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Affirmation of Life and the Prospect of Death in Robinson's "Isaac and Archibald"

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AFFIRMATION OF LIFE AND THE PROSPECT OF DEATH
IN ROBINSON'S "ISAAC AND ARCHIBALD"

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Bryce Elaine Druff

1971

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this essay is, first of all, to determine how, if at all, the title characters of Robinson's "Isaac and Archibald" come to terms with the brute fact of their coming deaths, and, secondly, to speculate about Robinson's attitude toward the two.

Some of the divergent critical opinions about this poem in particular and Robinson's poetry in general are noted, and it is ultimately concluded that judgment of these opinions could best be suspended, since they often include generalizations not warranted by the poem. It is suggested that this poem can best be studied as an entity, without reference to other poems or the consistency of this particular poem with Robinson's assumed philosophical stance.

It is argued that the text presents Isaac and Archibald as admirable characters--that their mutual fascination with each other's mortality (and their own robustness) is a sign both of their harmless competitiveness and their quite justifiable fear of death. Their contest to outlive each other thus points to their humanity without qualifying their wisdom. This wisdom is expressed again and again in their conversations with the boy, and it consists in their ability to face the frightful reality of death without major illusions while they at the same time refuse to despair at the darkness. They consistently affirm the "light," the rightness of living and the rightness of dying.

The boy, who hears it all, can only sense the dignity of the old men. He does, however, as an adult narrator (who has encountered death) approve of the old men ("there's a laughing that has honor in it"), and, it is contended, in the approval of the narrator is reflected the approval of Robinson himself.

"Isaac and Archibald" is generally acknowledged to be one of Robinson's most successful poems. Louis Coxe praises it as "one of the great American poems . . . a masterpiece, a small miracle of tone, control, speaking voice, and self-effacing description."¹ Robert P. Tristram Coffin calls it "one of the greatest poems this century or any has produced."² Medium in length (about four hundred lines), it is initially less awe-inspiring than Robinson's long poems, which often tend to be treacherously philosophical. Perhaps the measured pace of "Isaac and Archibald" is, as Ben Ray Redman suggests, a major reason for its popularity: "Where "Captain Craig" is tight-packed and crowded with ideas, "Isaac and Archibald" is really leisurely; and the result is that many persons find it easy reading. One need only resign oneself to the gentle flow of narrative; no mental gymnastics are called for."³ Yet leisurely though the poem may be, it is far from simple; the subtlety of handling Robinson displays renders any simplistic reading subject to endless qualification.

Of Isaac and Archibald, those endearingly human characters, Charles Cestre has unabashedly stated, "Where can we find more likable old men?"⁴ They are colorful and witty, yet representative in their failings--"the more true to common

mortality for that readiness to detect in the other what they are blind to in themselves."⁵ Their genuineness traces back to the poem's inception: Robinson's experience of having had each of two elderly acquaintances confide in him that the other seemed to be going mad. According to his biographer, Hermann Hagedorn: "He let his imagination play with the casual incident, shift it to the peaceful countryside he knew so well, throw it back twenty years, bathe it in the warmth of midsummer, deepen it, reveal the pathos and character inherent in it, universalize it so that Theocritus would have recognized its validity and some Virgil of the future would smile tenderly at the crotchets of two rustics nearing the end of the road."⁶

The major critical problem of the poem is reflected in the inability of commentators to agree whether those crotchets really do give cause for tender smiling. Coxe suggests that the dual folly of ignoring one's own flaws while exaggerating those of others is one of the major sins a Robinsonian character can commit.⁷ Thus it is not the condition of aging which is to be deplored, but the attempt to deny its existence. Similarly, there is implicit condemnation in Clement Wood's statement that the poem is "a childhood memory of two old men, each of whom, unknown to the other detected the coming breakdown in the other, and failed to study his own mirror"⁸ (my emphasis). Scott Donaldson has commented that Isaac and Archibald live in a world of mutual illusion, enabling each to better face the harsh realities

of life. But, Donaldson suggests, "any such happiness is necessarily hollow and meaningless."⁹ He goes on to note that Isaac and Archibald stand in contrast to the young boy whom they inspire to dreams. Youth is the proper time for such fancies; in mature men it is folly.

One of Robinson's earliest critics, Amy Lowell, offers what is perhaps the most pessimistic reading of the poem. She interprets Isaac's comments about how his friend is changing as a "pathetic attempt to bolster up himself, to prove himself very much alive by showing the failings of Archibald."¹⁰ This tendency, which is shared by Archibald, she deems a serious flaw in the character of each man, concluding that Robinson sees the whole world as bleak and tainted. The young boy must face the realities of a contradictory world, "which contains at once such realities as apples and tired legs, and such vague incomprehensibilities as old age and the reactions of a Summer sun."¹¹ The poem, she suggests, is dominated by a "brooding melancholy which will not be shaken off," a "questioning which finds no answer."¹²

Yet one wonders whether the "melancholy" and the "questioning" Lowell so constantly refers to are actually dominant in the poem. It is all too easy to proceed from the assumption that Robinson is a pessimistic poet and mechanically force every poem into the mold. Radcliffe Squires provides a case in point. He suggests that Robinson's best poems "emerge

from an awareness that life is continuously menaced."¹³ Squires accordingly insists that "Isaac and Archibald," although one of Robinson's "seemingly remote and mundane pastorals," is rather another expression of his dark vision, infused with "a mundane ruthlessness only the more emphatic for being unstated."¹⁴ It strikes me that the most telling word in this conclusion is "unstated."

Largely in reaction to such criticism, it will be my purpose to analyze the poem as an entity, without reference to other poems or the help they supposedly provide in interpreting this one. Irrespective of what Robinson's other poetry might be thought to express, "Isaac and Archibald" is not a pessimistic poem--of that much I am convinced. But while there is no pessimism in Isaac's and Archibald's outlook or example, there is likewise no unbridled optimism. The specter of death and human decay is ever present, and it does, at times, inspire Isaac and Archibald to the same folly which afflicts so many other mortals (witness, for instance, their contest to outlive each other). But if Robinson's optimism is guarded, it is nonetheless real; indeed, its credibility is strengthened by its awareness of reality. In this paper, I shall seek to justify this conclusion by discussing how this affirmation is expressed through Isaac and Archibald, and how reality, with its many unpleasant aspects, impinges on, qualifies, and ultimately reinforces their affirmative vision. Finally, I shall address myself to some of the most forceful pessimistic

interpretations--readings which almost invariably overstress certain features of the poem at the expense of others (a weakness which likely reflects the tendency to be on the lookout for certain things in Robinson's poetry).

Pessimistic readings of the poem are, to a certain extent, understandable. The anecdote itself could certainly allow of much somber philosophizing. Yet even the most pessimistic reader should not lose sight of the fact that Robinson, in the course of modifying the anecdote for poetic use, shifts the focus from the characters' minor folly (their excessive preoccupation with the effects of age in one another) to their tender concern for one another. Isaac does not, after all, walk for hours through the summer heat merely to gloat at an imagined senility in his oldest friend. He is moved to undertake the journey by many impulses, all of which are not necessarily consistent. He feels the simple joy of continued vibrancy in his aging limbs, a vibrancy in which he takes pride, and which leads him to marvel at what is actually a blistering day: he "said the day was glorious,"¹⁵ and he "praised the Lord"(l. 37). The boy, far younger and with nothing to prove, can only marvel in turn, "with a dry gasp of affable despair"(l. 33). Admittedly, Isaac might be spurred to such unnatural enthusiasm by the prospect of finding Archibald somewhat less spry than himself, but it is made clear that there is nothing of malice in this competitiveness. Isaac may invite friendly sarcasm by over-praising

an overly warm day, and he may earn a nose-twitching censure by gratuitously criticizing Archibald's harvest technique, but he never acts out of malice. In the banter over weather and crops, the warmth of their relationship is evident; Isaac at one point lights up with one of his infrequent smiles, "kept in reserve, apparently, / For Archibald alone"(ll. 183-184). Their friendship is, indeed, strengthened by their common predicament. Both have taken note of "the twilight warning of experience, / The singular idea of loneliness"(ll. 62-63). Experience and loneliness--"they have long been mine," Isaac explains, "And they have shown me now for seven years / That Archibald is changing"(ll. 64-66). Certainly there is more than pathetic self-serving in this interest; the experience and loneliness have, in fact, wrought changes in both men. Isaac's comment reflects a genuine solicitude, grounded in experience and the deepest affection as much as in competitiveness (a warming, cantankerous, affectionate competitiveness). Robinson clearly grasps the subtleties of long-standing male friendship--a curious condition which often seems based more on conflict than on anything else, but which binds more closely than relationships which may appear less inclement. It is thus all too easy to miss the closeness of Isaac and Archibald, their competitive, but well-intentioned, interest in one another. This solicitude is, as Redman points out, one of their most appealing qualities.¹⁶ There is not, then, mere gloating in Isaac's confidence to the boy that Archibald is getting senile,

as Lowell would have us accept. There is some, of course; but there is also genuine sincerity in his proclamation that he has "seen so much of good in him"(l. 70). Slightly condescending, perhaps, (male competitiveness again) but indicative of strong compassion and respect. Indeed, the affection is so genuine that much of their communication has become non-verbal and telepathic--a language of winks and nods. Isaac's rare smile, Archibald's yellowed, card-player's grin, and "the process of his Archibald's nose"(l. 358) at having his farming judgment questioned, these are but instances of this special language.

The darkness and brooding in the poem which many critics stress is certainly not evident in Robinson's portrayal of natural setting. As Hoyt Franchere comments: "For all his disdain of tinkling water and red-bellied robins . . . he saw much in nature to utilize as a backdrop for a human situation."¹⁷ Having introduced the two old men, Robinson sets the mood:

. . . the world
 Was wide, and there was gladness everywhere.
 We walked together down the River Road
 With all the warmth and wonder of the land
 Around us, and the wayside flash of leaves(l. 20-24).

Such rapturous detail affects all but the most dusty-eared of critics. Ellsworth Barnard aptly describes the poem as "sun-flooded."¹⁸ Van Wyck Brooks refers to Isaac and Archibald as "ripe and sweet as the cider they kept in their cellars."¹⁹ Barnard notes that there is a conscious avoidance of

Wordsworthian aphorisms concerning the rustic life, that the poem never suggests that rural people are by nature any more virtuous than their urban counterparts. But, he adds, "there is an assurance no less strong than in the work of the great prophet of English Romanticism that wealth and station are irrelevant to the 'good life.'"²⁰ Robinson's stance in "Isaac and Archibald" is that nature is aesthetically pleasing, but also that it "restores the soul no less surely than the green pastures and still waters of the Psalmist."²¹ The judgment can draw much support from the text. Perhaps the most powerful weapon Isaac and Archibald share in facing the darkness is the rustic simplicity of their outlooks--a simplicity which allows them to grapple with complex and cosmic forces without losing sight of the issues (a point I shall soon discuss in more detail).

The whole pattern of natural imagery in the poem certainly seems to run counter to the brooding melancholy that certain critics choose to recognize in it. Amy Lowell attempts to shrug off the apparent inconsistency:

But in spite of the "gladness," the sun,
the warmth, the effect is not hot and gay,
not redolent of the unquestioning delight of
boyhood, but a little dark and chilly with
mist, the mist of questioning, where old
faith has been swept away and no new confidence
has restored the balance. A disinherited
Puritan cannot suddenly turn Pagan and bask
contentedly under a blue sky. And the "new
Paganism" which raises science to the emotional
level of a religion, is achieved with dif-
ficulty by one only lately freed²² from the shack-
les of a hampering superstition.

Yet peruse the poem as we might, it will be difficult to

discover what Lowell is referring to. Perhaps she is actually discussing herself, rather than Robinson. We should at least be suspicious when a twentieth century New Englander of good Puritan stock launches a disquisition on the "new Paganism" and "disinherited Puritans" in a totally inappropriate context. But it would, of course, be irrelevant to pursue this thought. The point to be noted here is that, in this particular poem, Robinson makes no effort to elevate "science to the emotional level of a religion," and that there is no pervading Angst we can conveniently trace back to such an effort, be it successful or not. Robinson's rejection of "the unquestioning delights of boyhood" does not imply that his outlook is pessimistic. On the contrary, "Isaac and Archibald" describes, as we shall see, his relative contentment--a contentment grounded in realism. We encounter, as does the boy, that variety of contentment which can, indeed, question profoundly, which affirms in the face of apparent cosmic opposition. As Isaac and Archibald can affirm life (the "light behind the stars") in the face of death--something their still young companion cannot meaningfully do--so the boy, aware of their foibles, affirms the basic dignity of both men. His is a "laughing that has honor in it"(l. 412); he smiles at their human failings, yet draws comfort from their human warmth.

Robinson is thus not content to brood futilely over the prospect of coming death. It is the quality of the life

lived which concerns him more. And if Isaac and Archibald are perhaps a little foolish in the living it, the impression the poem leaves is that, in Barnard's words, "the sense of brevity adds a tang rather than a taint."²³ Isaac and Archibald, in their humble acceptance of life, in their thankfulness to God for the things he has provided, in their serene faith that "there's a light behind the stars," are true Robinsonian heroes. Archibald expounds Robinson's belief that life should be accepted as it has been lived, without attempting to cloud it with illusions:

Let there be no confusion or distrust
 In you, no snarling of a life half lived,
 Nor any cursing over broken things
 That your complaint has been the ruin of,
 Live to see clearly and the light will come
 To you, and as you need it(11. 298-303).

This is the old man's affirmation. And the boy, more instinctively than comprehendingly, defends the dignity of its exponent. His inability to comprehend fully is indicated by his literal interpretation of Isaac's and Archibald's figurative language; he cannot yet fathom the meaning behind the symbols, and hence he takes their metaphors for death (for instance) at face value only. Symbolic and concrete are still, for him, inseparable: "The flame beyond the boundary, the music, /The foam and the white ship, and two old men"(11. 398-399)--all these are literally envisaged. The speaker frankly confesses that, as a boy, he did not know why he "made so much of Isaac and the things /He said"(11. 114-115). Being yet a child, the boy consistently fails to think

abstractly. He will only understand death on encountering it personally; until then, he cannot really comfort Isaac. This literal, rather than metaphorical, interpreting of the old men's words does make for some humor, however. Amazed at Isaac's stamina in walking through the heat, and recalling the old man's avowal that he has gone through "cold and fire" with Archibald, the boy speculates that

. . . those extremities of heat and cold
Which he had long gone through with Archibald
Had made the man impervious to both(11. 131-133).

The abstract has been actualized, if only in a child's imagination. And again, when Isaac has lamented the fate of being figuratively left behind at a friend's passing, the boy picks up the literal image; he later asks Isaac to slow his pace, lest he (the boy) learn early the suffering of being left behind. As these conceptual images are equivocally literalized, so are the conceptual truths the old men have revealed. They are truths whose implications the boy cannot yet fully appreciate, but which he plays with in his imagination. Intuiting the dignity of the men who utter them, he literally equates Isaac and Archibald with the Greek heroes of his timeless world:

. . . Archibald
and Isaac were good fellows in old clothes
And Agamemnon was a friend of mine;
Ulysses coming home again to shoot
With bows and feathered arrows made another,
And all was as it should be. I was young(11. 320-325).

Escape from time, in the sense of no longer being enslaved

by thoughts of death, is apprehended as literal timelessness by the boy, who perceives the fusion in his reverie. Similarly, the "light" of Archibald's teachings is literally apprehended:

. . . I felt
 Within the mightiness of the white sun
 That smote the land around us and wrought out
 A fragrance from the trees, a vital warmth
 And fullness for the time that was to come,
 And a glory for the world beyond the forest,
 the present and the future and the past,
 Isaac and Archibald, the burning bush,
 The Trojans and the walls of Jericho,
 Were beautifully fused(11. 332-341).

He is "calm and incorrigibly satisfied /With apples and romance and ignorance"(11. 327-328)--an ignorance of subtle analogies which will last until he has encountered death and can realize their significance. The wisdom the old men reveal is that time can be transcended by the simple act of willing it. The expression of this wisdom has the immediate effect of stimulating the boy's mind to wander in time while remaining grounded in the present moment. No slave to time in his fancies, the boy will later reflect on the words and sense their deeper meaning, and we can speculate that he too will avoid railing at the thought of having expended his limited portion. He will not dread the coming of death for having lost sight of the light. The truth which is revealed to the boy, but which he only fully comprehends as a mature narrator (who carefully avoids articulating it; lest the reader be deprived of discovering

it for himself), is that while time controls all, it need enslave no one; that precedence and consequence--the "present and the future and the past" of the boy's vision--wear similar aspects; in short, that life is affirmative so long as we affirm it. As Levenson points out, Nature herself, in the blazing sunset which confronts the boy in his journey home, seems to confirm the lesson of the poem--"The sunshine lights /A good road yet before us if we look"(ll. 263-264).²⁴ That both Isaac and Archibald reveal this knowledge in the same breath with their silly questioning of each other's sanity is not so much a repudiation of this wisdom as it is testimony of their humanity.

Louis Coxe has suggested that "Isaac and Archibald" is, in one sense, Robinson's record of what his own time and place were like.²⁵ This nostalgic intent likely accounts for some of the poem's charm. Over the landscape containing Archibald's farm

Hovered an air of still simplicity
And a fragrance of old summers--the old style
That lives the while it passes(ll. 149-151).

Certainly this sense of an era passing parallels each man's intimations of his friend's passing. The bittersweet effect of this image is consistently reinforced by the general pattern of imagery. In the orchard, the boy munches on "A dozen of worm-blighted astrakhans"(l. 245), suggesting that while life's fruit is not unblemished, it is well

worth sampling. The presence of the cellar-cricket, "of the brown soft sort /That feeds on darkness"(ll. 206-207), works to the same effect. It is a reminder that after ripeness inevitably follow decay and death. But Isaac's simple routing of this intruder reflects the control he has come to wield over death: "Isaac turned him out, /And touched him with his thumb to make him jump"(ll. 207-208). Thus while James Dickey is right to label the cricket a "terrifying and mysterious creature,"²⁶ he misses the most significant fact--that Isaac exercises a symbolic dominance over the cricket, a dominance which does not lie in a power to escape death, but in his facing it in a spirit of life-affirmation. Robinson handles all this with a rural charm and subtlety which allows this crucial image to fit smoothly, almost imperceptibly, into the conversational poem, while he maintains its precision and thematic appropriateness.

Robinson's use of humor, also artfully exploiting rural habits and mannerisms, injects a strong current of optimism into the poem. Lloyd Morris has described the humor of "Isaac and Archibald" as being "like the touch of a cool hand."²⁷ Which is not to say that its effect is trivial. The humor is double-edged; it not only emanates from the characters in the poem but is also directed against them. The first type of humor has the effect of revealing the cleverness of the characters' minds, thus making them less likely objects of pity. Some of the comic remarks

are subtle enough to be easily overlooked. Archibald, for instance, in responding to Isaac's chatter about the "cool" breeze, comments sarcastically, "'You must have made it with your legs, I guess'"(1. 180). Even the boy contributes some one-liners. As they approach the "smooth-cut field" (1. 157) of Archibald's farm, and Isaac murmurs in surprise, the boy, with "childhood subtlety"(1. 162), merely notes: "'Archibald will be surprised, I think'"(1. 161). This is not the sarcasm of the cynic; the boy's knowledge is not yet sufficiently advanced to warrant cynicism. The comment rather reflects a child-like understanding of and amusement at life as it comes, without adult bitterness or illusion. The humor arises from the ability of this one character to see and to mock gently the interesting, but minor, illusions of the others. As Estelle Kaplan, in her study of the philosophy in Robinson's poetry, suggests: "Man must recognize the humor in the world which God sees and enjoys. Resignation to fate, not lamentation will be the result. It is important to note that humor comes only from wisdom, not from cynicism, for wisdom gives knowledge of the truth."²⁸ It might be added that resignation to fate does not imply fatalism. Rather, it implies a healthy acceptance of earthly flux--of coming and going, life and death--and a subsequent affirmation that this is as things should be. Through the spontaneous humor of a child, then, Robinson points to the folly of thus judging others. Isaac and Archibald

themselves recognize the folly of such judgments--more clearly in each other than in themselves, perhaps--for they seem content merely to irritate each other in the spirit of cantankerous sport. As their more serious comments indicate, they both face the truths they might seem to be avoiding by this apparent clinging to youth. The boy is warned not to rail at a life half-lived when the time comes for leaving it. Archibald explicitly discusses his fear of death, and the vision of "light" whereby he copes with that fear. As I noted above, in this context each man's cranky gauging of the other's failing powers is not so much a pathetic attempt to grasp at life as it is an odd and rather amusing form of competition between them.

In our amusement, Isaac and Archibald thus become the butts of humor; perfect individuals are, after all, exceedingly rare in Robinson's poetry. The basic anecdote certainly provides a fund of comic material, as well as ample evidence of man's minor follies. In Charles Cestre's words: "It is excellent comedy--a snapshot of the lives of two old men, linked by true friendship, yet not so heroically devoted as not to point out a flaw in the other fellow or not to satisfy themselves that each keeps a superiority over the other."²⁹ Robinson is not one to render heavy-handed judgments of his characters; he has too much sympathy for his fellow men to condemn them. As Barnard stresses, Robinson is no dogmatizing moralist: "His regard for the

integrity of his characters does not allow us to pity or scorn them. Having acknowledged their spiritual independence, we can let ourselves be amused by the incongruities in which that independence sometimes issues. 'But,' as the boy in Isaac and Archibald observes, 'there's a laughing that has honor in it.'³⁰ To support her pessimistic reading, Lowell must deny the poem's essential humor. She must and does contradict the speaker's own avowal that "I may laugh at them because I knew them "(1. 417). She can only insist that "laughter is the one emotion which he has not at command."³¹ She thus concludes that the avowal does not, mean what it says: "The line is cryptic, because it really means just a question, pitying, fearful, cast into space to go knocking about among the stars."³²

The key to the poem lies, then, in recognizing the subtlety of Robinson's views--a subtlety which is necessary to accurately portray a very complex reality, frightening at times, yet not devoid of potential comfort. The poetry itself, which reflects this subtlety, is characterized, in Wallace Anderson's words, by "a seeming artlessness that hardly betrays his narrative skill."³³ As the thoughts expressed are subtle in their implications, so are the means of expressing them. Robinson is, as T. K. Whipple has noted, a master of understatement: "Most often he gains his intensity, not by the lift or surge of rhythm of his language, but by implication, without raising his voice, by some sort of understatement, by the very contrast between the

meaning of his words and their almost prosaic plainness."³⁴

J. C. Levenson has commented on the subtlety of Robinson's symbols, the way they "seem to operate almost below the level of consciousness. The emergent symbol has its cumulative effect without coming into focus in a climactic epiphany."³⁵ The simple process of walking, for example, might seem to be introduced into the poem for nothing more than a realistic touch; but, "in one local context after another the fact takes on meaning."³⁶ The boy compares Isaac's strides to those of a Homeric hero, and "in his short-legged, never-quite-surrendering struggle to keep up, there are emulation and respect that bespeak a kind of greatness."³⁷ Isaac laments the sadness of "being left behind . . . when the best friend of your life goes down" (ll. 80, 86) extending the implications of the imagery of motion. And when the boy jokingly asks Isaac to slow his pace, lest he "learn too soon / The bitterness of being left behind," (ll. 138-139) the significance of Isaac's comment is underscored. The literalization of the image I discussed above here serves to set off Isaac's figurative usage. The sustained use of the image has contributed to one central idea: "Life goes toward death, and the living are characterized by their relation to dying. The relation of boy to man and of both to life and death comes through forcibly on reflection, even though each separate touch that contributed to the picture has little intensity by itself."³⁸

Life-death, youth-age, hope-despair--all are here present and variable as they are in life; none dominates completely.

Much of "Isaac and Archibald"'s appeal thus stems from Robinson's success in avoiding overt didacticism (or pessimism). His insight is rather into human character and as such can be presented without giving the impression of teaching. Harriet Monroe, an early and astute critic of Robinson, sees "Isaac and Archibald" as "a gleam of light into hidden places of living and individual human souls."³⁹ This insight into character allows Robinson to comment on existence through his characters, thereby avoiding a regression to the philosophical treatise. His best poems are thus character poems. As William Free observes: "the presence of character enabled Robinson to objectify his ideas in a way not possible in the more lyrical forms . . . in which the poet speaks in his own voice."⁴⁰ In "Isaac and Archibald" the philosophizing is subtly introduced and Robinson never allows it to dominate the poem. After the long section in which Archibald expounds his view of life, and the boy, in his reverie, marvels at the fanciful world Archibald's statements have conjured up for him, the reader is firmly brought back to a less heady atmosphere by a comment from Archibald--one which is "enough to make a mummy smile"(l. 344). Thus if Redman is not quite correct in judging that the poem's appeal is ultimately sentimental rather than intellectual, we can certainly agree with Free in his conclusion that Robinson succeeds in avoiding "abstraction's debilitating effects."⁴¹

Stressing the realness and substantiality of life over the absence which is death (and the spiritual void of becoming obsessed with death), Robinson nonetheless realizes that notions of being and possession are naturally complemented by those of non-being and loss--be it the loss of friendship, youth, or life itself. The old men's wisdom lies in their commitment to affirm the value of life, rather than to despair at the prospect of death. They realize the nearness of their own passing, and they are frightened by it; yet they choose to counter their natural fear by a voluntary affirmation that life's goodness is not negated by the frightfulness of death. This is the lesson they teach the boy, and learning it will involve deliberately choosing an adult attitude toward life and death, rather than merely assimilating their factual knowledge. The boy, who is only vaguely aware of non-being and loss, can as yet merely observe and approve of the salutary effects this attitude has on the old men; he will only realize the full significance of their words later. He laughs indulgently at the old men's contest to avoid death (a contest spurred by both competitiveness and a genuine fear of death), realizing instinctively that there is nothing gruesome in it, since there could be no ill-will in these two old companions.

Through this voluntary affirmation of light over darkness, life over death, the old men defy the tyranny of death, and hence of time. Paul Zietlow concludes that for

Robinson "the only meaningful history is that which has become detached from time and place, and which has therefore proved its universal and eternal significance."⁴²

Robinson accordingly makes great use in this poem of Greek and Biblical myths: "These myths provide a standard for judging our present external world. Ulysses and Agamemnon embody once and for all certain heroic ideals, and Isaac and Archibald are worth remembering to the extent that they come up to them."⁴³ Zietlow also notes that Isaac and Archibald are among the few characters associated with Tilbury Town who have no surnames; rather, they assume the "mythic dimensions suggested by their names."⁴⁴ Their heroic names are appropriate because these characters have an awareness of something which transcends time and place. Zietlow describes their awareness thus: "The alternative to Tilbury Town is something entirely remote from the material world, a 'realm behind the stars' which cannot be lived in physically. Archibald can describe it only as 'light'--a vague and incomplete metaphor for an internal awareness and stability which can be described only in vague, incomplete metaphors. The life led in pursuit of the light is led in the 'old style,' the eternal style, the only style that is meaningful."⁴⁵ Zietlow suggests that the truth of what Archibald has said is made manifest to the boy as he sits in the sun: "The sun--the source of all physical light--makes him aware of the 'world beyond

the forest,' a world in which the past, present, and future fuse with one brief experience in his life the classical and Biblical past. All things become one in a flashing moment of transcendental insight, and time and place are shown to be mere illusions."⁴⁶ Yet it should be remembered that the fusion of time and place the boy apprehends in the sun is but an anticipation of the wisdom he will later glean from the old men's words. For the moment, he can only envisage a fantastic and surrealistic event--a cosmic, quasi-literal performance, as it were. Only later will he realize that this fusion symbolizes the liberating consequence of refusing to submit to the tyranny of death--a tyranny arising from its power to taint the experience of living for those who are overly afraid of dying. The truth is thus paradoxical: in frankly acknowledging the hold time has over one (that is, in accepting and reconciling oneself to the reality of death), time's grip is broken (insofar as one will not squander the remainder of life in protesting at the reality of death). The boy, "prefiguring as he does the mature man and the poet he will become,"⁴⁷ is intrigued by this notion of spatio-temporal fusion, and he allows his imagination to toy with it. His vision is a naive, yet accurate, reflection of the truths he has heard the old men utter. Time has never yet frightened him, so it has never bound him. When it finally does (when he encounters and fears death), he will reflect on

both his vision and the words which prompted it, and he will realize the validity of both. In accordance with this imaginative fusion, Ulysses and Agamemnon are his friends; Isaac and Archibald do, after all, live up to their heroic proportions. Crotchety though they may be, they have conquered the bitterness which so often afflicts old age. The cricket has been shooed (if only temporarily) and they can now thank God for the very existence of the orchards. The boy absorbs it all, stores it for adult reflection, and is, in the meanwhile, content to squeal with delight, not mockery. What laughter could have more of honor in it?

A pessimistic reading of the poem demands that this seemingly straightforward comparison of Isaac and Archibald to heroic Greek figures be considered ironic. Amy Lowell recognizes this fact:

That touch 'out of Homer,' strikes the hidden significance of the poem. To the boy, this adventure is epic. These are the doings of heroes, giant-men, and for a moment he is privileged to hear their thoughts, which are all the more wonderful to him because he cannot understand them. This throwing up of the commonplace actors of the real scene into the clouds of legend, juxtaposing two old men fast drawing toward senility and each fearing to be the first to pass, and jealous of every remaining proof of vigor in the other, with the god-like figures stalking through the boy's brain, makes the irony, the weird truth of the poem.⁴⁸

But there is no evidence that the mature poet's view of Isaac and Archibald differs essentially from that of the

boy. The boy does not adulate the old men so much that he is blind to their folly; his "childhood subtlety" is, after all, deliberate. His reaction to the sight of Archibald's cut oats, his speculation about Isaac's imperviousness to heat and cold, and his clever plea that Isaac not leave him behind--all these indicate his keen awareness. Both child and man can laugh at Isaac and Archibald--at the cracker-barrel competitiveness, the provincialism, and, in matters of little import, the all-too-human self-seeking--but it is an honorable laughter, a laughter without bitterness, cleansing in its awareness of its objects' decency.

Edwin Fussell has identified the quality of timelessness as crucial to the poem's effect: "The whole texture of 'Isaac and Archibald' depends to a large extent on this constant reference from present to past, a shuttling back and forth and a merging that is less a simple contrast than a steady interplay of both, and by logical extension the introduction and destruction of all time and place. Blending the heroic and the mock heroic, Robinson employs classical allusions brilliantly in a characteristic transcendental fusion stemming from full awareness of the particular moment."⁴⁹ Larzer Ziff suggests that Robinson was able to project this feeling of timelessness so well because he had learned to speak from a vantage-point unhindered by restrictions of time and place. Ziff speculatively traces this to Robinson's self-denial of youth's innocent pleasures--a denial which led

him to view life maturely at a very early age:

He was able to see himself in older people and to check his impatience at the darkness ahead by seeing that it was ahead only because he was young; that, in point of fact, it was behind for many people, and, because they had experienced it, it was not all darkness. He could project a drama involving this perception so completely that his assertions of the light glimmering somewhere were validated by the felt experience set forth in the poem, since a life had been lived there, rather than sounding, as in the poems of his contemporaries, like the pronouncements of youthful bravado.⁵⁰

Ziff concludes that Robinson seeks and achieves a universal voice, timeless and removed from history: "The poet, a man in his early thirties, has diffused himself into the talk of old men and the wonder of a boy; he speaks from no given time in life. The youth Robinson denied himself is not present to insist; the agelessness he has assumed--not as a fictive costume which clothes his outside, but as the very spiritual condition of his art--impregnates the drama and the quoted lines with meaning. They stand as truth, not as clamor."⁵¹

The ageless wisdom of the old men, a bit frightening in its finality, can thus nonetheless be comforting. Its complexity arises from the clash of their mortality (and their healthy fear of it) with their timeless vision, which can affirm the rightness of mortality as a cosmic process. Isaac and Archibald are, on the one hand, mere old men chattering in the shade. They are inevitably forced to dote on

"the thousand little differences"(l. 286) separating them from youth: "'I am old and I must think of them'"(l. 292), Archibald ruefully admits. For "'The shadow calls us, and it frightens us'"(l. 268); he and Isaac are approaching the indiscriminating "silence of the loved and well-forgotten" (l. 410). Their glory lies in their ability to approach that silence without major illusions; that the same fate awaits both good and bad, the loved and the well-forgotten, that all mortals, whatever their merits, are equalized by age and death--this is the truth which they doggedly acknowledge:

". . . Whatever we have gained,
Or lost, or thrown away /Archibald insists/, we are old men.
You look before you and we look behind,
And we are playing out life in the shadow"(ll. 259-262).

There is surely much that might trigger despair in such a conclusion. Isaac and Archibald must pass their remaining days in a "half-sepulchral"(l. 197) gloom, ever looking backwards. Each sees the decay a little more clearly in the other than in himself, or in a more vital location in the other than in himself (Archibald feels it in his knees, but notes it in Isaac's head), but neither actually denies that the end will be the same for both. The knowledge of this fact prompts Archibald's mirthless chuckling at Isaac's gloating interest in his (Archibald's) nonexistent back trouble:

. . . I can hear to-day
The way the old man chuckled to himself--
Not wholesomely, not wholly to convince
Another of his mirth,--as I can hear
The lonely sigh that followed(ll. 235-239).

"'But,'" as Archibald attests, "'that's not all of it'" (l. 263). If the shade of their cellar is half-sepulchral, it is likewise half-ethereal. They are both foolish and inspiring in their courage. Old and rickety though they might be, Isaac and Archibald are yet capable of Homeric strides, "Powerful / And awful on the wayside"(ll. 164-165). As the speaker proclaims at the outset, Isaac and Archibald are to be honored, "For they were old, and they were geniuses"(l. 4). Forced by age to dote on the past and tremble at the future, they are yet able, by virtue of this genius, to look ahead, down the sunlit road still before them, and to affirm the principle of life over that of death: "'I never twist a spigot nowadays,'" says Isaac, raising his glass to the light, "'But I thank God for orchards'"(ll. 215-217). Admittedly, Isaac seems to protest too much--indicating both that the shadow might frighten him more than Archibald who "had no heroics"(l. 382), or need of them/and that he is taking great pains to inform all listeners that he is yet spry enough to enjoy it all. But human fear and human bravado have their places in Robinson's heroic code. The significant fact about Isaac, as about Archibald, is that he consciously avoids bitterness at both the prospect of death and the memory of opportunities passed by. By virtue of this simple wisdom-- "The sight within that never will deceive"(l. 60)--Isaac and Archibald seem able to temporarily defy their age. The boy, tired, and alarmed at Isaac's vitality, suddenly realizes

this:

. . . First I was half inclined
 To caution him that he was growing old,
 But something that was not compassion soon
 Made plain the folly of all subterfuge.
 Isaac was old, but not so old as that(11. 41-45).

All of Isaac's and Archibald's teachings are, in short, commandments, "thrown down to me from Sinai"(1. 375), to live life. The boy is enjoined always to "growl cautiously, / And always where the shadow of despair may not reach you"(11. 306-307). The old men are magnificent in their mutual resolve to growl softly, in spite of their terror of the shadow. This resolve draws sustenance from their conviction that they have not squandered the time allotted them:

". . . but there's a light behind the stars
 And we old fellows who have dared to live,
 We see it"(11. 269-271).

Barnard has referred to "Isaac and Archibald" as one of the few Robinson poems with a happy ending, concluding that it "cannot have been the work of a man who despaired of human happiness."⁵² As Glauco Cambon comments: "Robinson is not an ultimate pessimist, because with every fiber of his being he senses that intangible something which dwells in every human being. . . . Isaac and Archibald . . . embody this mystery, they harbor this light no darkness will ever manage to stifle, for they have reconquered innocence through experience."⁵³ This Blakean synthesis--the worldly-wise innocence of the realist--is the most impressive part of Robinson's vision. Robinson, like Blake, defines the points

on the circle: the childish, naive innocence of the boy; the frightening world of adult experience, with its darkness and promise of death; and the recaptured innocence of the truly enlightened--those who can face the void, and yet proclaim the justice of being.

FOOTNOTES

¹Louis Coxe, Edwin Arlington Robinson: The Life of Poetry (New York: Pegasus, 1969), p. 70.

²Robert P. Tristram Coffin, New Poetry of New England: Frost and Robinson (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1964), p. 33.

³Ben Ray Redman, Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York: Robert M. McBride and Company, 1926), p. 52.

⁴Charles Cestre, An Introduction to Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1930), p. 17.

⁵Cestre, p. 18.

⁶Hermann Hagedorn, Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1938), p. 168.

⁷Louis O. Coxe, "E. A. Robinson: The Lost Tradition," Sewanee Review, 62 (1954), p. 251.

⁸Clement Wood, Poets of America (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1925), p. 127.

⁹Scott Donaldson, "The Alien Pity: A Study of Character in E. A. Robinson's Poetry," American Literature, 38 (1966-67), p. 225.

¹⁰Amy Lowell, Tendencies in Modern American Poetry (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917), p. 15.

¹¹Lowell, p. 13.

¹²Lowell, p. 13.

¹³Radcliffe Squires, "Tilbury Town Today," in Edwin Arlington Robinson: Centenary Essays, ed. Ellsworth Barnard (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1969), p. 180.

¹⁴Squires, pp. 180-181.

¹⁵Charles T. Davis, ed., E. A. Robinson: Selected Early Poems and Letters (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), p. 124, l. 25. All subsequent references to "Isaac and Archibald" will be to this edition. Line numbers will be included in the body of the paper.

¹⁶Redman, p. 52.

¹⁷Hoyt C. Franchere, Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1968), p. 83.

¹⁸Ellsworth Barnard, Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1952), p. 171.

¹⁹Van Wyck Brooks, New England: Indian Summer (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, Inc., and London: J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 1940), p. 505.

²⁰Barnard, p. 140.

²¹Barnard, p. 209.

²²Lowell, p. 24.

²³Barnard, p. 188.

²⁴J. C. Levenson, "Robinson's Modernity," Virginia Quarterly Review, 44 (1968), p. 610.

²⁵Coxe, Edwin Arlington Robinson: The Life of Poetry, p. 73.

²⁶Morton D. Zabel, ed., Selected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson, intro. by James Dickey (New York: The Macmillan Company, and London: Collier-Macmillan, Ltd., 1965), p. xxiii.

²⁷Lloyd Morris, The Poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1923), p. 31.

²⁸Estelle Kaplan, Philosophy in the Poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), p. 44.

²⁹Cestre, p. 165.

³⁰Barnard, p. 182.

³¹Lowell, p. 23.

³²Lowell, p. 23.

³³Wallace L. Anderson, Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Introduction (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967), p. 127.

³⁴T. K. Whipple, Spokesmen: Modern Writers and American Life (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1928), p. 62.

³⁵Levenson, p. 606.

³⁶Levenson, p. 607.

³⁷Levenson, p. 607.

³⁸Levenson, pp. 607-608.

³⁹Harriet Monroe, Poets and Their Art (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1926), p. 7.

⁴⁰William J. Free, "The Strategy of 'Flammonde,'" in Edwin Arlington Robinson: Centenary Essays, ed. Ellsworth Barnard (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1969), p. 20.

⁴¹Free, p. 19.

⁴²Paul Zietlow, "The Meaning of Tilbury Town: Robinson as a Regional Poet," New England Quarterly, 40 (1967), p. 205.

⁴³Zietlow, p. 206.

⁴⁴Zietlow, p. 208.

⁴⁵Zietlow, p. 209.

⁴⁶Zietlow, p. 209.

⁴⁷Zabel, p. xxii.

⁴⁸Lowell, p. 18.

⁴⁹Edwin S. Fussell, Edwin Arlington Robinson: The Literary Background of a Traditional Poet (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1954), p. 141.

⁵⁰Larzer Ziff, The American 1890's (New York: Viking Press, 1966), pp. 330-331.

⁵¹Ziff, p. 331.

⁵²Barnard, p. 204.

⁵³Glauco Cambon, "Edwin Arlington Robinson: Knight of the Grail" in The Inclusive Flame (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), p. 77.

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