mind and situation rub against each other in random ways, striking sparks of awareness which have an irrelevant relation to the needs and desires of the detached speaker-observer. The moments of awareness in Robinson are not the conscious choice of the knower as the poet may well have taken them to be in James; rather, paradox typifies the workings of the consciousness in its attempt to know: "gloom" becomes, unexpectedly, a "daylight," and, at best, one can perceive "mirages" by an "elusive light." The use of the lion emblem rather than a naming of specific historical figures gives the further sense that what one comes to know retains always a slippery quality, is always open to reinterpretation. Robinson seems to insist that the only knowing one can trust is knowing which refuses to be too sure of itself. Robinson intentionally allows his speaker to question, by his manner of telling, even as he asserts, certain attitudes about the character at issue.

Although James and Robinson are often in agreement about the significance of the relation between impressions and the selectivity of attention, the poet appears, in his approving insistence on the speaker's consultation between inward and outward observation, to be condemning a potential for—as he sees it—a dangerous subjectivism in the Jamesian view of the perceptual process as it is outlined in "The Will to Believe." Robinson dismisses "The Will" in his letter to Smith as unwise, and this fact coupled with his relentless insistence on a balance between visible evidence and the inner world of imagination and inference suggest Robinson's criticism of what he may have taken to be an over-simplified philosophy of positive thinking, the Jamesian "leap of faith." Robinson makes the wanderer of his poem appear obsessive, an incipient paranoid, one who suffers from the pathetic results of imposing his emotional preoccupations upon the perceptual process. Because of his limited reading of James, the poet fails to grasp the complex assumptions which undergird James's theories in "The Will." To Robinson, James seems too trusting in the confident assertion of faith which he recommends for all

judgments on controversial issues like religious or moral questions, or those pertaining to personal relations.

For James, "faith based on desire is certainly a lawful and possibly an indispensable thing" (*Pragmatism* 209). Ultimately, however, Robinson's emphasis on the value of a cautious, detached process of acquiring knowledge presupposes what is fundamentally a less relativist view than James holds in his rejection of absolutes, in his insistence on a concern for the practical consequences of a judgment, and in his optimistic pluralism. For Robinson, there is somewhere a final truth which it is the perceiver's job to approximate in his own mind. That an approximation is the most that can be attained does not prevent Robinson from valuing the speaker's hesitancy over the wanderer's stubborn assertiveness.

Yet despite the obvious contrasts between Robinson's approving treatment of his speaker in "The Wandering Jew" and the ideas of James's "The Will to Believe," it is clear that James is neither simple nor a subjectivist, as Robinson's implicit poetic criticism of his essay seems to suggest. Though Robinson, in "The Man Against the Sky," clearly values the voluntarist position much as James himself does, we must ask why in a poem like "The Wandering Jew" he is so much less willing than is James to pursue the confident and optimistic line of thinking which can develop from a voluntarist point of departure.

Jamesian voluntarism and the application of the pragmatic method—to which he alludes in "The Will to Believe"—contribute substantially to the individual's sense of his or her power to act by making each perceptual act a part of the process of the creation of "truth" as James defines it. Although these ideas are present in the form of assumptions even in James's relatively early work, the philosopher develops them with completeness only much later in his career. Even though Robinson did not know James's late essay "A World of Pure Experience," its fuller realization of James's understanding of the process of knowing helps to clarify the contrasts we find between James's and Robinson's assumptions.

For James, knower and known are indivisible; experience is made up of transitions which are as real as what James calls "external relations." In its "pure" state, experience is not divided into mind and matter, but is made up only of inchoate sensations of transition. Only when the mind sorts experience into concepts does the mind-matter division become

apparent. Therefore "thought-paths" are continuous with external reality, and the individual consciousness is in no way cut off from contributing to the very shaping of reality (*Radical Empiricism* 74-75, 79). This kind of thinking is essentially alien to Robinson, who operates, as we have seen in "The Wandering Jew," with the inflexible Cartesian categories of mind and matter.[4] For Robinson, inner and outer worlds are not necessarily connected to each other simply because they belong to one individual's experience. Inevitably, his recombining of Jamesian voluntarism with a more traditional picture of a bifurcated world leaves him suspicious of the multiplicity of beliefs which individuals may choose to apply to their experience. Beliefs like those of the wanderer are made to seem obsessive in Robinson; clearly they are not, for the poet, fruitful ideas such as James insists result from the application of the pragmatic method. James might see the wanderer as an eccentric or isolated champion of Israel, or even regard the old man as finding his own salvation in choosing the role of outraged defender of his people. But for Robinson, voluntarism is not an idea which necessarily connects the individual consciousness with its own greatest sources of confidence and power.

We commonly acknowledge the difficulty of "knowing" another mind, the cause and effect relationships which control the decisions of another consciousness. But we do often feel better able to draw appropriate conclusions from someone else's story, to discover the "lesson" in a series of events taking place in time. Yet in Robinson's "Eros Turannos," a poem much more concerned with inward matters, with the way the mind processes data rather than, as in the "Wandering Jew," with the way the mind gathers information, the inclusion of the temporal dimension seems unexpectedly to obscure rather than to clarify matters. We expect additional data because both the story in the poem and the narrator's analysis of the story are unfolding over a considerable period of time. But we are continually disappointed. The indirection of the narrator's style of speech suggests that Robinson has his speaker develop his uncertain understanding of the situation in the poem only from remote observation, perhaps from gossip, largely from subtle inference. The scant details we are sure of seem far more ambiguous in their implications than those connected with the character of the wanderer, who at least provided the inquiring mind of the speaker with a single focus relatively fixed in time and spatially close by.

"Eros Turannos," in which considerably greater emotional pressure is brought to bear on the process of making judgments than was the case in a poem like "The Wandering Jew," is a story about physical passion and an ill-fated marriage. The voyeuristic male observer's brooding attention to the story of a woman of means and social standing who marries and then inexplicably withdraws into reclusion suggests that he finds in her passive withdrawal a version of his own condition, detached as it is from actual experience. Indeed, even though the poet accepts the Jamesian model of the perceptual process, Robinson uses both the central figure of the woman and the speaker, engaged as he is in self-discovery, to convey his scepticism about the practical efficacy of the perceptual process as James outlines it.

Still, the brief verse narrative shows Robinson in many substantial respects parallelling James's theories about the operation of the consciousness. The narrator makes it clear in stanza two that the woman chooses her husband out of a "blurring" of rational judgment by a combination of love and pride. Her attention, as James says, is selective; only the data which assuage her own anxieties make an impact on her consciousness:

> And all her doubts of what he says
> Are dimmed with what she knows of days— (127)

The speaker also makes use of the relation between impressions, the "fringe"; he imagines the man's predatory interest in the woman's caste and breeding in terms of her physical setting and her place of origin:

> A sense of ocean and old trees
> Envelops and allures him. (127)

Something of his superficiality is suggested also; his susceptibility to atmosphere seems here to imply a certain fickleness. And, in an almost perverse echo of James, in the last two stanzas, Robinson has his narrator insist on the separateness of each stream of consciousness. It makes little difference, he insists, how we speculate, since each individual pursues his own path, apparently, for the poet—and here Robinson goes further than James—without a capacity to be influenced by the perceptions of observers.

Further, Robinson has his narrator in "Eros Turannos" put into practice James's recommendations in "The Will to Believe": the speaker attempts to attribute to the story which he observes and retells a significance that will answer to his own emotional requirements. Indeed, the quality of the speaker's story as a whole, in stanzas one through four, suggests a selection of narrative material based almost entirely on a need for emotional gratification, even of a borrowed kind. The speaker does not seem to select details on the principle of truth telling, as if the story were a "case," or on the principle of moral making. Rather—and it is unclear whether James would approve this use of the voluntarist principle—the speaker seems to allow the story to take whatever course will provide him with the most intense vicarious experience.

That the shape, direction, and duration of the story is controlled by the speaker's own needs rather than by any external principle, analytic or aesthetic, is strongly suggested by the story's stanza-to-stanza development. The speaker begins, plausibly enough, by suggesting a rational motive, fear of a lonely old age, for the woman's choice of a man she doesn't trust. The second stanza introduces the emotional complications, love and pride, which further deter the operation of common sense. But in the third stanza, the speaker moves yet farther inward into the minds of both man and woman to draw in yet more remote kinds of influences on the situation, those cultural, like "Tradition," and social, like the venerability conferred by "old trees." In the fourth stanza, the speaker takes yet another step into the speculative realm and imagines the woman's present outlook, her thoughts and feelings after having made her mistake. The percussive rhythms and the unusual number of four- and five-syllable words in this stanza seem to echo the "reverberation" and "vibration" of her humiliation and pain as the speaker brings his story into the present moment.

Each stanza appears to represent a deepening and widening of the speaker's vision, and each one also marks an increasing loss of any distance or "veil" between the speaker and the mind about which he speculates. The fourth stanza constitutes a kind of climactic, throbbing moment of almost absolute identification between speaker and woman; at this moment, the speaker and the woman about whom he speculates seem to achieve a union which is not unlike the passionate one she seeks with the man of the story. And, just as this oneness of condition is

achieved, the speaker must report the "falling leaf" and the death of passion: the intense poetry of the "pounding wave" in stanza four disintegrates immediately into the flat, prosaic ironies of stanza five. If the narrator of "The Wandering Jew" provides a vivid contrast to his title character, the speaker of "Eros Turannos" stands as a kind of less dignified parallel to the woman about whom he writes. Just as she seeks to avoid the sterility of old age, so her narrator attempts vicariously, through intense speculation about others, to vivify his own emotional landscape.

Though Robinson has his speaker follow out James's recommendations for dependence on the emotions in the making of judgments about experience, the drama of the speaker's experience in telling his story clearly implies Robinson's sense of the doubtful value of the conclusions reached by such perceptual methods as those Jamesian ones used by both woman and narrator. These methods do not, for Robinson, necessarily connect the mind to external circumstances at all, and, as we have already seen, Robinson's denial of a continuity between mind and matter leaves him continually suspicious of James's voluntarist position as he interprets it. In "Eros Turannos," the speaker appears to use his subject merely as a point of departure for the gratification of what finally amount to autoerotic impulses. The poet underscores this point about the lack of connection between the mind's selection of its material, its inferences about that material, and the external situation upon which it claims to comment, in the final two stanzas of the poem.

> We tell you, tapping on our brows,
> The story as it should be,—
> As if the story of a house
> Were told or ever could be;
> We'll have no kindly veil between
> Her visions and those we have seen,—
> As if we guessed what hers have been,
> Or what they are or would be.
>
> Meanwhile we do no harm; for they
> That with a god have striven,
> Not hearing much of what we say,
> Take what the god has given;
> Though like waves breaking it may be,

Or like a changed familiar tree,
Or like a stairway to the sea
Where down the blind are driven. (128)

Not only is a speculative narrator presumptuous, as the speaker says in the next to the last stanza, ironizing his own collapsed attempt at inferential thinking, but such a narrator is, most damning of all, simply superfluous, even impotent, in his inability to influence or change his world. In the last stanza, the speaker states overtly that such story-making as he has engaged in is likely to affect no one, since each consciousness is equally caught up inside itself, committed to its own vision of experience and the consequences of that vision, no matter how tragic they may be.

For Robinson, the indirect and inferential habits of the consciousness, which are so like the theories expounded by James in his *Principles*, offer the individual no such comfortable benefits as the philosopher would claim. In "The Will to Believe," James takes as an example the problem of establishing whether one is "liked" by another (*Pragmatism* 208). Having established that passion is inseparable from the perceptual process, James proceeds, insisting that the assumption of liking on the other side will probably make the phenomenon occur. While James insists on the positive result, "Eros Turannos" shows Robinson following out the devastating conclusion of a situation in which such an assumption has been falsely made. While James easily dismisses fear of mistakes by arguing that no successes would ever come to pass without risks, the poet shows his consciousness of the tremendous personal cost which accompanies such risks. The subject of "Eros Turannos" is sexual passion, and for Robinson, the infusion of strong emotion into the decision-making process dooms it from the start. Even as it appears to fill a void in the lives of woman and speaker, passion tends to blind them to vital information. Each one is finally left empty and isolate, she in her small-town reclusion, and he in an emotional and intellectual vacuum.

While in "The Wandering Jew," Robinson has the wanderer perceive all of his experience in the gloom of his unchecked bitterness, the poet still allows the possibility of a kind of ongoing rapport between the speaker and the old man. But in "Eros Turannos," the comparatively greater intensity of sexual passion seems to circumscribe the process of perception to such an extent that it reduces severely both the possibility

of a genuine interchange with another person, as well as the possibility of knowing very much beyond the meanings imposed on experience by the individual consciousness. That both poet and philosopher can perceive so fully the significance of the emotions in the process of making judgments, and yet arrive at such remarkably different assessments of that significance points to a contrast in the underlying assumptions of the two. We have seen that Robinson's ideas about mind in relation to the space beyond it are essentially traditional and Cartesian; the two realms are not continuous as they are for the relativist James. "Eros Turannos" serves to emphasize that Robinson is equally unable to adopt James's relativistic assumptions about the inconclusiveness and the perpetual extension through time of the perceptual process. For the poet, the elongation of the perceptual process—the way the mind is offered data for speculation over a period of years—and the inconclusiveness of such data ultimately frustrate both narrator and poet. In Robinson's view, the inability to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion appears to drive the perceiving consciousness back inside the twists and turns of its own interior.

For James, experience and the perceptual process are ongoing. As he says in "A World of Pure Experience," a non-physical terminal point like another person's anger can never be "known" as an object can be (*Radical Empiricism* 64, 73-74). James speaks of a "more that continuously develops," of knowing the "fringes" of such a terminal point. But for James, the ongoing nature of the perceptual process does not separate the consciousness from reality (pure experience is real), nor from truth, which James defines as a belief which frees the individual to act in ways beneficial to the particular situation in which he finds himself. Jamesian definitions of truth and reality allow these terms a protean quality which is finally alien to Robinson.

Robinson shows in "Man Against the Sky" not only that mind must seek after that which is external to it—the two are not inseparable—but that there is indeed a final answer which, in order to be valuable, must originate outside the mind which perceives it. The individuals whose attitudes make up "Man Against the Sky" are engaged only in the process of evolving a system of belief from a combination of temperament and early experience. Although Robinson extends considerable tolerance to the host of consciousnesses seeking psychic survival by espousing a plurality of beliefs, finally the poet cannot grant these attitudes his

approval and authority; he can only point to a static "orient Word." This final meaning, always shrouded in mystery, is beyond the reach of those who seek after it; it is a fixed point against which the metaphysical seekers who people the poem aim themselves fruitlessly. For James, the constant transitions of experience do not undercut the individual's attainment of perceptual authority. However, even though the poet sees the perceptual act as a process, the inconclusive nature of that process devitalizes it in Robinson's eyes. When the "truth" of the situation in "Eros Turannos" seems continually to evade narrator, poet, and reader, Robinson gives up in despair. Without a firm and identifiable terminal point, the process is futile in his eyes.

In "Luke Havergal," a poem which moves inward from a consideration of mind in relation to the external world to a study of the nature of mind in itself, Robinson shows the devastating results of what may be the most intense form of emotional experience, the pain of bereavement. The effect of grief on perception is the principal topic of the 1897 poem in which Luke listens to a voice from within as it develops a compelling argument for suicide. The intensity of feeling and the obscure logic of the poem's development appear to be generated in part by the dramatic monologue form of the poem in which Luke's inner self addresses an outer or volitional part of the self. All of the details and dialogue of the poem are the products of the mind; no data from without seem to penetrate Luke's closed world. If Robinson has established in "The Wandering Jew" and "Eros Turannos" how sharp a division exists between the mind and the world beyond, he now questions the degree to which we can in fact know even our own interior world of the consciousness.

Robinson begins his psychological study in the poem with postulates about the operation of the consciousness which echo James vividly. That the poet sees the mind's tendencies as moving in "Luke Havergal" towards a self-destructive goal, a goal which would be anathema to the philosopher, does not negate the startling similarities in the points of departure adopted by both Robinson and James. James attributes to the consciousness the capacity to bring a condition into being: "The interest itself . . . makes experience more than it is made by it" (*Principles* 381). In "Luke," Robinson dramatizes the mind's attempt by its selectivity to will a situation it desires—here, the reunion with the lost beloved—into being; Luke's consciousness in the poem does indeed appear to attend

exclusively to its own grief, to what is already uppermost in its consciousness. His inner voice attempts to rationalize the suicidal impulse growing inevitably out of the situation, and the development of the poem dramatizes the Jamesian maxim that "the only things we commonly see are those which we preperceive" (*Principles* 420).

Similarly, as his own deepest consciousness attempts to persuade Luke the lover that suicide would mean a way of regaining his lost beloved, what James calls the "insularity" of the stream of consciousness becomes apparent. The unusually sumptuous language and imagery, the swinging metre, and the echoing repetitions at the end of each stanza, all suggest a self-involved state of mind, a hallucinatory or hypnotic condition. The speaker's voice, the inner voice of his mind addressing him, seems caught up, transfixed by a fantasy of reunion achieved through death, a fantasy which feeds only on itself, and on the speaker's intense pain.

Yet even as Robinson agrees with James about certain characteristics of perception, the poet uses the voice of Luke's inner self to dramatize how treacherous the mind's ways of knowing render it. Luke becomes his own worst enemy as he falls prey to self-destructive impulses. James sees the insularity of consciousness as remote from a solipsistic position since relations between objects and feelings exist just as feelings and objects themselves do. But the poet sees the mind, as James does not, as so locked inside itself, so much the author and source of its perceptions, that it is capable of transforming suicide into a lovers' rendezvous, death into life. But Robinson makes the speaker of the poem appear both appealing and fraudulent at once; for Robinson, Luke's attempt to metamorphose loss into gain through "trust" is a project based on a delusion, doomed to disappointment and failure, a plan whose ultimate cost would be the loss of life itself. The poet's oblique treatment of the poem's speaker, his dramatization of the sentimental charm combined with grim deception which characterize the voice of Luke's inner self, emphasizes that the essence of the mind's treachery is its insidiousness and its duplicity.

Even as the voice of "Luke Havergal" momentarily attracts by its rather sensuous, even Tennysonian, imagery and detail, by the "crimson" vines, and the leaves which "whisper," by its use of the twilight setting, by its compelling rhythms, and the sentimental alliteration of "w," so also does the voice offer dangerously specious reasoning. It negates, in the second stanza, with an un-Robinsonian certainty, the possibility of a

"dawn in eastern skies," and further asserts, with questionable logic, that death will somehow cancel what the speaker has determined is a nihilist reality, that "The dark will end the dark." And even as the voice of the poem appears merely to offer a "way to where she is" there is also evidence in the poem of polished persuasive tactics.

The poem begins and ends with a repetitive, almost bullying command to perform the act; the speaker visualizes vividly for Luke the positive results of compliance: "But go, and if you trust her she will call." The skilful speaker avoids cluttering the issue by providing only one argument; choosing the single thought, the possibility of life after death, a "dawn," which might deter Luke from the proposed action, he argues it down, playing to Luke's dark frame of mind by suggesting that "hell is more than half of paradise." The speaker's principal technique, however, is that of calculating self-presentation. "Out of a grave I come to tell you this," he repeats, granting himself the authority of a Lazarus. At the same time, since grief has plunged Luke into a state of death in life, the speaker is able to underscore the like nature of their conditions and so add to the impact of his authority. Calculated and factitious as the speaker's argument seems, Robinson emphasizes its dangerous efficacy. Though the first and last stanzas seem largely alike, the use of "there is" (in place of "go to") in the last stanza, and the increased urgency of the voice's insistence that Luke should now ignore the whispers of the leaves, suggest that Luke has moved, during the course of the poem, much closer to compliance with the speaker than he was at the poem's start.

In opposition to James, Robinson shows by the capacity of the speaker's statement both to beguile and to threaten, how dangerously unreliable are the ways of knowing to which the individual consciousness must resort. And the very form of the poem, the dramatic monologue, in which the speaker's comments remain uninterpreted by a second speaker or by the poet, helps Robinson make his point about the trap that the individual consciousness can become; the form of the poem dramatizes the individual's absolute aloneness in the vagaries of the consciousness. In "Luke Havergal," Robinson suggests that Jamesian epistemological principles, far from liberating us to a health-giving leap of faith, are entirely capable of sealing us into a solipsistic world whose drift is toward self-destruction rather than rebirth.

In James's "Pragmatism and Humanism" lecture, the philosopher undertakes to refute a charge similar to the implicit criticism offered by Robinson's work. To the accusation that pragmatic thought conduces to "narrowness," that it is the "tendency" of pragmatism to deny the impulse to take into account "remoter bearings and issues" than those which surround an immediate and specific situation, James answers that empirical testing invalidates such an idea. If two people agree to meet at a given point at a certain time, they are able to carry out their mutually arranged plans. But this is not a proof which clears up all reservations for the poet Robinson.

Robinson suggests in a poem like "Luke Havergal" that the ability to choose our reality, to shape the universe we inhabit is stringently limited; rather than being nonchalant perceivers of a healthy reality which we choose for ourselves, we are as often victims of a self-made world which comes to destroy us. Though James insists that pragmatism embraces both tough- and tender-mindedness, he seems not to acknowledge to Robinson's satisfaction that the much-emphasized benefits of a pluralist definition of reality depend upon the capacity to "foresee" the consequences of one's beliefs and to forecast their benefits, and that these benefits are therefore available only to some individuals, specifically those not under emotional pressure.

Robinson's inability to be satisfied by Jamesian optimism about the relation of the emotions to the perceptual process ultimately points to a difference in underlying definitions of the nature of mind. When, as James says, in "A World of Pure Experience," thought-paths lead to "fancies" rather than to a terminal point in external reality, belief becomes ultimately a matter of choice. James simply asserts that in such a situation the individual will apply the pragmatic method and select the belief with the greatest "cash-value." James is confident that the consciousness will forecast potential benefits with considerable accuracy primarily because of his "teleological" definition of mind (*Radical Empiricism* 64, 73-74). James, in *Talks to Teachers on Psychology* (1899), clarifies his sense of the individual's ability to forecast the consequences of alternative perceptions. The human mind is constituted by the process of evolution in such a way that it will censure its own convictions so as to ensure survival. For James, "man, whatever else he may be, is primarily a practical being, whose mind is given him to aid in adapting himself to

this world's life" (*Talks to Teachers* 25). Innocent of this element in James's thought, Robinson recombines James's epistemological voluntarism with a much more conventional view: he intuitively operates with what James describes as classical philosophy's definition of mind as essentially reactive, as detached and rational, rather than engaged and protective.

Such a difference in assumptions clearly implies that for Robinson, the individual consciousness is not compelled from within to apply the pragmatic method in order to choose a healthy alternative. The mind is just as likely to choose a suicidal belief, as Luke does, out of a brooding and unrealistic desire to re-create a lost era. For Robinson, awareness of the voluntarist position means that in a poem like "Man Against the Sky," he emphasizes the variety and arbitrariness of the many individual perspectives on final questions represented in the poem, but he does not indicate that the range of choice carries with it the capacity to ensure health or survival. On the contrary, the many figures who appear for ten lines and then evaporate seem fated to meet as unpromising a destiny as Luke Havergal does.

Despite the remarkable overlaps between poet and philosopher on subjects like the operation of the perceptual faculties of the mind, these connections explain only part of the relationship between James and Robinson. Clearly, while James counts the contribution of emotional need as "indispensable" in the process of making judgments, Robinson sees emotional pressure as a dangerous deterrent to the making of healthy decisions based on one's perception of experience. For the poet, the greater the emotional pressure brought to bear on the individual consciousness, the more likely the mind is to retreat within itself, into a subjective and even solipsistic state which ultimately leads to isolation from others, alienation from self, and even the impulse to self-destruction.

Less obvious, however, are the underlying causes for these differences between Robinson and James. As we have seen, Robinson—as James does not—couples his acceptance of voluntarism and the role of the emotions in perception with older Cartesian and classical assumptions about the relation of mind to the external world and about the nature of mind itself. As the poet, pursuing various aspects of the issue of perception, moves from his consideration of mind in its relation to matter inward, in "Luke Havergal," to a study of mind in itself, we become

increasingly aware that for the poet, the more likely we are to think we can know our world, the less likely we are to know even our own minds. Similarly, as Robinson moves closer to the heart of the matter, to his theory of the nature of mind, the underlying orthodoxy of his anti-relativist assumptions seems to intensify. As we might expect, his grim conclusions show a correspondingly larger contrast to James's optimistic and highly relativist ones. Ultimately, the Robinsonian view of the mind as puzzle-like, deceptive, and when troubled, to retire into a cocoon of its own making, underlies all of the poet's reasons for seeing the individual consciousness as likely to turn toward darkness rather than toward light.

NOTES

1. I am indebted to Professor Daniel B. Shea whose unpublished manuscript, "William James, Henry James and *The Ambassadors*" (Washington U, St. Louis), suggested early ways of approach in the development of the present discussion.
2. For a full and accessible overview of James's work, see the works by Brennan and Reck. In addition to James's books and essays, the philosopher's letters, collected by Ralph Barton Perry, often provide enlightening restatements of some of James's more elusive theories.
3. James's famous analogy helps to clarify his voluntarist convictions. Each individual is free to walk down the corridor of a large hotel. He may open any door he likes; in one may be a man praying while in the next may be a man writing an argument in support of atheism. His choice of a door, or a belief, should be based on his sense of the practical value to be gained from adopting such a belief.
4. If Robinson assumed that James also found mind and matter separate, he is not guilty of philosophical impercipience for the poet had only read in the *Principles* and "The Will." Brennan points out (59-60) that in the *Principles* James does speak—contrary to his position in the rest of his work—of mind and matter as if they were fixed categories in opposition to each other. Robinson's selective reading—as well as James's lack of consistent logic—cause the poet to fail to come to terms with a fundamental assumption underlying the philosopher's canon.

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