

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

The concluding chapter attempts to recapitulate Robinson's contribution to the poetic renaissance that swept across America at the beginning of the twentieth century and his life long crusade against the philosophy of materialism. He was a great poet and a staunch advocate of antimaterialism. Though he believed in the primacy of delight over instruction in a work of art, he was also conscious of the social commitment of a poet. While preparing his first volume of poems *The Torrent and the Night Before* for publication, he wrote to his friend Harry de Forest Smith, "If printed lines are good for anything, they are bound to be picked up sometimes and then, if some poor devil of a man or woman feels any better or any stronger for anything that I have said, I shall have no fault to find with the scheme or anything in it" (Barnard 21). Robinson's success as a poet lies in his ability to fuse his brilliant poetic technique with his philosophy. Winters provides an objective assessment of Robinson's poetic strategy:

The artist creating lives at a point of intensity, and whether the material is consciously digested before that point is reached, and is simply organized and set down at the time of creation; or whether the point of intensity is first reached and the material then drawn out of the subconscious, doubtless depends a good deal on the individual poet, perhaps on the individual poem... The best of Mr. Robinson's poems appear to have come into being very much in this second fashion. He has spun his images out of a world of sense and thought that have been a part of him so long that he seems to have forgot their beginning – has spun these images out as the movement of his lines, the recurrence of his rhymes, have demanded them. A basic philosophy and

emotional view point have provided the necessary unity. (11-12)

Robinson lived and wrote in a period of shifting values when it was difficult to find a strong foothold rooted in tradition while at the same time looking forward to the future. But he succeeded in doing just that. Using conventional forms he brought about an innovation in American poetry by the directness and honesty of his style and his realistic outlook. He rejected the idea that only certain subjects were appropriate for poetry. The function of the poet is to deal truthfully with human experience as he sees it. He found poetic material in all types of humanity whether they were clerks, butchers or misers and he made a psychological probing into their lives in a simple, plain and condensed language that imparted depth and complexity to his poems. Irving Howe credits Robinson with a pioneering position and states that he “was the first American poet of stature to bring common place people and commonplace experience to our poetry” (Donaldson 113).

It has been proved beyond doubt that Robinson was a master craftsman who could carve out poems of perfect balance and poise. But he was not satisfied with mere brilliance of technique and believed that only a suitable union of content and form could give a poem its organic unity. He gave considerable importance to the subject matter of his poems and insisted on their contemporary significance as well as social relevance. He is never guilty of triviality of thought and his poems embody his philosophical insights. It is this combination of matter and manner, thought and technique that make his poems worthy of perennial interest.

The twentieth century marked the beginning of a new age in all aspects of human life. Mass production and mass communication were instrumental in evolving a mass culture which aimed at standardization. Scientific knowledge brought about rapid proliferation of the philosophy of materialism and forged a new social ideology in the west.

This new ideology was founded on wealth and status rather than morals or spiritual values. The preponderance of this wealth culture led to gradual dehumanization of society and paved the way for the alienation of man. The majority in American society suffered from self-alienation while a minority was alienated by the society for their nonconformity. Robinson held that the dominant social ideology shaped by the philosophy of materialism was responsible for the alienation of modern man. The evolution of a mass society based on ruthless competition and survival of the wealthiest aggravated the alienation of man in modern society. Thus a conflict ensued between man as a commercial being and a social being. The new social ideology promoted the development of the commercial being and the stifling of the social being. This resulted in discontentment and frustration as the social instinct is innate and compulsive in human beings. As a consequence there was a rapid increase in the rate of mental abnormality as well as suicides. Robinson traced the source of this rapid increase in mental abnormality and suicide to the alienated existence of man in modern society. And alienation was a consequence of the social ideology of twentieth century America which was shaped by the philosophy of materialism.

Though Robinson deals with self-alienation and social alienation in his poems, he is more concerned about the plight of the socially alienated in a society because of three reasons. Firstly, the self-alienated majority belongs to the center of society and their problems are the focus of attention of the society. Secondly, the socially alienated, being in the minority, are marginalized and voiceless. Thirdly, being an artist, he had personal experience of social alienation. Hence he decided to champion the cause of the socially alienated in his poems.

Robinson associates self-alienation with conformity and social alienation with nonconformity. Conformity is a modern behavioral strategy by which the individuals in a

society agree to the dictates of the majority. Conformity arises from fear of isolation but the irony is that conformity ultimately leads to the self-alienation of modern man. On the contrary, social alienation is the price for nonconformity. Artists, spiritual leaders and other nonconformists who refuse to sacrifice their individuality have to suffer from social alienation. But the nonconformists are in the minority and are marginalized and persecuted by the majority. Robinson portrays these outcasts of society in the majority of his poems. He also shatters the American success myth which propagates the theory that the rich, the beautiful and the influential are the successful in society. This criterion for success disregards humanitarian and spiritual qualities. Robinson discredits this theory of success and glorifies the failed in his poems.

Robinson holds the philosophy of materialism responsible for the discontentment prevailing in modern society. He ascertains that self- alienation of the majority and the social alienation of the nonconforming minority are the result of the contemporary social ideology forged by the materialistic philosophy. He exposes the theoretical as well as cultural drawbacks of this philosophy in his poems. He argues that the theoretical basis of the materialistic philosophy is unsound since scientific knowledge is still incomplete. Culturally, the philosophy has molded a fraudulent social ideology giving undue importance to wealth and material possessions. The poet was certain that such a social ideology would ultimately destroy human civilization itself. So he registered his protest against this ideology and philosophy in his poetry.

He also proposed an alternative to this philosophy in one of his own, “Optimistic Desperation”. Though his humility never allowed him to consider himself a philosopher, his poems propound a humanitarian philosophy grounded in realism. A realistic outlook made him aware of the sufferings of human life which makes life miserable. But his realism did

not make him a pessimist or a materialist as he always believed that there is an ultimate meaning and purpose to human life. As W.R. Robinson opined: “Robinson abandoned the inadequate attitudes deriving from materialism and emerged not an antirealist but a realist of a more profound kind” (Coxe, *The Life of Poetry* 129).

Robinson’s prophetic vision of the destructive aspect of materialism was realized in his life time itself. He regarded the First World War as an offshoot of the new social ideology shaped by the philosophy of materialism. He believed that the increase in suicides and mental abnormality, the routinization of modern life, and the devaluation of spiritual and moral values were all consequences of the materialistic philosophy.

Materialism has been the dominant ideology of western society for more than a hundred years now. It is no more the West alone which is in the grip of this philosophy, but the whole world is governed by materialism. The destructive potential of this philosophy on human civilization has only accentuated with the passing years. A major drawback of this philosophy has been the alienation of man from himself, from others and from nature. There has been a lot of discussion among academicians and non-academicians regarding the causes and effects of alienation and the probable solutions for this problem.

Pappenheim at a student conference on “Socialism in America” held at Yale University in 1964 delivered a lecture on “Alienation in American Society”. To draw attention to alienation in American society he quoted the example of a young amateur photographer who won the prize in a picture contest sponsored by a popular magazine. He won the prize for the photograph of a traffic accident which showed the anguished expression of one of the victims in the throes of death. Pappenheim argues that this action of the photographer symbolizes the attitude of the alienated man who turns every experience into a tool for attaining his ends (Pappenheim 2). Pappenheim, who based his views on

Marx's theory of alienation, believed that a socialist society would solve the problem of alienation. But Robinson had little faith in either socialism or capitalism since he distrusted any political system that threatened to impose conformity. Donaldson throws light on the poet's views on political systems and comments that "Throughout the 1920s, he regarded communism as the most dangerous of these systems. 'The socialistic dark ages' were coming, and he expected the individual to 'wither' as a consequence. At the same time, though, Robinson repeatedly depicted in his long poems the disastrous consequences of unchecked competition in the capitalistic market place. Henry Ford and his assembly line came in for particular abuse. 'In his way', EAR observed, '(Ford) is greater than Napoleon, and far more terrible'" (452- 453). The poet's derisive views about socialism and capitalism have turned out to be prophetic. Both these political systems have only augmented alienation. He believed that the need of the age is not a new political system but a new social ideology.

The turn of the century has only augmented the characteristic features of alienation existing in society. The September 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre in America, the spurt of terrorist activities all over the world, the increase in psychological disorders and suicides, all point to the enhanced alienation of man in the twenty first century. Kasser analyses the world scenario and says that "Most of the world's population is now growing up in winner-take-all economies, where the main goal of individuals is to get whatever they can for themselves to each according to his greed. Within this economic landscape, selfishness and materialism are no longer being seen as moral problems, but as cardinal goals of life" (ix). Kasser goes on to say that the most insidious aspect of this modern measure of success is that it is not simply about having enough, but about having more than others do. But his most important finding is that people with strong materialistic values and

desires report more symptoms of anxiety and are at a greater risk of depression. Barry Schwartz also endorses Kasser's view and states that too much of choice emanating from materialism actually results in frustration and discontentment rather than increased happiness (Schwartz 100). Alienation has become so all pervasive that it has affected every aspect of human life. It has evolved a self-centered culture which is indifferent to everything other than the immediate benefit of the self. Social responsibility is almost lacking in modern man so that he destroys the environment through pollution, demolishes forests, annihilates animal species, and causes global warming. Thomas L. Friedman reports in *The New York Times* that "The loss of global biological diversity is advancing at an unprecedented pace.... Up to 150 species are becoming extinct every day...The web of life that sustains our global society is getting weaker and weaker" (2). Thus materialism has been instrumental in bringing about not only the alienation of man but a global disaster from which it is extremely difficult to save the planet.

Two incidents from the twenty first century are quoted here to clinch the argument of this thesis that materialism has shaped a social ideology which has brought about the alienation of man. On 16 April 2007, Seung-Hui Cho, a student, killed 33 people and wounded 15 in the deadliest shooting rampage in American history at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg, Virginia (Virginia Tech Shooting 1). In another incident a 73 years old man in Austria held his daughter captive in his cellar for two decades and fathered at least six children with her, according to police and state-run news reports (Austrian Hid Daughter in Cellar 1). These gruesome incidents point to the fact that alienation has reached its zenith in the twenty first century. Though these are extreme cases of alienation, such incidents are on the rise and are no more uncommon. Self-alienation of modern man has reached a point where atrocities are committed with great

ease. This is no time for apathy. Discussions and deliberations must continue until a binding solution emerges.

The recent crisis in the financial sector of capitalist countries points to the truth of Robinson's assertions on the destructive nature of capitalism. The disillusionment with capitalism is so intense that there is renewed interest in Karl Marx and his theories (Marx is back 24). The alienation of modern man arising from the philosophy of materialism is still an unresolved problem for mankind and hence the relevance of the sociological dimension of this thesis.

This thesis is an attempt to make a meaningful contribution to the study of social alienation with reference to Robinson's poetry. There is scope for further study and research in this area. An interdisciplinary approach linking sociology, psychology and literature can yield more theories and data on the subject. It is hoped that the work done in this thesis will motivate research in Robinson and introspection on social evils like alienation. The study also aims at renewing interest in poets like Robinson who should not be condemned to oblivion simply because of the modern craving for novelty.

Several poets have come after Robinson but most of them were mere meteors that glowed for a short while but died thereafter and were forgotten. On the contrary, Robinson's brilliant light has illuminated generations of poetic lovers all over the world. As William Vaughn Moody, poet and friend, prophesied, "When we're all dead and buried, E.A. will go thundering down the ages" (Anderson 154). This study is evidence to it.