

"ONE WORD AFTER ANOTHER"

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“ONE WORD AFTER ANOTHER”

IF I COULD take you back a quarter of a century to New York City on a gray and dusky evening in November, and introduce you unobserved into a gathering of friends around a candle-lighted table, you might see—as I saw first—the silent, downcast face of Edwin Arlington Robinson, where he sat listening to a wordy red-faced importation from Old England declaiming on good diction and the art of reading poetry; until he looked at Robinson and checked himself, demanding, “How should one read American poetry aloud?” The face lifted and looked back at him, almost too quietly, and then came the answer—which is the title for tonight: “One word after another.” Throughout that evening Robinson contritely said not another word, although there were about him heated arguments by poets, volatile and voluble; and I had known him for a half-year before I learned that he had meant no more than what he said—and certainly no less. The social consequence of its laconic utterance had incommoded him internally—a fate for him too frequent. The pithy understatements were never malicious, only salty New England, down-east common sense.

Common sense in common speech is scarcely to be found as the clear vision and consistent practice of a

poet, except perhaps Robinson himself, and Crabbe, whom he respected. Yet they had won for him about that time the highest honors and, what no New Englander can quite forget, financial independence. Perhaps these circumstances made it possible for him to gather half-a-dozen of us youngsters who wrote poems, around him who was poet. Perhaps it was in happy recollection of his teens when his neighbor, Dr. Schumann, had done the same for him, before he left the place that he called Tilbury Town. Be that as it may, there was no stile by which he could at will climb over the gray stone wall that fenced him from the world—except in poetry. We knew him as a man, and knew him well; and yet I do not think on that account we knew of him one jot or tittle that was relevant to the real man which is not public property. There may be poets of whom this is not true, men who had lives too rich for words; but I am sure in his case that no matter what had mattered to that man he would have found a way to say it—or to sing it. It is no boast to say I knew that man.

Perfunctorily, we begin with a biography as brief as his life was factually thin—remembering his own reproving voice raised angrily against unseemly inquest into Verlaine's putrescence:

Why do you dig like long clawed scavengers
To touch the covered corpse of him who fled
The uplands for the fens, and rioted
Like a sick satyr with doom's worshippers?
Come!—let the dead flesh be dead
And let the worms be its biographers

which ends with all he thought worth saving:

"ONE WORD AFTER ANOTHER"

. . . . Nothing less
Than Hell's fulfillment of the End of Things
Can blot the star that shines on Paris now.

Robinson was the unwanted youngest son of an old New England banker in a small town. His very name was drawn by luck from a hat when he was already a six-month denizen of this bleak world. From childhood, a self-intended poet, he had the respect paid by a thrifty community to dabblers in words. His schooling was inadequate. His family went to pieces on his father's death—one brother being a financial failure, the other a morphine addict. His mother finally died, but before this the burden of the family had fallen upon him. Without training or financial backing, he had attempted Harvard, where he could make neither a fair living nor a good scholastic record. But he did make friends: to them he owed greatly what little riches—humanly speaking—ever came his way, and the "slim pickings" financially that tided him over until his poetry finally took hold. The rest of his early and much of his later history is of a struggle to get publication. After his first success he proposed to the only girl he seems ever to have really loved, and did it so unexpectedly that nothing came of it except his famous attempt to console her for so upsetting a scene. His misery and the silence that confounded him could only be broken down by quantities of alcohol so great that they would have intoxicated an Ajax. Poverty, inebriety and accompanying inability to produce or to publish drove him to a job in subway construction—as timekeeper—of which in after years he had almost no memory. Then, thanks to the "tyrant who used the White House as a rostrum from which to lord it over taste"—

I mean the first Roosevelt—he received a sinecure which he held long enough to get started again. After that came "Success"—and the recluse remained the recluse in public instead of in private. All this and more still less to the point is to be found in a flat biography by Hagedorn—who should have known better.

I say "should" advisedly, for Hagedorn knew Robinson among his friends, and, incredibly, Robinson was gifted in the art of friendship. Hopelessly sane, a touch-me-not and semi-mute, he could remain unpersuaded and unconvinced and dryly humorous until the best of souls, male and female alike, came around to his way of seeing things or of understanding and respecting them. The facts are, in a sense, there in that biography, but not in any way to suggest their crucial nature. Robinson's friends were his first audience; he had listened the hearts out of them; he held those hearts as tenderly as his own desired to be held. It was to them he spoke, always with humor, always with simple words; and occasionally in sudden outbursts of passion so intellectualized that his language, like his face, seemed rather what one would expect of a scientist or philosopher. Had he spoken more or listened less he would not have known so well what to put between quotation marks—the place where he is at his best.

Robinson never just listened; his brain was a busy place; between the few words he said was so much thinking that one had to hurry to keep up with it or the next utterance seemed oracular. His silences were his busiest times; they were not engendered by any sort of timidity, or uncomfortable in a sense of insecurity: they were just thinking.

He was, in fact, more sure of himself than any man of

his age has a right to be—unless he be a Robinson. From childhood he had learned to write one word after another. He was a craftsman; a good craftsman, as he well knew—and his craft was poetry. Others might—did—doubt his ability—never Robinson. Had he, the upright, God-fearing New Englander, had any doubt of it—as he always doubted his ability to make money—he would never have accepted the financial help from his many friends, of whom many could ill afford it. It is therefore to his craft that one must look for all the clues that make him understandable.

Outside his poetry there are two sources of sidelights on the man which might be publicized with no disparagement to him. He wrote, long and hard, at plays—two of which have seen the light of day in print. They do not lack lines worth knowing and quoting, although they may have been most execrable theater. He wrote letters—many letters—very human and expressive, of which only a small sample is in the public domain. Two strange figures have the rest under lock and key. One is a heavy-set dowager in Pennsylvania; and the other, that graceful gazelle poet, Ridgely Torrence, who grew up into an old maid and guards his treasure as though it contained at least a secret and sacred amour. The *Selected Letters*, published by Macmillan, has an introduction by this same Torrence: it makes Robinson look secretive. This is what we of the psychiatric cloth call Projection. Fortunately the published letters happen to contain critical remarks concerning other authors which, with his poems concerning many more, help to disclose what Robinson considered important to Poetry.

In one letter we find him describing John Donne as

dogmatic and ancient. To quote: "—particularly, a poet, who must be, if he is to be anything, an interpreter of life—Donne, looking at him from the larger point of view, doesn't seem to me to interpret much more than a sort of half-mystical sexual uneasiness and a rather uninteresting religious enthusiasm, which seems to have been quite the thing in those days for a fellow who raised the devil for thirty-five years and so worked up an appetite for symbols." That letter goes on into a point in Spencer's philosophy, but in the next he is back at style—Spencer's style—which he admits is sincere and "intends to be dignified, while James's is forever prostituting itself to contemporary slang and slipshod affectations—to strike a popular chord and conceal arrogance." So these letters continue with points concerning Santayana, Kipling, Brontë, Poe, and who not, to the end of his days when we find him agreeing with Swinburne half-heartedly that the Egoist is "not the language of God and it cannot live." The letters bespeak the craftsman ever mindful of the craft—unhesitating in forming a crisp opinion.

Unlike his letters, his poems were intended for posterity, and among them are several of importance on this score. The first, to Zola, bespeaks the importance Robinson attached to seeing life and man as they are, and conveying them sincerely.

Because he puts the compromising chart
Of hell before your eyes, you are afraid;
Because he counts the price that you have paid
For innocence, and counts it from the start,
You loathe him. But he sees the human heart
Of God meanwhile, and in His hand has weighed

“ ONE WORD AFTER ANOTHER ”

Your squeamish and emasculate crusade
Against the grim dominion of his art.
Never until we conquer the uncouth
Connivings of our shamed indifference
(We call it Christian faith) are we to scan
The racked and shrieking hideousness of Truth,
To find, in hate's polluted self-defense
Throbbing, the pulse, the divine heart of man.

Apparently, for Robinson, Zola wrote God's language—
and it need not die!

George Crabbe cannot even be banished. The sonnet
to him which begins

Give him the darkest inch your shelf allows,
Hide him in lonely garrets, if you will,

ends with the sextet,

Whether or not we read him, we can feel
From time to time the vigor of his name
Against us like a finger for the shame
And emptiness of what our souls reveal
In books that are as altars where we kneel
To consecrate the flicker, not the flame.

No European—not even a dour Scot—is as demanding
as Robinson that one's grip on the hard facts should
never loosen. But for all this overdose of conscience, he
remained humorous. He had no "crust of overdone divinity"—nor any patience for it. Life never made him bitter
—only insistent on seeing things as they are.

Yet his sympathy, and he had reasons, and his taste,
make him in several unexpected ways akin to Thomas
Hood, of whom he wrote:

The man who cloaked his bitterness within
This winding-sheet of puns and pleasantries,

" ONE WORD AFTER ANOTHER "

God never gave to look with common eyes
Upon a world of anguish and of sin:
His brother was the branded man of Lynn;
And there are woven with his jollities
The nameless and eternal tragedies
That render hope and hopelessness akin.

We laugh, and crown him; but anon we feel
A still chord sorrow-swept,—a weird unrest;
And thin dim shadows home to midnight steal,
As if the very ghost of mirth were dead—
As if the joys of time to dreams had fled,
Or sailed away with Ines to the West.

Even these few sonnets are enough to convey the high seriousness, the conscientious craftsmanship and the pervasive humor of a thinking author—the only American poet who was avowedly a poet and nothing else from youth to death.

Let me return, therefore, to certain of his poems that convey what was the real importance of some of the few events of his uneventful life.

He was born December 22, 1869, in Head Tide, Maine—New England.

Here where the wind is always north-north-east
And children learn to walk on frozen toes,
Wonder begets an envy of all those
Who boil *elsewhere* with such a lyric yeast
Of love that you will hear them at a feast
Where demons would appeal for some repose,
Still clamoring where the chalice overflows
And crying wildest who have drunk the least.

Passion is *here* a soilure of the wits,
We're told, and Love a cross for them to bear;

"ONE WORD AFTER ANOTHER"

Joy shivers in the corner where she knits
And Conscience always has the rocking-chair,
Cheerful as when she tortured into fits
The first cat that was ever killed by Care.

The fate of an unwanted child—almost too deep a wound to find a tongue—he managed to express, but only circuitously, in a poem too painful to be readily understood, "Luke Havergal," containing the somber lines so central to Robinson and to his vocation:

. . . . 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—

And it produced a yearning for friendship, which reappears in a hundred lonely lines—among them the loneliest,

. . . . He sought a friend—and found the stars.

The response to the disrespect that thrifty neighbors had for a youngster with no trade but words came out in reverse: substitute "they," "their," and "them" for "I," "mine," and "me" in the following:

There is a drear and lonely tract of hell
From all the common gloom removed afar:
A flat, sad land it is, where shadows are,
Whose lorn estate my verse may never tell.
I walked among them and I knew them well:
Men I had slandered on life's little star
For churls and sluggards; and I knew the scar
Upon their brows of woe ineffable.
But as I went majestic on my way,
Into the dark they vanished, one by one,

"ONE WORD AFTER ANOTHER"

Till, with a shaft of God's eternal day,
The dream of all my glory was undone,—
And, with a fool's importunate dismay,
I heard the dead men singing in the sun.

One of his brothers, a financial failure, the other, a
dope addict. Remember the line,

. . . . His brother was the branded man of Lynn. . . .

Change it to Gardiner or Tilbury Town.

That midnight to which thin dim shadows steal,
haunted by ghosts, became increasingly Robinson's
world. To face it he formulated his creed:

I cannot find my way: there is no star
In all the shrouded heavens anywhere;
And there is not a whisper in the air
Of any living voice but one so far
That I can hear it only as a bar
Of lost, imperial music, played when fair
And angel fingers wove, and unaware,
Dead leaves to garland where no roses are.

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

This is scarcely a religion.

But a religion he did formulate for himself on the basis
of friendship, and the insistence upon knowing things
for what they are. The darkness which surrounded
Robinson was for him life; to pierce it one must look
carefully; through it one might discern true friends as he

had discerned them at Harvard. All this even Robinson could not squeeze into a single sonnet.

Just as I wonder at the twofold screen
Of twisted innocence that you would plait
For eyes that uncourageously await
The coming of a kingdom that has been,
So do I wonder what God's love can mean
To you that all so strangely estimate
The purpose and the consequent estate
Of one short shuddering step to the Unseen.

No, I have not your backward faith to shrink
Lone-faring from the doorway of God's home
To find Him in the names of buried men;
Nor your ingenious recreance to think
We cherish, in the life that is to come,
The scattered features of dead friends again.

Never until our souls are strong enough
To plunge into the crater of the Scheme—
Triumphant in the flash there to redeem
Love's handsel and forevermore to slough,
Like cerements at a played-out masque, the rough
And reptile skins of us whereon we set
The stigma of scared years—are we to get
Where atoms and the ages are one stuff.

Nor ever shall we know the cursed waste
Of life in the beneficence divine
Of starlight and of sunlight and soul-shine
That we have squandered in sin's frail distress,
Till we have drunk, and trembled at the taste,
The mead of Thought's prophetic endlessness.

One can, of course, go into greater detail or continue relating poems to history: for example, his problem with

liquor to a dozen poems including "The Dark House," "Miniver Cheevy," and the greatest of his manhood's poems, "The Man Who Died Twice." There are also many of his friends recognizable in his works, but in such a strange way—I mean so generated into essence—that they frequently cannot recognize themselves—or rather their pure spirits; or, if they do, feel honored: the most famous instance being the original of Captain Craig, Alfred H. Louis.

But one poem must be cited: not because of the way in which Robinson's life determined it—but it, his life. It is perhaps the finest of his sonnets, and was the one that captivated Roosevelt. It is called "The Clerks."

I did not think that I should find them there
When I came back again; but there they stood,
As in the days they dreamed of when young blood
Was in their cheeks and women called them fair.
Be sure, they met me with an ancient air,—
And yes, there was a shop-worn brotherhood
About them; but the men were just as good,
And just as human as they ever were.

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

With one exception the sonnets quoted were all printed by the time Robinson was twenty-eight. His character, his style, and his fortune were all determined by that time. Among them, if anywhere, one might look for purple passages. He will find none. New England's reticence

and its art of understatement precluded them. The humor is dry—heady rather than hearty. Aside from his dictum, "One word after another," I have heard him quote, on more than one occasion, Samuel Johnson to the effect that "most poetry is defective in inductive and deductive reasoning"—Robinson's was not—and that "the composition of poetry should be of wit"—Robinson's was—and the wit lay in pointing up some fundamental likeness of things superficially unlike. It is therefore not surprising that his audience has always been restricted to those who had the wit and the will to read him thoughtfully.

His influence on contemporary poetry is therefore surprising. One has only to compare him with any other author of the Gay Nineties, or the Mauve Decade, to realize that it was he who started a revolution in vocabulary. The familiar onomatopoeic words, the trite or exotic high-flown phrases, just are not to be found in anything except in jest to make the pompous ludicrous. When one thinks of the author as a revolutionary figure, it raises a strange smile, for he began by writing the most conventionalized of French and English forms: rondeau, rondelle, triolet, villanelle, ballad, sonnet, and even one sestina. Few of these early disciplinary labors seemed to him worth publishing, but these few show him at an early age an accomplished musician—some have said a virtuoso. At no time was he a mere innovator; and, as time went slowly on, blank verse became his principal vehicle for anything too long for sonnets.

This was the birthday of free verse: concerning which he quoted someone, I believe originally Lowes, that it is no more a form of verse than lying in a gutter is a form

of architecture. Not an innovator, but a revolutionary even as Wordsworth was, he sought to express all that mattered to men as they actually lived, even more—to interpret it in common words. Common does not mean slang; he abhorred slang: not because it was vulgar or common. Quite the reverse! It was far too private and particular, too local or provincial, and above all, too ephemeral, too evanescent, for his poems, which were intended for a wider audience and a more remote posterity. Slang could only date and place what was meant to remain universal. For that reason alone it was out of place in poetry. So it comes about that the poet who is at his best between quotation marks writes what appears to be vernacular but is nearer basic English. It would be safe to bet, not merely because we would not live to pay, that for this reason alone his poems will outlive his contemporaries.

He lived through the Spanish and the first World War. They hardly left a trace in his writing, although they did, in fact, furnish the basis for his allegories, most notably, his Arthurian Romances. The wars are gone and the veterans forgotten; and Robinson's poems are taking a new lease on life. He has been dead about ten years and the sales of his Collected Works are increasing.

To produce forms of proved merit, using the most enduring, albeit the most inert, of materials, is shrewd common sense in craftsmanship. These materials frequently do not glitter of themselves and they are recalcitrant. They must be worked in the manner appropriate to them. They cannot be tossed into flamboyant structures whose major uprights burst into flame. Not that that is what one wants of major uprights, but, to

have them do so, often lends a magic flavor to a mixed metaphor and permits a rhyme which not even another poet had expected. To debar oneself of the use of such words is to debunk one's diction, and, inevitably one's ideas. Without humor it becomes as unsupportable as Wordsworth at his worst. That never happened to Robinson. His choice of words permitted only the humor of a disillusioned man; disillusioned, but passionate internally and capable of exquisite suffering, the very kind most poignant in a smile:

If Bunyan had only had the urbanity to smile!

As Robinson weeded the orchids from his vocabulary, he was forced into a use of metaphors, or similes: a sort of universalized symbology built upon the most ubiquitous of things that have for us constant emotional connotation. Try writing poetry in basic English. The halo of feeling deserts the thoughts, and one is forced to devious constructions, to peculiar phrasing, and to combinations of these phrases that pervert the rhythmic come and go of breath. By the time he had published *Captain Craig*, Robinson had so pruned the grapevine of his speech that he was forced to a new complexity of grammar and a certain indirection of expression from which he never again fully escaped. But he had found his symbols.

They were, in fact, if not native at least constitutional with him. Embryonically, they are present in that early volume from which I quoted: To *look*, to *see*, or *not to see*—the *dark* and then or perhaps not even then, the *light*—to *touch* or to *be touched*—by *hands*, kind *hands* or busy *hands* or hostile *hands*—to *speak* and *not to speak*—to *listen*

and to *hear* and *not to hear*—to *wait* for what must *come* or never *comes* or *came* and *needs no waiting*.

The volume *Captain Craig* abounds in them; *The Town Down the River* contains still more; *The Man Against the Sky* is little else. To avoid endless quotation, let us focus attention on seeing or not seeing in the dark or coming light, and sample every poem in the first half of that volume.

- 1) We *look* beyond horizons for the man Flammonde.
- 2) He *shines* anointed—and he *blurs* her vision.
- 3) Your *own* contriving has put the *last light out*.
- 4) And are you *never* to have *eyes* to *see* the world for what it *is*.
- 5) You'll *never see* so much of me as ribbons any more.
- 6) An apple tree that is yet alive *saw* something I suppose.
- 7) Who *sees* enough in his duress.
- 8) He *gleamed* as with an inward *light* that had the Lord's assurance in it—
- 9) To the few *seeing* ones a trifle terrifying—
- 10) He *sees* that he will not be lost—and *waits* and *looks* around him—
- 11) A *light* of other *gleams* he has today—

The rest of the volume is the same story—the same for touching and for listening. And where I have quoted a single instance from a given poem, there are often a score. The last poem of the volume, "The Man Against the Sky," begins: "Between me and the sunset"—and ends: "look sheer down to the dark tideless floods of Nothingness." The next volume is the same set of symbols, ending: "Down to our very noses' end, We see and are invincible." The *Lancelot* begins: "with his hard, cold eyes, where doubts at war with memories

fanned a sad wrath"—and it is these same eyes that see the light and follow it out of the world. The next volume is more of the same—ending with Lazarus, who could tell nothing of his three days dead—"I saw His eyes . . . only His eyes; and they looked long into mine. . . ." *Avon's Harvest* begins with Avon's eyes and ends with Rembrandt: . . . "forget your darkness in the dark. . . ." Even the *Tristram* begins of "Isolt of the white hands, in Brittany"—where she "Could see no longer northward anywhere . . ."—and ends with her ". . . Alone, with her white face and her gray eyes, She watched them there till even her thoughts were white. . . ."

To name the poems in which they increasingly abound would be to catalogue his works; for they increase in frequency and in complexity of interweaving to the last line of the last poem. In fact, King Jasper is haunted with seeing, not seeing, hands, touching and not touching, the dark and then the light, that was such different things as destruction and liberation and the listening and waiting, to end in one—seeing.

All this may sound as though Robinson repeated himself endlessly. On the intellectual side he did the reverse. He was an inveterate thinker, and originator, as well as a keen student of the feelings and thinkings of others. His ideas have greater scope and variety than those of any other American poet known to me: it is merely that he used the same symbols ever more skillfully, and for other purposes.

On the emotional side, the story is different. Prior to and including *Captain Craig*, his short poems are in many moods and his few longer poems have sequences of emo-

tions as various as their themes. From that time on, his short poems are all somber, even when touched off with humor; and his emotional sequence is as fixed as that of any middle-aged commuter. It climbs out of despair into a tense struggle against fate; then, with realization, instead of renunciation, there is a burning anger which consumes itself; and a sense of proportion with dry humor heads back into despair—a sadder, and a wiser and a final despair, a kind of despair that is the core of sublimity. Call it tragedy, or comedy; the catharsis is always the same.

Fixity in the sequence of our emotions is a sad fate, more confining than any crimp the world can cramp upon us from without; but it is an almost universal fate, and is certainly not to be held against an author who lives to middle age.

To despair without yielding to despair is after all the great tradition of English poetry. And Robinson was of that tradition in yet other ways: he conveys how people feel and think in terms of what they do or hear or see; his description of objects conveys their value in terms of their effect upon action rather than their position or shape or color or texture. "Isolt of the white hands" or "of Ireland" is Isolt whose hands touched and healed Tristram; and Ireland is his failure to win her for himself until too late.

But from his humor and his inveterate reticence was born his unique and inimitable art of understatement. It is not that this quaint quality leaves things half-said so that one may build in to them at will. It is usually quite the reverse, as in "He sought a friend and found the stars." It is simply that the analysis has been pushed

past all irrelevancies to the place where there is nothing more to say: from that point forth form must perforce give place to frenzy. We may as well make the most of it in him; for it cannot be passed on into the art of poetry until we have more poets who will get "where atoms and the ages are one stuff." The price is not too great but there are too few who can afford it.

And in the meantime, while we enjoy it we must be a bit on our guard, for Robinson is at times a sly fellow; and while he tells us all we need to know to get the point of his intending, he may, with pleasure, omit what we desire. That he did this with malice aforethought, there can be no doubt. It is fairly explicit in "Old King Cole," whose guests sat there all night "expecting something every minute." What the guests expected was not the guests' business; and many an ardent admirer found Robinson an Old King Cole. This seems to have been particularly tantalizing to women, several of whom pestered him. How far that went—or they ever got—was noised abroad by Isadora Duncan, who publicly lamented her inability to seduce him; "rape" is the right word, although to rape a man may be past the Muse's power, even though she be Terpsichore.

So much for passion as a soilure of the wits. But of the poet's passion—the kind that makes him see most clearly when he feels most deeply—we know all that we have any business to know of Robinson from his poems. In them it found its ultimate expression and that was enough.

There can be no doubt that Robinson had a violent temper. In poem after poem there is a distillate of pure rage. But, in personal contact it rarely found vent. Of the

one explosion I ever witnessed, I was its object and its cause. Half-a-dozen of us had been writing sonnets to command; the specified topic, a fruitless love affair. These were then read aloud by someone else, all listening the first time round. My second quatrain began, "I to the frenzied and immortal few, turned hungry home."

"Stop!" screamed the poet, "No one can ever resolve that sonnet." That was nearly a quarter of a century ago; and it is still unresolved.

There is one other point which must be made concerning Robinson's contribution to poetry. It is the introduction of a device at once so simple and so powerful that I wonder it has not already appeared in the armamentarium of oncoming poets. He tried it early in tentative fashion in "Old King Cole":

But whether from too little thought
Or too much fealty to the bowl
A dim reward was all he got
For sitting up with Old King Cole.

Here Robinson is not content merely to abstract the essential; he gives you the choice between either of two explanations, neither of which is anything but a horn of an apparent dilemma; the choice is ineffectual and enhances by contrast the essential. Actually, that device is used three times in "Old King Cole." In its early form the Or is explicit; and, as it finds almost no other *raison d'être* in his poems, one need only count Or's to see how much he uses it. Later the Or is replaced by a variety of subtle constructions that have the same effect of letting you select which irrelevancy you, or the character, prefer. As time went on the device took on new power. This depended in part on a growing sense

of our not looking to the fundamentals in laying out our acts; and of the consequent preponderance of fate; a notion as far removed from Kismet as sin is from bad luck. Finally, as Robinson began to know himself in essence, his characters begin to realize the ineluctable catastrophe as ineluctable—though they must choose, and as their handiwork—though they would have it otherwise.

Because in living's aftermath he knew
With reasoned certitude the way he went
Was his, and all attempts to circumvent
Inevitably led to the same stew,
He was content to keep the end in view,
Leaving decision in our discontent
Free rein to choose the form of our lament,—
That of our odd dilemma comes nought new.

It would be senseless to labor this point with many quotations, for the device became so aptly suited to his emotional sequence that no great passage is without it. Rather, in the few moments that remain I would, with your permission, quote a passage from his *Lancelot*. I cannot read it with his nasal resonance and clear twang, but merely one word after another—even as he wrote it. He was then the accomplished artist in complete command of his symbols, writing common sense in basic English. His emotional sequence was firmly established. Understatement and dry humor never deserted him; and you will find the vain choices confronting the man who had made fate what it was for him, including the Grail.

Lancelot looked about him, but he saw
No Guinevere. The place where she had sat

Was now an empty chair that might have been
The shadowy throne of an abandoned world,
But for the living fragrance of a kiss
That he remembered, and a living voice
That hovered when he saw that she was gone.
There was too much remembering while he felt
Upon his cheek the warm sound of her words;
There was too much regret; there was too much
Remorse. Regret was there for what had gone,
Remorse for what had come. Yet there was time,
That had not wholly come. There was time enough
Between him and the night—as there were shoals
Enough, no doubt, that in the sea somewhere
Were not yet hidden by the drowning tide.
“So there is here between me and the dark
Some twilight left,” he said. He sighed, and said
Again, “Time, tide, and twilight—and the dark;
And then, for me, the Light. But what for her?
I do not think of anything but life
That I may give to her by going now;
And if I look into her eyes again,
Or feel her breath upon my face again,
God knows if I may give so much as life;
Or if the durance of her loneliness
Would have it for the asking. What am I?
What have I seen that I must leave behind
So much of heaven and earth to burn itself
Away in white and gold, until in time
There shall be no more white and no more gold?
I cannot think of such a time as that;
I cannot—yet I must; for I am he
That shall have hastened it and hurried on
To dissolution all that wonderment—
That envy of all women who have said
She was a child of ice and ivory;

" ONE WORD AFTER ANOTHER "

And of all men, save one. And who is he?
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 for ever,—
Who has no eye for what he will not see,
And will see nothing but what's passing here
In Camelot, which is passing? Why are we here?
What are we doing—kings, queens, Camelots,
And Lancelots? And what is this dim world
That I would leave, and cannot leave tonight
Because a Queen is in it and a King
Has gone away to some place where there's hunting—
Carleon or Carlisle! Who is this Queen

.

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. Yet, here I am,
And all because a king has gone a-hunting
Carleon or Carlisle!"

So Lancelot

Fed with a sullen rancor, which he knew
To be as false as he was to the King,
The passion and the fear that now in him
Were burning like two slow infernal fires
That only flight and exile far away
From Camelot should ever cool again.
"Yet here I am," he said,— "and here I am.

“ ONE WORD AFTER ANOTHER ”

Time, tide, and twilight; and there is no twilight—
And there is not much time. But there's enough
To eat and drink in; and there may be time
For me to frame a jest or two to prove
How merry a man may be who sees the Light.
And I must get me up and go along,
Before the shadows blot out everything,
And leave me stumbling among skeletons.
God, what a rain of ashes falls on him
Who sees the new and cannot leave the old!”

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