THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF THE POETRY OF EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

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THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF THE POETRY OF EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

By

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PREFACE

My thesis is chronologically arranged to consider the criticism of each new book of Edwin Arlington Robinson's as it appeared.and includes as well comments by his friends and important literary persons of the time.

I have no illusions that the material which I present is exhaustive, but I do believe that I have covered (though due to the mass, selectively) the important material that is available in the Michigan State College Library, the Michigan State Library, and The Detroit Public Library.

I am grateful to Doctor Lawrence for suggesting the topic, Doctor Orbeck for encouraging me, and I am particularly grateful to Doctor Russell B. Nye who has guided me and enabled me to make the mass of my material readable.

Alice Lucille Cody

INDEX

THE FORMATIVE YEARS

Edwin Arlington Robinson was born into an old New England family. His father, Edward Robinson, came of a family who had long been expert carpenters and shipwrights. In his youth he and two of his brothers worked as shipwrights in Boston and New York. After his father died he moved back to Maine and ran a general store at Head-of-the-Tide. It was there that he met and married Mary Elizabeth Palmer, a school teacher fifteen years younger than he. She was a descendant of Thomas Dudley, the second colonial governor of Massachusetts, and of Dudley's daughter, Mercy Woodbridge, who was a sister to Anne Bradstreet, the first American woman poet. Edward and Mary Robinson had three children, Dean, Herman and Edwin Arlington. Shortly after "Win's" birth in 1869 the offer of a directorship in the Gardiner bank caused Edward Robinson to move his family to the larger town, which became the Tilbury Town of his son's poems.

Though Maine was developed by a handful of able men from Massachusetts, the Puritan culture never flowered luxuriantly there, but neither did it deteriorate. Maine always kept its contact with the intellectual life of its mother state. The towns of consequence, mostly seaports, also kept contacts with Europe and the Orient. Country lawyers, here and there, sent their

sons to Oxford or Heidelberg. Ship builders brought back Ming porcelain and some knowledge of Chinese art and civilization. Through the shipping trade the Continent seemed nearer to the people of Maine than New York, Washington, or St. Louis.

There was no sharp division in Maine between educated men and farmers. The educated were frequently farmers on the side and the farmers themselves often read avidly and with discrimination. There were practically no theatres in Maine and few "lyceums". Reading was the main diversion and almost the only permissible escape from the tedium of the interminable winters. Everybody seemed to read, and not a few wrote. Aside from the reminiscences of missionaries and the speeches of Daniel Webster there was the romantic influence of Scott's The Lady of the Lake; the social-religious-romantic influence of Harriet Beecher Stowe, who wrote Uncle Tom's Cabin in Brunswick, Maine; and the mediaeval romanticism of the one-time Bowdoin college instructor, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

The Gardiner of Robinson's youth was not the thriving shipping center it had once been. The Robinson timber fortune vanished along with many others and Gardiner abounded in men who had once been important but who had no life any longer to shape to their code. The town itself was named after a clan which built for itself

A Tudor mansion of grey stone with rounded bow windows, strangely like a Manor House. But it was in need of repair and stood empty much of the time. In order to keep it the owner had sold the outlying acres and had gone into business in Boston. It was from this background that Robinson drew the characters of his Tilbury Town - the lonely fallen men who slept in doorways, the skirt-crazed old reprobates, the misers, the spendthrifts, the old men left behind, and the respected citizens who blew their brains out.

While Robinson was growing up he showed no practical talents and not much aptitude for conventional study, but he read widely and began writing verse while in high school. He was accepted as an equal "among the boys" and was cheerful, cooperative and even affectionate at home. He had access to his brother Dean's medical books and became a temporary hypochondriac, thoroughly convinced that he was suffering from all of the ugly diseases pictures. Later he became aware that he was different from others and did not fit into family life. His father was aware of his acute intelligence and was proud of him, but he gave him no fellowship.

Because Robinson was the youngest the unwanted chores fell to him and he of course resented it. He then found a sort of foster-home with some neighbors, Alice and Gus Jordan. Gus was an ex-sailor turned insur-

ance salesman; he and his wife were sympathetic and understood the boy. They encouraged his love of strange words and helped him build his vocabulary. His passion for words perhaps accounts for the exotic vocabulary which appeared in his early poetry. His reading was widely varied - Horatio Alger, Jules Verne, Shakespeare, and Dickens jostled each other in his mind. He particularly liked Dickens for his humor, his sympathy, and his characters. In high school he took the "scientific" course not because he had any particular interest in science but because it omitted Greek. At the time he had no intention of going to college.

It was while he was in high school that he met Dr. Alanson Tucker Schumann, a homeopathic physician and literary amateur. He was impressed by Robinson's ability and introduced him to the local literary group, where he became acquainted with the poetry of Ronsard, Villon and Verlaine. At seventeen he was also absorbed in Thackeray, Tennyson and his beloved Dickens. Robinson and Schumann were closely associated for several years and read and criticized each other's poetry. Schumann appears to have been a man of some intelligence and may have had some influence on Robinson's style. He was devoted to early French forms - the rondeau, the ballade, and the villanelle - and some of Robinson's early work is in these forms.

During these years Robinson's brother Dean took to narcotics and alcohol to sustain himself in the hardships of country medical practice. His brother Herman took over the family business and Robinson remained at home to look after his ailing father and brother. His father felt that Dean's case proved the worthlessness of a college education and refused to send young "Win" to college.

So Robinson spent an extra year in high school and added Horace and Paradise Lost to his reading list. Finally, when an infection in his ear (brought about by a blow given him years before by a teacher) required that he spend a year within reach of a Boston physician, Herman convinced his father that "Win" should be permitted to attend Harvard while he was there. At Harvard he read Swinburne, Rossetti, Austin Dobson, Whitman, found Spinoza enticing and discovered Thomas Hardy. Members of the Harvard faculty who were within the range of Robinson's interest were Charles Eliot Norton, Lewis Gates, Josiah Royce, Le Baran Briggs and Barrett Wendell. Estelle Kaplan and Lloyd Morriss attribute the transcendental inclination of Robinson's thought to Royce's influence at this time. Yvor Winters does not agree but believes that it is more likely to be the result of his readings in Emerson and Thoreau, and adds that "what one might call folk atmosphere of the upper levels of New England Society

would suffice".[1] Besides Emerson, his favorite writers at this period seemt to have been Carlyle, Crabbe, Arnold and Kipling.

Robinson's father had been slowly dying for five years; before the college year was up, Robinson had to return home to be with him during his last few weeks. Edward Robinson had become interested in spiritualism in his last days and Hagedorn's biography mentions that "there were table tappings and once the table came off the floor, 'cutting my universe' as Robinson later told a friend 'clean in half'. As the end approached, other articles of furniture began to levitate. Rows of books on a shelf were swept to the floor". These last months with his father, Robinson told a friend, "were a living hell".[2]

He went back to Harvard for another year and then left. He had never intended to take a degree; furthermore the family business was declining. Robinson suffered acutely with his ear and lived in fear of the doctor's intimations that the damage might reach his brain and cause insanity.

At the time he was writing such poems as "Luke

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[1]Yvor Winters, Edwin Arlington Robinson, 4.

[2]Herman Hagedorn Edwin Arlington Robinson, 77.

Havergal" and "The Clerks" which were later to appear in The Children of the Night, but he was unable to make any impression upon the editors of The Atlantic, Century, Harper's, or Scribner's, though Lippincott's published a sonnet on Poe and The Critic published "Oh, for a Poet". One editor offered to take "The Torrent" for fifteen dollars on condition that the poet would change the last two lines. The change seemed pointless to Robinson and he rejected the offer. His collection of rejection slips grew and even included a few from England. He began to have doubts of his poetic ability and some misgivings about the future if he persisted in his decision to give his life to poetry. He then turned to writing short stories which he hoped might do for American life what Francois Coppee's had done for the French. The titles of some were "John Town", "Lily Condillac", "Those Merry Gentlemen and their Wives" and "The Barcarolle". This last was the story of a man who had been haunted through all the crises of his life by a boat song until at last he heard the tune whistled by a stone cutter carving a tombstone -- on which he sees his own name emerge under the chisel. But imaginative as they were, it seemed that the magazines would have none of Robinson's prose fiction, and after toying for a year with the thought of publishing them himself in a separate volume, he destroyed the

manuscripts and surrendered himself once and for all to poetry.

He received some small encouragement from William Henry Thorne, a converted Catholic and frothy adventurer who published a quarterly of limited circulation and unlimited impudence, called The Globe. Thorne could not afford to pay for contributions and therefore accepted poems and articles that the commercial magazines rejected. The Globe published "The House on the Hill" and "The Miracle". It was a year before Thorne found room for another poem, "Kosmos", but during the twelve months following he printed a poem of Robinson's in every issue. This was of great help to Robinson, but The Globe's circulation was under two thousand and it published only four issues a year. Robinson then tried to get his poems published in the newspapers and succeeded in getting "The Children of the Night" in the Boston Transcript, but when he sent "The Clerks" to the New York Sun (which had a reputation for brilliance and perspecacity) the poem came back with the verdict, "Unavailable, Paul Dana".

Robinson was discouraged, but still convinced of the worth of his poetry. He gathered some forty poems in a volume which he called The Torrent and the Night Before and sent it the rounds of the publishers, who failed to respond. He then decided to publish it himself and persuaded an uncle connected with the Riverside Press to arrange for the printing of some three hundred copies at a cost of fifty-two dollars.

He intended the book to be a surprise for his mother, but she did not see it for she died suddenly of diphtheria. The family physician, fearing the disease, was afraid to attend her, but her son, Dean, pulled himself together to serve unsuccessfully. The undertaker refused to touch the body so her three sons laid her in the coffin and the minister read the services through the front window from the safety of the porch. The brothers drove the coffin to the cemetery in an express wagon.

Robinson sent copies of his first book to his friends in Gardiner and Cambridge, to numerous literary critics, and to members of literary circles in America and England who might speak a good word for him at the opportune time. He sent one to Edward Eggleston, the author of The Hoosier Schoolmaster, and received in reply an understanding and complimentary letter, which ended,

> "In this world where we are like men speaking to one another for cheer's sake in the dark, let a total stranger hail you with admiration, putting aside all flattering words of which you have no need, for which you have no desire."[1]

The letter was like champagne to Robinson. Another from his former landlady in Cambridge was not so encouraging. She regretted that his book was so "gloomy" and "pessimistic", a criticism which filled him with a kind of helpless despair for he regarded himself as among the most optimistic of men.

The first reviews were scanty. The dedication, "This book is dedicated to any man, woman, or critic who will cut the edges of it - I have done the top", struck one critic as flippant. Robinson in his later years agreed with him and said he thought it merely a youthful idiosyncrasy. W. P. Trent in the Sewanee Review referred indefinitely to the influence of other poets, commented at some length on the individual poems, and noted Robinson's techinical ability, but suggested room for improvement in the French forms. He also noted that the "impressionistic effect" produced in"The House on the Hill" was "not worth striving after". Robinson realized the inadequacy of these tightly restricted forms and finally abandoned them altogether in his later books.[2]

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[1]Hagedorn, Edwin Arlington Robinson, 110

[2]William P. Trent, "A New Poetic Venture", The Sewanee Review, V (April, 1897), 243-246.

Helen Clark, reviewer for Poet-Lore, chose to praise the same villanelle, "The House on the Hill" for the "startling vivid effect...produced by small means". She spoke of Robinson's wide range in subject matter and variations in treatment, nothing that Robinson described both a scene from nature as a human being with an equally facile touch. His poems to Whitman and Zola she felt were among the strongest of his poems and thought that no one had summed up Whitman's relation to his time with more penetration than Robinson. She wondered why he chose to appear as his own sponsor, feeling that "his hand is not yet quite assured in this difficult form of poetry, but there is plenty of promise of a future mastery of it."[1] William Morton Payne in The Dial felt the volume to be above average in thought and expression and commended "the austere restraint that is so rarely heard in contemporary song".[2] Harry Thurston Peck, literary editor of The Bookman and one of the most influential of critics, found in the book "a true fire...the swing and the singing of wind and wave and the passion of human emotion...and the cry of a yearning spirit."

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[1]Helen a. Clark, "Notes on American Verse", Poet-Lore, IX, No. 3 (1897), 448-449.

[2]William M. Payne, "Recent Poetry", The Dial, XXII (February 1, 1897), 92-93.

But the poet's "limitations" were "vital", his humor of a "grim sort", and the world was not beautiful to him but a prison house.[1] Robinson thanked Peck for the "unexpected notice" and said,

> "I am sorry to learn that I have painted myself in such lugubreous colors. The world is not a 'prison-house', but a kind of spiritual kindergarten, where millions of bewildered infants are trying to spell God with the wrong blocks".[2]

Later during an interview with Nancy Evans, when the phrase was recalled to him, "He said, with a sort of fond disapproval, 'I was young then and it was a smart thing to say".[3] Such generalities as "power", "swing", "passion", and "musical sense" were freely used by critics. They bestowed considerable though tempered praise on him, and as Hagedorn says, were "unperceptive rather than hostile".

Robinson's principal aim was to cut away the ornaments and artificialities of the poetic language that he had inherited. In his determination to cleanse his verse of cant and clap-trap he was barely conscious of how sharply he was breaking with tradition and had

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[1]Harry T. Peck, "A Literary Journal", The Bookman, IV (February 1897), 509-10.

[2]Hagedorn, op. cit., 112.

[3]Nancy Evans, "Record of an Interview", The Bookman, LXXV (November, 1932), 680.

no suspicion that the nearer he came to success, the surer he was to fail in the popular, worldly sense.[1]

A Boston publisher, Richard J. Badger, who dealt with unrecognized poets, contacted Robinson and arranged to publish Robinson's second book, The Children of the Night, at Robinson's expense. It consisted of Robinson's first book with one or two deletions plus sixteen new poems. It was brought out in two editions, one bound in vellum. A childhood friend of Robinson's "Willy" Butler, paid the bill. Publication by Badger was not much, but it was something to have any publisher's imprint. The volume contained ballades, villanelles, sonnets, and quatrains as well as the less usual blank verse forms.

The Boston Transcript gave the book two favorable reviews spaced a week apart. The first, which was anonymous, spoke of a wide and earnest charity, a deep sympathy for all who suffer and struggle.. a lofty, serious, yet hopeful aspiration; of "grave restraint", and humor, and music, "lingering along the lines".[2] The second was by John Hays Gardiner of the "manor house" of Gardiner whom Robinson later met through Laura E. Richards and with whom he formed a fast friendship. Gardiner called

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[1]Cf. Hagedorn, op. cit., 97.

[2]Anon., "The Children of the Night", The Boston Evening Transcript (December 18, 1897), 13.

attention to "a kind of natural realism of method which reminds one of Wordsworth, and withal a shrewd and Yankee directness which is like nothing that we remember". The book to him was a new declaration "of the old and eternal verities". Its message was a triumphant and deep-seated confidence in the ultimate heritage of man in the divine".[1]

An unidentified reviewer in the Nation noted that "there is power there, but crude". He judged Robinson's variety of measure to be small but added that he did his work "deftly within that plot of ground", and packed "even" his sonnets with such vigor and such creative imagination that the whole story is told". He noted that Robinson wrote of men and women and used external nature only as a setting in the Greeks manner. There was a note of surprise on the part of the reviewer that Robinson had heard of Crabbe - "we expect young poets to have heard of Whitman and Verlaine but we hardly expect them to have heard of Crabbe "and yet" what prose critic ever summed up Crabbe and placed him in his niche so completely as this young American"? The sonnet "The Clerks", a favorite with the reviewers, was used by him to illustrate Robinson's power of putting a whole life or a whole generation of lives into the narrow compass of a sonnet.

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[1] John Hays Gardiner, "The Children of the Night", The Boston Evening Transcript, (December 24, 1897), 5.

"Luke Havergal", also a favorite, was used to illustrate Robinson's "haunting lyric flow".[1] Vance Thompson in The Musical Courier was enthusiastic - "Years have brought us nothing quite so good". He relished the absence of "shopworn superfluities" and commended the "strenuousness of thought", the "frugality of words", and the style like the thought, "sober, quiet, evening-colored".[2] Robinson's old friend and converted Catholic William Henry Thorne went a trifle mad in his review in The Globe. He called Robinson's art "unimitable" but said that he had "nothing to say to this age of imbecile newspaper and shoddy-fed boobies". The title poem reflected Robinson's "poor and pitiable unfaith and negation" but as a poem it was one of the very best in the English language" since "In Memorian". He condemned its "infernal philosophy" of "atheism" blaming it on "boyish conceit". He exhorted him to drop Tom Paine and Walt Whitman and take up with Tennyson and the Deity.[3] Another critic called The Children of the Night a

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[1]Anon., "Recent American Poetry", The Nation, LXIV (June 2, 1898), 426.

[2]Vance Thompson "A New Poet", The Musical Courier, XXXVII (July 13, 1898), V.

[3]William Henry Thorne, "Shakespeare, Foss and Compnay", The Globe, VIII (March, 1898), 29-33.

"pleasant little book", an unusual comment in view of the bleakness of such poems as "The House on the Hill", the serious defense of such authors as Verlaine and Zola, and the cries for more profundity and higher flights in poetry. The leading literary periodicals - The Bookman, The Critic and The Independent ignored the book.

What Robinson's critics did not analyze (beyond calling it "restraint") was the poet's persistent simplicity of proselike cadences - natural, conversational qualities. Only one or two critics called attention to the psychological portraits. Browning was interested in penetrating portraiture, but he was more expansive in language and imagery than Robinson. Crabbe, who had served as Robinson's tutor, was more abrupt, less kindly, and sympathetic in tone.

Robinson was also interested in the problem of failure and resignation rather than in such customary sentimental themes of the nineties. His emotions were sincere and personal, his attitudes genuine rather than assumed or bookish. Honesty, cleanness, intellect, the chief characteristics of The Children of the Night, were uncommon in that decade.[1]

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[1]Cf. Richard Crowder, "The Emergence of E. A. Robinson", The South Atlantic Quarterly, XLV (January, 1946), 89-98.

Hagedorn found the plainness of Robinson's style revolutionary. Yvor Winters found it no more revolutionary than that of any first rate writer in any period, but rather "accurate with the conscientiousness of genius", and observed that such accuracy is invariable a major obstacle to success, for "nothing baffles the average critic so completely as honesty - he is prepared for anything but that".[1]

The leading literary critics had ignored The Torrent and The Night Before and the 1897 edition of The Children of the Night and save for Trent's four pages in The Sewanee Review the reviews were relatively modest, were tucked away in the poetry sections of periodicals.

In 1897 Robinson moved to New York, which became the setting for his The Town Down the River and where he met Alfred Louis who was the original of his Captain Craig. His life was much the same and he soon acquired a new circle of literary acquaintances. Among them was Titus Munson Coan, who as a young man had interviewed the elderly Melville with disappointment and bewilderment. It was at his apartment among signed photographs and pornographic collections that the little group which called itself the Clan met. The other members were Robinson, William Henry Thorne, Craven Langstroth Betts,

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[1]Yvor Winters, op. cit., 6.

an itenerant book-dealer, and Alfred Louis. Hagedorn described him as a little Jew in his late sixties with a goatlike smell as though he slept in a stable. But his eyes had in them the suffering of five thousand years and when he rose out of a chair to greet a stranger it seemed "as though some great figure of history, rose to address, not me but the nations of the world".[1] Louis had been educated in England and claimed to have had something of a political career in London. He was at home in the literatures of the world, was a trained pianist, an acute lawyer, an experienced student in government and diplomacy, a philosopher in whom "knowledge had been burned to understanding", and a poet. With such a background he wholly dominated the meetings of the clan.

At about the same time Robinson met Joseph French a literary hack who haunted him for the rest of his life - borrowing small sums, borrowing or stealing clothes, admiring him, abusing him, endeavoring to get him the Nobel prize, threatening his life, and borrowing five dollars when Robinson was on his death bed.

Robinson also had a number of friends of a different type, normal and intelligent people who liked, admired and helped him -- and there were a few like Josephine Preston Peabody, Edmund Clarence Stedman, Ridgely Torrence, and William Vaughn Moody (a former classmate

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[1]Hagedorn, 132.

of Robinson's at Harvard), who had achieved some literary distinction.

In 1898, as a result of the intervention of Hays Gardiner, Robinson obtained a position at Harvard as a kind of office boy. Gardiner recommended him as a confidential clerk or secretary, for Robinson would not consider teaching. Nothing much came of it and it is the only professional connection on record between Robinson and Harvard. While there he worked on Captain Craig which in embryo he called The Pauper.

In the fall of 1899, Dean Robinson died. A little later Robinson returned to New York to live in rooming houses and work on his poetry. He finished Captain Craig and with some trepidation let Louis read the book, fearing lest his peripatetic friend might resent the portrait. The old man brought the poem back with trembling hands and asked why Robinson should have hesitated to let him read it. Louis said, "This is the best justification I have of my existence. Now I seem to know why I am still in the world".[1] Scribners' rejected the book and Robinson sent it to Small, Maynard and Company in Boston, as well as to other publishing firms, all of whom rejected it. In the meantime he was writing another book which he called The Book of Annandale. Hays Gardiner sent it

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[1]Hagedorn, 162.

to Scribner's, supported by letters from Barrett Wendell and himself. The publishers answered that they liked the "quaint contemplative philosophy" of the poems, but that they were clearly for "the poet's own Brahmin class... interesting, yet at once too simple and too sophisticated" for the Scribners' constituency.

Thus rebuffed by New York, Gardiner turned to the center and temple of Brahminism and sent the manuscript to Houghton, Mifflin under a barrage of letters from Lewis Gates, George Lyman Kittredge, William Vaughn Moody and others. Bliss Perry, the firm's chief literary advisor, thought the poems obscure and often eccentric and prosaic, but caught "flashes of genius". The result was that the publishers offered to accept them if Mr. Robinson's distinguished friends would invest in his future, so Gardiner and Laura E. Richards became his guarantors.

Captain Craig and The Book of Annandale were combined and published as one under the former title. It contained no French forms and only a few sonnets. The title poem, "Isaac and Archibald","Aunt Imogen" and "The Book of Annandale" used the flexible blank verse form which the poet had introduced in his "Octaves" in the preceding volume and which he did not use after this until the publication of The Man Against the Sky in 1916.

The book received some praise, but the majority of the reviews were cautious, tepid and patronizing. The Critic which had completely ignored his previous books, printed the first photograph of Robinson ever to be published. Its reviewer, Clinton Scollard, the perfect exemplar of those "little sonnet-men" whom Robinson had declaimed against in his first book, reviewed this one in his column along with ten others. He found a"certain provoking fascination" in the "disturbing volume" but felt that the book might have been vastly better from an artistic standpoint "if the author had so willed it". He called "Captain Craig's" blank verse little more than "inverted prose chopped up into lines" that continually elbowed passages that were "shot through with real poetic fire". The natural, run-on quality of Robinson's lines and the avoidance of definite end-stops probably account for Scollard's phrase "prose chopped up". He noted that "while there is strength, and to spare, there is also a seemingly perverse carelessness, a frequent disregard of the niceties of form". As long as a poet had anything to say (and he acknowledged that Robinson did) Scollard insisted that he ought to "dress his thought in attractive attire and not let it go slovenly clad". He was apparently referring to such lapses as occur in "The Torrent" in which the poet ignores the customary 8-6 sonnet formula. Scollard did not care for the title poem on the "two or

three tales similar in manner" but preferred the sonnet "The Sage" and the "swinging lyric" with which the book closed, called "Twilight Song", a predilection explained by the presence in these poems of phrases familar in the period, "Love's inner shrine" and "Long ago, far away..."[1]

Another disciple of prettiness was Frank Dempster Sherman, a poet like Scollard of charming fancy and impeccable sentiment. In The Book Buyer he reviewed thirty-nine books of verse at one critical swoop. He thought Robinson to be a good story-teller, but the "round, crude, and altogether prosaic character of his blank verse" seemed unforgivable. He thought some of the rhymed verse excellent, but too much of it was marred by obscurity. He recommended the use of a file.[2]

An annonymous critic in The Independent compared Robinson's poetry to French verse which evidenced a "first hand impression of life", showing that its author has "looked at life and thought about art for himself". He found most American and English verse to be "mainly derivative and vaguely reminiscent like all second-hand inspiration"; in short, in most cases it would stand for nothing but what "already has a place in letters and a

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[1]Clinton Scollard, "Recent Books of Poetry", The Critic, XLII (March, 1903), 232.

[2]Frank Dempster Sherman, "Recent Poetry", The Book Buyer XXV (December, 1902), 429.

following among the public". He believes that it is the contrast of Captain Craig with the majority that makes it seem more remarkable than it really is and that the characters of Robinson's work are symptomatic of certain tendencies of modern verse - "the sum of which is making for what may be called the secularization of poetry". In contrast to Sherman, he says that the poem is too shapeless to be a story but is rather a characterization of a bit of "bombastical old social wreckage or debris... with a glimpse of cosmic humor" and a kind of "transcendental optimism". He found its language to be diametrically opposed to subject in any ordinary poetic sense and that there was nothing to distinguish it from prose in diction, imagery, or rhythm. It illustrated the modern formlessness of monologing which treated the reader as an eavesdropper "welcome to anything that he can contrive to pick up"...a suitable medium in its own confusion for "hasty, turbid thinking, unhampered by an ideal of beauty or literary distinction but compatible" like Captain Craig with a great deal of vigor, humor, caricature, even satire and pathos. He saw Captain Craig's mind as an "emblem of his time, half-formed, undisciplined, vaguely emotional... kaleidoscopic", professing in addition a "dim conception of human...perfectibility". Such comment on individual character showed greater understanding than was customary

of what Robinson was about.[1]

Other critics caught the shine of genius as well. William Morton Payne, writing in The Dial, spoke of the philosophy of its free spirit which has given no hostages to the conventional life, the spirit that "seeks to divest from their adventitious wrappings the fundamental verities of existence". He felt that "Captain Craig" was the best poem in the book and saw in it the shrewdness of Socrates, the irony of Aristophanes, and the zeal of Carlyle. He was not quite sure of Robinson's philosophy but he felt that he could discern quite plainly the "free spirit" of Whitman and the "sardonic humor" of Browning.[2]

An anonymous reviewer who published the same review in both The Nation and The New York Evening Post called Robinson one of the most promising of the younger poets, one who was gifted but had not yet mastered his powers and must "follow his muse for a time and not direct it". He found Robinson sometimes obscure but defended his right to be so "for his thoughts are always worth consideration, but it must be frankly owned that he sometimes draws near the unintelligible". This frank statement let

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[1]"A New Poetry", The Independent, LV (February 19,1903), 446-447.

[2]William Morton Payne, "Recent Poetry", The Dial, XXXIV (January 1, 1903), 18-19.

the bars down for later critics who evidently needed some precedent before they could admit that they often found Robinson's thoughts "obscure". The critic thought Robinson's lines at their best to be musical and colorful, but cautioned against careless reading. Indolent and impatient readers would find nothing in it, but careful ones would "revert to it again and again". In his last paragraph the critic more or less contradicted one of his former statements on Robinson's unintelligibility when he said "there is not a trivial or a meaningless thing in it", and when there was obscurity, "it is often like that of Emily Dickinson when she piques your curiosity through half a dozen readings and suddenly makes all clear".[1] This is either an example of fuzzy critical thinking, or just plain hack writing.

A western critic called Robinson, not without acumen, a "forlornly joyous cuss",[2] while in a personal statement, William James spoke of him as "a genuine poet" with "an important future", "an original sense of life", and wrote the publishers that he thought "Isaac and Archibald" "fully as good as anything of the

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[1]Anon., "Recent Poetry", The Nation, LXXV (December 11, 1902), 465.

[2]Anon., "Some Recent Books of Verse", The Argonaut, LII (January 5, 1903), 6.

kind in Wordsworth". [1]

The reviews indicated that Robinson had clearly made some progress. The Critic and The Independent, two of the nation's leading literary periodicals, had recognized his existence. The Critic's review was not flattering but the anonymous reviewer of The Independent thought him a precursor of a new trend in poetry who had the ability to handle caricature, satire, pathos and humor. He also saw Robinson's philosophy of human perfectability, something no other critic noticed. The Bookman continued to ignore the poet, but The Book Buyer, The Nation and The Dial made mention of him. The Harvard Monthly gave him three pages[2] and the critic of The Argonaut in San Francisco seemed to understand what Robinson was after. The Boston Transcript, which generally favored Robinson, gave him two complimentary reviews.

These laudatory notices called forth a second edition of 250 copies after six months, but the reviews had no effect on the editors of magazines, who continued to reject the manuscripts Robinson sent them. Apart from two poems in The Harvard Monthly, no magazine had printed a line of his. Robinson seems to have lived mainly on

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[1]Hagedorn, 191.

[2]Trumbull Stickney "Captain Craig" The Harvard Monthly, (December, 1903), 99-102.

gifts and loans in this period. He brooded much and drank heavily. Finally he received a job as a time-checker in a subway and although it gave him a living, the work left him exhausted. He became vaguely known as "the poet in the subway" and in his wanderings about New York he became familiar with the derelicts and failures just as he had in Gardiner. His friends found that when he was drunk he was capable of spinning many Rabalesian stories that he had picked up here and there. This life formed the background for the poems in his next volume, The Town Down the River.

French returned to New York about this time, and noting Robinson's state of mind, saw a chance to turn an honest penny and at the same time show the citizens of the metropolis what they were doing to a gifted spirit. He sought out the editor of The New York Sunday World and suggested a story on "the poet in the subway". The editor sent a reporter to get a statement from Stedman. Robinson became indignant when he heard what was being planned and insisted that it be stopped. Stedman only laughed and said that an article like that couldn't possibly harm Robinson, but would rather help him. In the middle of May, 1904, the article was published, "A Poet in the Subway : Hailed as a genius by men of letters, Edwin Arlington Robinson has to earn his living as a timekeeper." In the center was a reproduction of a photograph of

Robinson flanked on either side by a reproduction of the title page of Captain Craig and a drawing of the character represented as an old man in an ulster and black hat carrying a lantern. The story and picture covered a third of a page, all in the best style of that literature which Mr. Pulitzer and Mr. Hearst were so actively promoting. All Robinson's New England forbears rose within him in humiliation and rage at this public exhibition of his personal affairs and he informed French that he had committed the unforgivable sin. The bewildered hack, feeling guilty and miserable, consoled himself that at least Robinson's friends now knew how the land lay.[1]

Shortly afterwards Richard Watson Gilder of The Century accepted "Uncle Ananias" for publication in his department of frivolities called "In Lighter Vein". It was the first acceptance by any magazine other than The Globe or the Harvard Monthly in eight years; the first paid acceptance since Lippincott's had taken his sonnet on Poe eleven years before.

In 1905 Theodore Roosevelt became interested in Robinson's work, which had been called to his attention by his son, Kermit, then a pupil at Groton. Roosevelt, after trying to persuade Robinson to accept several positions, succeeded in getting him a place in the New

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[1]Hagedorn, 206-208.

York Customs, as a special agent of the treasury, at $2,000 a year. Robinson was somewhat bewildered at his new job.[1] Roosevelt invited Robinson to the White House and talked with him at length. Later he wrote an article in praise of Robinson's poems for The Outlook and persuaded Scribner's to reissue The Children of the Night. His article stated that there was an undoubted touch of genius in the poems in The Children of the Night, a curious simplicity and good faith, all of which qualities differentiated them sharply from ordinary collections of the kind. He affirmed that it was not always necessary in order to enjoy a poem that one should be able to "translate it into terms of mathematical accuracy" and said that though he was not sure that he understood "Luke Havergal", he was entirely sure that he liked it. He liked "The House on the Hill", "Richard Cory", "Ballade of Broken Flutes","The Pity of the Leaves", and quoted all of "The Wilderness". "Mr. Robinson has written in this little volume not verse but poetry. Whether he has the power of sustained flight remains to be seen".[2]

For his temerity in writing a critical article the president was generally abused by the literary experts of the period and Robinson's poetry belittled

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[1]Hagedorn, 221.

[2]Theodore Roosevelt, "The Children of the Night", The Outlook, LXXX (August 12, 1905), 913-914.

by them. The Critic responded with the kind of review that hurt the poet most keenly and for a little while paralized his efforts.

> "We do not dispute the President's dictum: but we suspect that he has not kept 'au courant' with the flood of American minor verse. Had he done so, he would think twice before applying the word 'genius' to Mr. Robinson, notwithstanding the author's "curious simplicity and good faith".[1]

The Bookman told of a four-foot shelf, annually filled three times with books of minor poetry and reviewed, summarized or otherwise disposed of. "Three fourths of this is tinged with the 'certain sad mysticism' detected by the President in Mr. Robinson's verse, and half of it is almost if not quite Robinsonian in merit". The New York Evening Post, which loved the President as the land-owner loves the tax-collector, waxed literary - histor-ical - critical in a sardonic discussion of the conse-quences if "our Presidents should usurp the authority of critics". This "union of political and literary authority in a single man" was "a dangerous business".[2] During these years when Robinson seemed to stand so completely alone against perverse editors and a cynical public, Roosevelt's kindly help must have accomplished more toward assisting him with regard both to his reputation and his

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[1]Anon., The Critic, XL (December, 1905), 584.

[2]Hagedorn, 219.

personal life than anyone else had done. Perhaps Roosevelt was not a great literary scholar, but he knew what he liked and time has disproved neither his judgment nor the worth of his aid to Robinson.

The new edition of The Children of the Night did not receive any overwhelming reviews. The New York Times thought "the numerous poems of religious feeling" were "the products of a wholesome faith".[1] "Though not escaping the calamities of injudicious praise", said The Nation, the collection was "a very pleasant little book". Ferris Greenslet claimed that no minor poet of the day was less indebted to conventionalism or more "securely himself" than Robinson. He admired the poet's "gift" of "coining musical and suggestive" names for his characters - Luke Havergal, John Evereldown, Aaron Stork, Cliff Klingenhagen, Fleming Helphenstine, Reuben Bright - each a perfect symbol and almost a poem in itself that clung potently to one's memory. His poetry had a "haunting individuality" and a "curious vividness".[2] The Boston Transcript was consistently faithful and admiring.[3]

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[1]Anon., "Recent Poetry", The New York Times Saturday Review of Books (November 25, 1905), 798.

[2]Ferris Greenslet, "Recent Poetry", The Nation, LXXXI (December 21, 1905), 507.

[3]Anon., "The Children of the Night" The Boston Evening Transcript, (November 25, 1905), 4.

Among the major literary journals, The Dial was the only one that made so bold as to insist that "Mr. Robinson's work has never got half the attention it deserved".[1] The unaccountable Joseph Lewis French wrote the most comprehensive review for the New England Magazine. He said that Robinson was more nearly a Greek than any other contemporary American poet. His frank, naked democratic view of life was a legacy from the Puritan ideal. No man had struck it with quite the same "union of simplicity and force"...it is the "fulfillment of the Christian ideal" as nourished by generations of New England thinkers, "the stern law of personal accountability, united to the large charity of the Golden Rule".[2]

In 1906 Robinson made the acquaintance of May Sinclair, a young novelist flushed with her first success - a novel about a poet, but comically she had never known one before. She wrote an article for The Fortnightly Review entitled "Three American Poets of Today", concerning Robinson and his two friends, Moody and Torrence. She felt that Robinson had pressed allusiveness and simplicity to the verge of vagueness in his shorter poems. His longer poems were a little too analytically diffuse. "Captain Craig" was "severely undecorated" and unrelieved

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[1]Anon., The Dial, XXXIX (November 16, 1905), 314.

[2]Hagedorn, 220.

by any "sensuous coloring", but charm grew in the reading of it revealing the "divine soul" hidden in a starved body"; a soul that had the courage to be itself". She spoke of Robinson's "great gift of spiritual imagination, and an unerring skill in disentangling the slender threads of thought, motive and emotion". His message was,

> "Be true to the truth that lies nearest to you; true to God, if you have found Him; true to man; true to yourself; true, if you know better truth, to your primal instincts; but at any cost, to be true".

Naively she added that "Captain Craig" is one "prolonged and glorious wantoning and wallowing in the truth". She was unsure of Robinson's future for he had no sense of action and was still waiting for a generative impulse to break up his "sequences and cadences into other combinations and more living forms". He had it in him to write a great human drama of the soul "from which all action proceeds and to which its results return."[1] Her review was kind and perceptive in its philosophical criticism, but she did not comprehend Robinson's intentions in his use of forms.

Robinson lost his job at the Custom House when Taft became president in 1909. Roosevelt endeavored to protect him but to no avail. When Robinson was asked to keep regular office hours and do regular work, he resigned.

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[1] May Sinclair, "Three American Poets", The Fortnightly Review, LXXXVI (September, 1906), 429-434.

In the meantime he had completed The Town Down the River, which he dedicated to Roosevelt. It made its appearance in 1911, but received little notice. The Outlook said that the poet was quietly himself, neither a reactionary nor a rebel but a producer of work of "a very reassuring quality". His quiet speech, his fresh perception and his penetration are shown in his lines on Lincoln. The poet did not appear to strain after originality. His style was full of the strength of plain words and "compressed experience". Some of the poems lacked enchantment but had the vibration of life.[1] The Literary Digest, in a groping, romantic review, said that the poet's tone was one of regret and that from the regrets of his lost heritage he has distilled verses of the "rarest imaginable beauty". Each poem was a "lyric secret". Occasionally his style was too "cryptic" and "obscure". The essence of his poetry lay in a self-deprecating irony - half a confession of weakness and half a deliberate veiling of strength in gentleness. It had no grief more "clamorous than a sigh" and no mirth "more boisterous than a smile".[2] William Morton Payne noted the honesty, the careful weighing of words, the stripped quality of his verse.

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[1] "Three Books of Verse", The Outlook, XLVIII (June 3, 1911), 245.

[2] Anon., "Current Poetry", The Literary Digest, XLII (March 4, 1911), 424-425.

These characteristics were lacking for the most part in American poetry during the first two decades in which Robinson wrote. Typical of these years were the artificiallity of Bunner, Sherman, and Scollard; the sentimentality of Riley and Field; and the "luxuriant qualities" of Miss Reese and Miss Guiney.[1] Richard Le Gallienne compared the book to Browning and Houseman. Their influence resulted in too many "dark sayings and abbreviations of his meaning". So far he was a poet of vividly etched lines rather than of complete poems and depended on "flashes of insight and lightening glimpses of character". His book was not one of love songs, but one written by a man who had "gone through the mill", a book almost exclusively about men who had gone through the mill also: Lincoln, Napoleon, Roosevelt, and "certain sad, cynical, good-hearted men, comrades in misfortunes of existence".[2] The critic in The New York Times reviewed the book four months after its publication. He found that it had an individual point of view and manner of feeling, but was esoteric. He spoke of "fantasy, an odd, shy self-confidence, a bitter tenderness... at times a rare beauty. "

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[1]William Morton Payne, "Recent Poetry", The Dial, L (March 1, 1911), 164-165.

[2]Richard LeGallienne, "Three American Poets", The Forum, XLV (January, 1911), 88-90.

Robinson had a "wisdom content to question, ponder, doubt", yet was "conscious of a sublime answer somewhere". All this it seems was neither "deep" nor "wonderful".[1]

The first review that appeared was also the most penetrating. It was by W. S. Braithwaite, packing into a column of close thinking the wisest analysis which had yet been made of the qualities by which Robinson was distinguished from all contemporary American poets.[2]

Robinson's critics, at this early date, seem to have stressed his intellectuality, his searching insight and the plainness of his style. These qualities stood out against the contemporary verse of the time which was sentimental,"pretty", and superficially subjective.

In the meantime Robinson had been writing two plays, Van Zorn and The Porcupine. They were not acceptable to publishers and so he tried unsuccessfully to rewrite them as novels. In 1911 he was persuaded against his better judgment to spend the summer at the Mac Dowell colony at Peterborough, New Hampshire; he was so pleased with it that he went there regularly each summer for the

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[1]Anon., "Three Poets of the Present" The New York Times Review of Books,(February 12, 1912), 79.

[2]Wm. Stanley Braithwaite, "Down the River", Boston Evening Transcript, (October 29, 1910),6.
Cf. Hagedorn, 260.

rest of his life. The Mac Dowell farmhouse, Hillcrest, provided the title and something of the subject matter for one of his most important short poems. He gave up alcohol at this time, a difficult thing for him to do since he had been rather dangerously addicted to it for the past seven years.

Popular interest in poetry was awakening from a thirty year slumber. In England Ezra Pound launched the movement he called Imagism, a revolt against standardization in poetry and life and a demand for precision, for poetic utterance in terms of the image rather than the phrase, for poetic forms more fluid and ductile than the accepted formal measures. Little magazines sprang up championing the new poetry of free verse. Amy Lowell took command of the movement in America; Harriet Monroe founded the magazine Poetry; conservative critics defended tradition and the ensuing altercation aroused public interest in poetry. In 1913 Alfred Noyes, at the peak of his popularity, visited America. Welcoming a chance to strike a blow in behalf of accepted standards, Noyes remarked that in his judgment, Robinson was the leading American poet. British approbation counted heavily in Boston and boosted Robinson's reputation.[1]

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[1]Cf. Hagedorn, 283-284.

Scribner's still refused his two plays but the Macmillan Company, influenced by Louis Ledoux, finally agreed to publish them and accept whatever losses there might be in view of a possible larger gain as the poet's fame grew. They were reviewed in the poetry sections of the newspapers, but the magazines did not bother much with them. Harper's critic called Van Zorn a masquerade, "the sort we are all playing everyday". The speeches were "cryptic" and the play failed to have action.[1] Most newspapers became entangled in the plot and failed to understand it. The Porcupine fared little better in the few reviews it had. One unusual critic predicted that Robinson might "go far as a dramatist;" his dialogue was admirable and his characters had strong and consistent individualities. But there was a minor controversy about a part of the plot that confused dates and left in doubt the paternity of a child. The story was depressing and could not hope for success in the theatre. "The weakness lies in the scheme, not in the execution".[2]

Although most of the reviews of the two plays were harsh and in some cases ruthless, the faithful Boston

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[1]Neith Boyce, "Books and Men", Harper's Weekly, LX (February 6, 1915), 131.

[2]John Rankin Towse, "The Porcupine", The Nation, CII (June 29, 1916), 717.

Transcript carried favorable reviews of each. Braithwaite felt that they were real stories with strong characterization, whose action was "so deep that the mind has got to dive underneath the surface to feel it".[1] The plays were not successful and brought little added fame to Robinson except that they introduced his name to people who read newspapers and not magazines. Few people pretended either to understand or like them.

But nevertheless, Robinson's luck was beginning to change, for The Atlantic Monthly, Scribner's and Harper's Weekly began to publish his poems. "Ben Johnson Entertains a Man from Stratford" was published in The Drama. The Outlook took "Pavrette" and "Flammonde". Harriet Monroe of Poetry, fighting for the younger group of American and British poets, was glad to give room to the man who had expressed the richest meaning of the new poetic movement half a generation before it was born; she published "Eros Turannos" and "Bokardo". When his next book was published Robinson was definitely assured of a place in American literature.

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[1] Wm. Stanley Braithwaite, "The Poet as a Dramatist", The Boston Evening Transcript (December 24, 1915), 6.

THE FIRST CRITICAL ACCLAIM

With The Man Against the Sky, published in 1916, Robinson arrived with the critics if not with the public. Reviews of his book were still lumped together in reviewers' columns with several others, but there was a difference. The New York Times gave him a column of discriminating praise.[1] Braithwaite reviewed it favorably in The Bookman[2] and in The Boston Transcript.[3] Oscar W. Firkins, while reviewing several volumes of verse in The Nation, singled Robinson out as a delightful versifier whose homespun verse ends up by "snatching you up into its hazelnut coach and making off with you to Fairyland". He was original enough to dispense with novelty thought Firkins, but his poetry did not have enough of the "sedative of music". Firkins censured the "narrative" as a "languid" and "famished intellectualism", but acknowledged that Robinson could "narrate finely" and had done so in his other books. He especially liked the characterization of Ben Jonson whose "misgivings and truculence" were given "almost in a touch". "Old King Cole" and "Flammonde" were mono-

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[1] Anon., "Edwin A. Robinson's New Book of Poems", The New York Times Review of Books (April 2, 1916), 121.

[2] Wm. Stanley Braithwaite, "The Year in Poetry", The Bookman, XLV (June, 1919), 429-430.

[3] Wm. Stanley Braithwaite, "The Man Against the Sky", The Boston Evening Transcript (February 26, 1916) 9.

chords of undeniable beauty.[1] The North American characterized Robinson's attitude toward life as Russian, "comparable to that of Dostoevsky". His poetry was distinguished from most contemporary verse by a "more genuine simplicity" and a "real elevation". He was one of the few moderns who had a sense for language, for power and beauty of idiom as well as for melody and imagery. Any obscurity in his verse was due to its compactness of expression and its swift transition of thought. Unlike Firkins, The North American reviewer believed that the poetry did not merely "lull and narcotize" but "made thought musical". Robinson's verse was not great, he concluded, because it lacked a "sense of completeness and finality", but it unquestionably attained distinction.[2]

E. B. Reed, in a contemplative page in the Yale Review, gave Robinson generous praise. He found his book austere in its restraint, surcharged with thought, but lacking in appeal through melody or color -- yet it seemed to him to be one of the most significant books of the year because of its art and force. He too liked "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford", but (unlike Firkins) for

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[1]Oscar W. Firkins, "American Verse", The Nation, CIII (August 17, 1916), 150-151.

[2]"The Man Against the Sky", The North American Review, CCIII (April, 1916), 633.

its picture of Shakespeare, rather than of Jonson, claiming that he knew of no portrait of Shakespeare that surpassed it. Mr. Robinson stood, he said, in the foremost rank of American poets. There was more packed away in this book of his than the "most receptive reader will discover in volumes of our modern rhapsodists".[1] The Outlook's reviewer mentioned Robinson's "curious attitude of impartiality" toward his characters. They seemed "always strangely independent", working out their own "destiny unhampered by their creator", who found them matters "chiefly for dissection and exposition". Mr. Robinson's younger contemporaries, in The Outlook's opinion, might learn from him that a writer is never so direct as when he is hinting a half expressed thought, nor so indirect as when he is apparently laying out a character in black and white. "Flammonde", "The Poor Relation", "Ben Johson Entertains a Man from Stratford" and "Another Dark Lady" received praise on this score.[2] Amy Lowell's review in The New Republic was more daring. She spoke of Robinson's great power, "dynamic with experience and knowledge of life". His poems did not invigorate, to her way of thinking, but mellowed and subdued the reader. His spirituality was "tonic and uplifting",

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[1]Edward Bliss Reed, "Recent American Verse" The Yale Review, VI (January, 1917), 421-422.

[2]"Mr Robinson's New Poems", The Outlook, CXII (April 5, 1916), 786-787.

and she liked the "reticence" and "astringency" of his poems, finding his prevailing mood one of "high seriousness".[1]

It is interesting to note that the title poem of this volume received little favorable comment from the critics, while "Flammonde" (which Robinson had earlier intended to make the title poem) was almost always singled out for praise. "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford" was a favorite with the reviewers but for different reasons. The gravity with which Robinson was discussed, however, bore witness to the respect that he was beginning to inspire. Perhaps he was not great, but he had become a poet of "distinction".

The conservatives used him as a shining example of traditionalism in verse, while the adherents of the "new poetry" deplored his use of "outmoded" forms, but admitted his eminence. What was valid in the "new poetry" seemed to Robinson, who was always distrustful of all movements, as ancient as Athens; in effect, the chief principles of the "new poetry" were nothing different from that for which he had fought for twenty years. When a stranger asked him whether he wrote "free verse" he answered, "no, I write badly enough as it is", a wry commentary on the so-called "new verse".

While this little warfare of the "old" verse the "new"

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[1]Amy Lowell, "E. A. Robinson's Verse", The New Republic, VII (May 27, 1916), 96-97.

poetry was in progress, Robinson was contemplating the far greater tragedy of World War I. He saw his age crumbling before his eyes; the men who might have had the "vision to guide it were irresponsible or trapped by their own passions, betraying what they most cherished". There was a Light, of course, that would survive, but meanwhile the darkness would be terrifying.[1]

Robinson lived and worked at the Peterborough colony every summer, during the rest of the year living on a $2000 legacy left him by John Hays Gardiner. When that was gone, a friend, Lewis Isaacs, in better financial straits got eleven others to join him in providing Robinson $1200 a year. Meanwhile Robinson, searching for a theme to express in verse the great upheaval and dissolution of civilization that World War I symbolized, found it in Malory's Arthurian cycle. He wanted to portray in verse, as Malory had in prose, the crumbling of a world, the shattering of an ethos - and out of his search came Merlin, Lancelot, and ten years later, Tristram.

Merlin, published in 1917, was not kindly received. Odell Shepard was merciless in his attack on it, maintaining that a malicious elf must have suggested the Arthurian legend as a subject to Robinson. His method and manner had not changed, but the subject-matter did not harmonize with

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[1]Cf. Hagedorn, op. cit., 306.

his method. Shepard's severest criticism was:

> "upon a style that has shaped itself in the delineation of modern types of mind - complex, eccentric, intensely individualized - is laid the talk of depicting certain very unmodern characters which throughout a long and august tradition have been treated as simple, conventional, naive. The result, in less skillful hands would have been burlesque... Mr. Robinson resembles his own Merlin, who has much to say about what he has seen and known without giving much notion of what it is, and who seems to rely upon our remembrance that he has been impressive in other scenes".

To him Robinson's method applied to Arthurian material, was faulty and ill-advised, seemingly because it had never been used before in relation to the legend.[1] Nor were the other reviewers more favorable.[2] The New York Times felt that Robinson was a respectable poet, but a heavy one.[3] E. B. Reed gave Merlin probably its most favorable review. Although he found it unlike any Arthurian poem he had ever read before (it was hard for critics to forget Tennyson) his attitude was different than Shepard's. Reed thought the poem deserved to be ranked with the best verse that the legends had inspired. Its "foundations were dug deep" and the compression of style gave a sense of "reserve force".

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[1] Odell Shepard, "Versified Henry James", The Dial, LXIII (October 11, 1917), 339-341.

[2] Stark Young, "Merlin", The New Republic, XII (September 29, 1917), 250-251.

[3] "Notable Books in Brief Review", The New York Times Review of Books (August 26, 1917), 314.

Its characters were powerless against "inexorable law, the inevitable sequence of growth and decay". Each volume of Robinson's deepened Reed's conviction that Robinson was the foremost American poet. "In laying down Merlin we have but one criticism to offer: it is too soon ended".[1]

In December, 1919, Robinson celebrated his fiftieth birthday. His friend, Percy MacKaye, summoned Robinson's friends to pay tribute and they responded lyrically in the newspapers and magazines. The New York Times carried tributes by Vachel Lindsay, Edgar Lee Masters, Ridgely Torrence, Edwin Markham, Amy Lowell, Sara Teasdale, and many others. Bliss Perry provided an introduction, stressing the consistency of Robinson's work and its relation to the main current of English poetry. The remarks were of course complimentary, and a few were perceptive.[2] Percy MacKaye[3] and Harriet Monroe[4] wrote rather mawkish tributes, while Kermit Roosevelt claimed that "there was never a master who depended for his fame less on any individual poem".[5]

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[1]Edward Bliss Reed "Poetry of Three Nations", The Yale Review, VI (July, 1917), 863-864.

[2]"Poets Celebrate E. A. Robinson's Birthday", The New York Times Review of Books (December 21, 1919), 1.

[3]Percy MacKaye, "E. A. - A Milestone for America", The North American Review, CCXI (January, 1920), 121-127.

[4]Harriet Monroe, "Mr. Robinson's Jubilee," Poetry XV (February, 1920), 265-267.

[5]Kermit Roosevelt "An Appreciation of the Poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson" Scribner's Magazine, LXVI (December,1919), 763-764.

The Outlook waxed slightly eloquent:

> "The influence of Mr. Robinson is more widely acknowledged today than at any time in the past decade, and his place among contemporary poets seems surer today than at any time since the publication of The Children of the Night, which after all, is gratifying indication that work of the first order will find its way to the front, no matter how void it may be of the superficial advantage of popular appeal".[1]

Robinson was grateful for the attention and realized that it was not simply prompted by popularity, but rather by the sympathetic understanding of an esoteric group who appreciated him - that some of them clearly did not approve of certain elements in his work he no doubt realized, and that his popularity was limited he must have known too. But Robinson hoped that popularity might come some day, acknowledging to a friend that he didn't know why but "for the majority of semi-intelligent readers my books might as well be written in Sanskrit".[2]

Despite what the critics had done to Merlin, Robinson published the second Arthurian legend, Lancelot, in 1919. This time the reviewers were a trifle more kind, possibly because they followed the laudatory comments that his birthday celebration had brought forth. Yet some of the critics continued to feel that Robinson had rushed

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[1]"A Poet's Birthday", The Outlook, CXXIII (December 24, 1919), 535.

[2]Hagedorn, op. cit., 234

into a land where angels feared to tread - that of Tennyson, Swinburne and Arnold. Babette Deutsch thought Lancelot finer than Merlin by as much as it was closer to Robinson. His chief distinction was that he mingled Puritan austerity with a "discerning tenderness".[1] R. M. Weaver felt Robinson's genius to be "essentially dramatic". The poet's analysis of soul at war with soul was "subtle, unsentimental, and contagiously sympathetic". His verse was noble, his judgment mature, and his method economical. Though a tragic moralist, Robinson gave at the end of his poem "the promise of something other than utter night".[2] Carl Van Doren found Robinson as much at home in Lancelot as in Tilbury Town, "hitting the universal with his narrowest strokes". Lancelot had the "stark, unpopular grandeur" of tragedies in which men are overwhelmed by reason of some trait of their souls - that passion for an ideal which lifts men above their senses and rends them from their societies. The verse was as "athletic and spare as an indian runner, though it walks not runs", and varied in admirable accord with situation and character. Since Browning there had been no finer dramatic dialogue in verse, thought Van Doren, and no apter

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[1] Babette Deutsch, "A New Light on Lancelot", Poetry XVI (July, 1920), 217-219.

[2] Raymond M. Weaver, "Some Currents and Backwaters of Contemporary Poetry", The Bookman, LI (June, 1920), 457-458.

characterization than in the ironical talk of Gawaine.[1] Braithwaite agreed that in Lancelot, by reason of thought and feeling plus supreme consciousness and evocation of beauty, Robinson proved himself the greatest of all living American poets.[2] Of the prominent critics Weaver and Braithwaite wrote perhaps the most discerning and encouraging reviews.

In 1920 a lesser known work of Robinson's, The Three Taverns, appeared. It received only a few reviews, grave and quietly complimentary. Samuel Roth in a grouped review in The Bookman referred to Robinson as a poet who held the "remote admiration which men accord to writers much discussed but little read". He was a poet of wisdom and understanding. The Three Taverns might in the future prove to be the most important book of that year. It was the book "of a man of a people, and of a civilization".[3] Carl Van Doren enthusiastically found the book "packed, and as such things go in the world, perfect". The miscellaneous poems were held together in a pattern by a "tone of mingled wisdom", a "clear, hard, tender blank verse, and those unforgettable eight line stanzas and dramatic sonnets which

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[1]Carl Van Doren, Tragedy in Lancelot", The Nation CX (May 8, 1920), 622-623.

[2]Wm. Stanley Braithwaite, "The Arthurian Legend in Poetry", The Boston Evening Transcript (June 12, 1920), 9.

[3]Samuel Roth, "Robinson - Bridges - Noyes", The Bookman, LII (December, 1920), 361-362.

go to make up one of the most scrupulous and valuable of living poets". The poet achieved his "immense pertinence to the moment" only by indirection of actual events. "Every line bears acutely on the times". He notes the historical nature of five of the longer poems and cites "Tasker Norcross" as being the most memorable.[1] Mitchell Stewart found the "claret of The Three Taverns... too cool for most palates", noting Robinson's indirectness, his passion for silhouettes, and his disdain for superficial tricks. The form, metre, and rhythm of the verse are "not unfamiliar...we have seen the like for many days", as for some men "clothing is a part of character for others it remains a trivial, inconsiderable item". Ironically Stewart criticized Robinson for failing to "express the spirit of his time; whatever that may mean...since the spirit of an age is only a fiction".[2] Harriet Monroe found that The Three Taverns interested her intellectually, but brought her little "emotional thrill". The searching essays in character analysis "left her cold", but in Robinson's meditative poems "one tastes more keenly the sharp and bitter savor of his high aloof philosophy". She seems a trifle unhappy that he offered no "solution

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[1]Carl Van Doren, "Wisdom and Irony", The Nation, CXI (October 20, 1920), 453-454.

[2]Mitchell Stewart, "Edward Arlington Robinson", The Dial, LXX (May, 1921), 569-571.

to the problem of creation, either in general or in detail" but she liked his lines:

> "That earth has not a school where we may go
> For wisdom, or for more than we may know".

and his counsel for the meantime:

> "Say what you feel, while you have time
> to say it -
> Eternity will answer for itself".[1]

Robinson by this time had begun to turn books out at a rather prolific rate. The year 1921 brought Avon's Harvest, which he called "a dime novel in verse". Harriet Monroe observed that it was done with a "kind of cold thrift...the music...being slow and stern".[2] John Farrar felt that he built his climax with a "masterful restraint". The poem was a "brilliant drawing of the intense calm of a suffering neurotic..; in American literature, surely there is no more powerful dramatic poem".[3] Carl Van Doren found it a shuddering ghost story written in a "steel-hard, steel-spare, steel-bright style". Its language was Yankee idiom lifted into literature, but its brevity and understatement led to obscurity. There was no "royal road to

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[1]Harriet Monroe,"Robinson's Double Harvest" Poetry, XVIII (August, 1921), 274-276.

[2]Ibid. 274.

[3]John Farrar, "E. A. Robinson's Dime Novel", The Bookman, LIII (May, 1921), 248.

Robinson", but "the summit was worth the ascent".[1]

William Stanley Braithwaite proposed a collected edition to Robinson, one that would challenge the critics to face not a single book, but a life-work. Macmillan's agreed, publishing a complete works in 1921, the first of four such collections to be published in a seventeen year period in more than one edition each.

Herbert Gorman was lyrically complimentary in The New York Times.[2] Carl Van Doren regretted Robinson's long delayed fame. His greatness was due to his steady penetration through the facts before him to the truths beneath them which gave his verse "significance and coherence". He never ceases to cerebrate said Van Doren or allows his readers to - by readers, Van Doren meant, "selected readers". His rhythms throbbed with "heightened thought" and no line or stanza escaped his steady hands before it "ran off singing".

> "Endowed at the outset with a subtle mind and a temperament of great integrity, he has kept both incorrupted and unweakened, and has hammered his lovely images always out of the chastest designs".[3]

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[1] Carl Van Doren, "In a Style of Steel", The Nation, CXII (April 20, 1921), 596.

[2] Herbert S. Gorman, "Edwin Arlington Robinson's Poetry", The New York Times Book Review and Magazine (October 30, 1921), 6.

[3] Carl Van Doren, "Greek Dignity and Yankee Ease", The Nation, CXII (November 16, 1921), 570-571.

Yvor Winters foun d Robinson superior to Browning by reason of his "fusion of basic philosophy, emotional viewpoint, imagery and form". He declared that a few critics had feared in the last few years that Robinson was "deteriorating"; going through the collected edition, "one is reassured". Robinson's greatness lay said Winters not in the people of whom he wrote, but in the "perfect balance" and the "infallible precision" with which he stated their cases - an indication of his fine perception and organization of material. Robinson had the "culture to know that to those to whom philosophy is comprehensible it is not a matter of the first importance". He knew that these people were not greatly impressed by a "ballyhoo statement of the principles of social and spiritual salvation". The few times he gave his opinion he did so quietly and intelligently and then "passed on to other things".[1]

Army Lowell dashed off twelve pages for The Dial in which she "dared" to say that Robinson was sure to rank among the "most important poets of this nation". With some precision, she pointed out that though he had dropped fourteen of the original poems the omission need cause the reader no regret, except possibly the title poem of The Children of the Night - an odd deletion but one that showed a developing critical faculty. His austerity, restraint

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[1]Yvor Winters, "A Cool Master", Poetry, XIX (February,1922), 278-288.

and insight were pure New Englandisms, she believed. He had been caught between the "old Puritan atavism and the new, free spirit" and his answer was a "creedless religion". He was the forerunner of the new poetry and its oldest and most respected exemplar. Unfortunately his historical monologues were seldom "apt as portraiture". He built his poetic world out of a series of poignant incidents and by the deftest of little touches. But she deplored the "melodrama" of "Avon's Harvest", which grows out of external happenings", and found his increasing use of circumlocutions in direct contradiction to his "own theory of straight-forward speech". She cited as example his allusions to the characteristics of a certain gentleman as "an index of adagios" to his calling billiard balls "three spheres of insidious ivory", and his naming a hypodermic syringe "a slight kind of engine". Such circumlocutions, Miss Lowell believed came from an atavistic fear of the common-place producing the old poetical jargon which he himself had done so much to banish from contempoary poetry. But still she thought Robinson a better poet than Crabbe because of his insight, placing him more akin to Hardy. Robinson was a better technician she thought, but Hardy had a more penetrating understanding which helped him to "dissect" his characters "reverently" while Robinson's approach was one of "dry-eyed pity".

She defended Robinson from the critics who found "the beating of the knell of doom" in his work. Doom there might be, she admitted, but it was an adjunct, not a preoccupation. His preoccupation was with the unanswered question: Is the light real or imagined, is man a dupe or a prophet, "is faith unbolstered by logic an act of cowardice or an expression of unconscious pondering intellectuability?"

Merlin as a series of lyrical intervals was excellent, she said, but as a long poem it was inchoate. The pattern of Lancelot was too traditional, a fusion of all the dramatic poets all speaking at once. The heady wine of Robinson's increasing fame had lulled his critical faculty somewhat - "would he have written Avon's Harvest ten years ago?" She advised him to forget his assured public and "seek again the silence of his own personality which seems the only condition under which his genius can freely create."

Continuing her review, Miss Lowell found his art not wide and inclusive, but narrow and deep. He had almost no early failures to look back upon with regret. His later work showed no marked advance over his earlier, even in the matter of technique. He gained his full stature early and what he had already written had won him a "high and permanent place in American literature.[1]

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[1]Amy Lowell, "A Bird's Eye View of Edwin Arlington Robinson", The Dial, LXXII (February, 1922), 130-142.

Conrad Aiken, a promising young poet, felt that no contemporary English poet had Robinson's insight into character, his intellectual beauty or his exquisite sense of form. Hardy's dramatic lyrics surpassed his occasionally in range and fire, but do not match them in subtlety and finish.[1] Helen Walker waxed lyrical about this poet whose songs rose "clear and high, and far, with a great message - a lilting music - and a deep and true philosophy."[2]

This collected edition brought forth more serious discussion of Robinson's philosophy than any single book had previously. The critics accepted his high seriousness, the fact that his forms were merely vehicles for his thought even when "exquisitely beautiful", and devoted themselves to defining his philosophy and admiring its union with his "restrained and austere" art forms. Amy Lowell wrote the most comprehensive and discriminating review while Yvor Winters was most"philosophically" sympathetic. The Collected Poems received the Pulitzer prize for poetry, and the award of the Authors Club of New York for the most distinguished contribution of the year to American literature. Yale gave Robinson an honorary degree. In an address before the Royal Society of

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[1]Conrad Aiken, "The New Elizabethians" The Yale Review, XI (April, 1922), 635-636.

[2]Helen Walker, "The Wisdom of Merlin", The Forum, LXVII February, 1922), 179-181.

Literature in London, John Drinkwater labelled Robinson "one of the six greatest poets writing today".[1]

Roman Bartholow published in 1923, was not happily received even after the praise which followed Robinson through 1922. Edmund Wilson called it "one of the most arid products of a mind which has run much into the sands". He admitted that a poem can be the vehicle for a novel but cannot forgive Robinson for the "absence of poetry in his poem". Though they were sometimes interesting, Robinson's poems could never be said to be beautiful. A sterility had blighted his work - its glamour fading paler and paler - it was poignant rather than intense. His old blank-verse idylls of New England, thought Wilson, had more "beauty and life".[2]

The Man Who Died Twice , published in 1924, evoked mixed responses. William Norris found it to be the "culmination of Robinson's increasing preoccupation with what might be called spiritual psychology". The actual story was left practically untold, but the spiritual story was recounted in full detail. The remorse, the pride, and the crumbling spiritual stature of the wrecked musician were of supreme and sole importance. But more

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[1]Hagedorn, op. cit., 326.

[2]Edmund Wilson, "Mr Robinson's Moonlight", The Dial, LXXIV (May, 1923), 515-517.

critically Norris added that when Robinson wandered into the "dark wood" he had neither "free wind" nor "open vista".[1] Louis Untermeyer, honoring Robinson with the title of the "ripest and most philosophical of our poets", lamented his indecisiveness in not choosing between the factual and the fantastic point of view in the poem. The result was that the book was a "cross between a grotesque narrative and inspired metaphysics, but curiously enough it is one of Robinson's triumphs". His insight into the tortured soul of Fernando Nash seemed more profound than in any of his other portraits. The tempo is more andante than usual, marred only by an excessive amount of self-cussing in which the author allowed the composer who wasted his genius to indulge. His penance, said Untermeyer, was not only inglorious, but repetitively voluminous. It was Robinson and not Fernando Nash that Untermeyer read into these lines of "ironic illumination":

> "There was the pain of seeing too clearly
> more than a man so willing to see nothing
> should have to see".[2]

Mark Van Doren said that for the conscientious reader there need not be any obscurity in the poem. The details of the story were not to be taken too literally, for the theme

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[1]William A. Norris, "The Dark Wood", The New Republic XLI (January 21, 1925).

[2]Louis Untermeyer, "Seven Against Realism", The Yale Review, XIV (July, 1925) 792-793.

was abstract and the application universal; it was a tale of the unpardonable sin, a man in full consciousness that his soul is one of the rarest gifts of the gods violates that soul and descends to a slow ruin. To Van Doren the poem was a "symphony of the most gorgeous content" and yet authentically a poem for the music was unheard, but he rather wished that some composer would attempt something with the lines and ideas of the poem for its basis.[1]

Dionysus in Doubt (1925) was the third of the trilogy that filled the lull between the collected edition and Tristram. H. S. Gorman was a personal friend of Robinson's and his review in The Bookman was kinder than most.[2] James Daly found it unutterably beneath Robinson's "usually distinguished level" and regretted its publication. Spacing it in blank verse did not prevent the "laborious social tract" from being "dull prose". He admired its sincerity, the high courage of its intention, but for all its profundity of motive, it never came alive. "The Sheaves" was a great sonnet and he liked "Not Always". In the sonnets "wisdom pulses and there is beauty in all of them". If Robinson

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[1] Mark Van Doren, "A Symphony of Sin", The Nation, CXVIII (April 16, 1924), 445.

[2] H. S. Gorman, "E. A. Robinson and Some Others", The Bookman, LXI (July, 1925), 595-596.

were totally unknown, thought Daly, his sonnets would win him high distinction, but now they could only augment and confirm a long held eminence.[1]

About this time Robinson was in need of something to reassure his public after the comparative mediocrity of his last three books. The critics were aware of him, but to the general reading public he was a poet "talked about" but "difficult", except for his early work and shorter poems. Tristram, the third portion of his Arthurian cycle, proved to be the work that made him famous.

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[1] James Daly "The Inextinguishable God", Poetry, XXVII (October, 1925), 40-44.

THE PUBLIC ACCLAIM OF TRISTRAM

Tristram brought Robinson the favor and popularity for which he had longed. Within three weeks of publication it was reprinted four times and a dozen times more during the year. The book of 4400 lines that Robinson expected "only the heroic few" to read became a best seller. The Literary Guild issued it as its book-of-the-month and published a monograph on Robinson by Mark Van Doren.[1] They held a public reception in the Little Theatre in New York that left fifty guests standing. All of the distinguished people in New York art and letters were there to greet him. Robinson himself balked at taking part in the program. A former actress, Mrs. August Belmont, read passages from the book, and Carl Van Doren spoke "of the finest Tristram poem in the English language." For once in his life Robinson was at ease, both gay and witty, in receiving his procession of admirers. This period marked the climax of his popular acclaim. Previously he had been the poet critics talked about, but comparatively few people read.

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[1] Mark Van Doren, Edwin Arlington Robinson, 1927.

The critics received Tristram with mixed feelings, but most of them were sure that it was an "important" book. H. S. Gorman felt that one might be "quite dogmatic in asserting that this is the finest long poem that has ever been produced in this country." The poet's talents were fused beautifully in a theme that called for every "iota of his poetic strength." His "unquestioned genius" had "circumscribed a moving and flame-like subject" with unfaltering art and in a "language that runs through the mind like a long string of perfectly cut jewels."[1] John Farrar's review sounded as if he were still under some sort of mystical enchantment cast by the poem. It was a poem, he said, such as a poor reviewer dreams of finding once in a life time and quite frankly he didn't expect it to "come from the pen of Mr. Robinson" because of late years his work, while mellow, had been "more erudite than impassioned" and the involutions of his thought have sometimes seemed to obscure the flow of his rhythm." But in Tristram he was a mature poet writing a poem which for beauty, technique, passion, and dramatic skill was the "equal at least of any great poem in the English language." It was strikingly original; the story had never

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[1] H. S. Gorman, "High Spots in Spring Books", The Bookman, LXV, (July 1927), 555.

been told so vividly. It moved "majestically from first to last." His psychological moods of men and women were accompanied with the "pound of physical passion and the rhythm of natural beauty." The dialogues between Tristram and Isolt had a "flaming beauty of desire unrealized and realized, of love torn and twisted and faithful, of courage and yet, underneath of irony." It was a far better poem than Merlin or Lancelot. "Here is a book that your great grandchildren will know, even if you neglect it!"[1] Frederick Pierce was not "disposed to quarrel" with the verdict that Robinson was the greatest contemporary American poet, but lamented that his "range of mood" was small. In Tristram:

> What was best and deepest in the romantic attitude has been preserved - the sense of life's transitoriness, the sense that we are breaking bubbles on changing seas of time and being. What was best in modern realism has been preserved too: the clean cut analysis of human nature; the realization that ancient characters did not seem dimly, romantically 'ancient' to themselves; the realization that the seeming villain of a piece is often a degenerate rather than a devil. The verse flows on within narrow limits perhaps, but with unerring judgment and unfailing dignity. . . Such poetry as that does not belong to any age or movement. It is a part of the lasting heritage of the race.[2]

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[1] John Farrar, "A New Tristram", The Bookman, LXIV (June 1927), 465-466.

[2] Frederick E. Pierce, "Four Poets", The Yale Review, XVII (October 1927), 177-178.

William Rose Benet felt that in some ways The Man Who Died Twice was a more remarkable poem than Tristram, but it was in a different category. In Tristram the poet was subtle and sophisticated in the greatest sense in his understanding of true love and passion. Its essence lay in the profound manner in which Robinson went to the root of an analysis of love in connection with fatality. It was intricately comprehensive; that would be its abiding power "for generations of readers." Benet felt that the highest praise that he could give was that Robinson had told "the whole story with far-reaching implications."[1]

Carl Van Doren, who called it the "finest Tristram poem in the English language," felt it "too early" to decide whether Tristram was really better than Merlin or Lancelot, Avon's Harvest, Three Taverns, or The Man Who Died Twice. He was "uneasy" about its superiority over other twentieth century verse. The death of Tristram and Isolt at the end was a commentary on the world's inadequacy to contain such lovers. He found no "magic" in the poem beyond the magic of love itself; "that is enough for Mr. Robinson, as it should be enough for anybody." Van Doren paid tribute to the speed of action, the fine sinew

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[1] William Rose Benet, "Escort to Leviathan," The Outlook, CXLVI (June 1, 1927), 158, 160.

of the blank verse, the frequent flights into authentic rapture and to the "profound interpretation of Mark's mind at the close." It was "certainly one of the best narrative poems we have."[1]

Van Doren's review was cautious compared to Conrad Aiken's and Harriet Monroe's. Aiken felt that Robinson's method was "halfway between the tapestry effect of Morris and the melodrama of Wagner." His characters were too Robinsonian. They were "modern and highly self-conscious folk" who could think and feel but not act. Tristram was rather a "namby-pamby" creature. The lyricism was sometimes very beautiful, but not as beautiful as certain passages in Merlin. The dialogue was repetitive as if "he were bent on saying the same thing three times over, each time more complicatedly and abstractly and involutely than before." Once Robinson even forgot to "finish a sentence." His obscurity made the poem too frequently "unrewarding reading," which was regrettable as Robinson had given the poem "great beauty of design." That it contained many pages of extraordinary loveliness went without saying.[2]

Harriet Monroe too lamented Tristram's loss of strength for action. He was not a great warrior perform-

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[1]Carl Van Doren, "Tristram," The Forum, LXXVIII (August 1927) 312-313.

[2]Conrad Aiken, "Tristram," The New Republic, LI (May 25, 1927), 22.

ing "deeds of derring-do, nor a great lover in the old, fierce wild sense of carnal and emotional magnificence in love," but a "much troubled modern who was talkative, argumentative rather than impassioned." She felt that Isolt of Brittany was the character most alive, the one who achieved the most beautiful and vital poetry. Because she was a figure, "not violent but docile, not tragic but pathetic, not demanding completeness but accepting compromise unwillingly," Harriet Monroe felt that Robinson "instinctively" understood her type better than Tristram's because Isolt came "more within range of modern civilized psychology, therefore of his sympathy." She found Isolt's final speech to her father, after Tristram's death which revealed the futility of her love and marriage, to be the "most humanly true and moving passage in the book." It was a finer work than either Merlin or Lancelot, but all of them had "something remote and theoretic and unachieved"; they had "neither the emotional intensity nor quite the rhythmic splendor of this poet's narratives of modern life." Of these last she felt that The Man Who Died Twice was "perhaps the best." Although Tristram was a "tour-de-force of exceptional hardihood and somewhat astonishing success" she could not feel that it would "rank ultimately among his best works."

Unlike the other critics, Harriet Monroe tried to analyze why this particular book of Robinson's had attained such popularity. She felt that it was not only due to the "Literary Guild's powerful boost which pushed this book to a record sale, far exceeding any, or perhaps all, of the poet's earlier volumes," but also to the combination of the glamour of the "rusty-rich love-legend with modern psychological insight in character analysis."[1] It may also have been that Tristram was published in a year of peace, whereas Merlin and Lancelot had been published during the war years when reality competed with the romance of the legends. Then too in 1927 the rather general economic well being of the public put them in a mood to deal with the beauty of impassioned romance, psychologically and humanly treated.

Despite published opinion to the contrary[2] Tristram received everything from the highest praise - down. Most of the critics conceded that Robinson had a rather good mastery of blank verse: to one it was "like a long string of perfectly cut jewels," while to another it lacked the "rhythmic splendor" of his narrations of modern life. This one poem was less accused of obscurity than any other long poem.

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[1] Harriet Monroe, "On Foreign Ground", Poetry, XXXI (December 1927), 160-167.

[2] Winifred Burns, "Edwin Arlington Robinson in the Hands of the Reviewers", Poet Lore, XLVIII (Summer 1942), 164-175.

Robinson's use of Arthurian material in a modern manner was at last accepted by most of the critics although Harriet Monroe had her regrets. The fact that Robinson had poetic "genius" was undisputed but critics were undecided whether he was "a" major poet or "the" major poet. Conrad Aiken made the sole faux pas when he criticized the characters as being too Robinsonian, a few sentences following commenting that Tristram was rather a "namby-pamby" creature.

Robinson had become a great man, even by the standards of the man in the street and he rather liked it. His sense of inferiority slipped from him, for he had justified his own existence; Gardiner, whose disapproval had so plagued him (especially after the editorial of the "poet in the subway") "quivered with pride of him."[1] An elderly relative saw his picture in a mail-order catalogue and yielded all doubt. Robinson had his economic freedom at last and was able to ask Lewis Isaacs to tell his friends that he would no longer need their annual gift of $1200 a year. When he was asked how monetary success felt, he admitted that he liked it, of course, "but I have learned to get along with so little that it doesn't seem to make much difference." Yet it did. He bought new clothing and ex-

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[1] Hagedorn, 345.

ercised great care in the choice of material and color. He delighted in fine English neckties, gloves and linen handkerchiefs such as he had not been able to afford previously. His greatest satisfaction was that he would have financial security when he was old. He paid long standing debts, many of which as Hagedorn points out, had really been paid in full or more by Robinson's habit of giving away his manuscripts in recompense for favors. He had always given what he could to friends in trouble, but now he "became alert to recognize the need before it was expressed."[1] Isaacs, who was handling his investments, protested but Robinson responded, "You've never walked the streets of New York without a nickel in your pocket." His friend had no answer.

Characteristically, during his period of public popularity, he gave no lectures, appeared before no suburban women's clubs, joined no clubs, and accepted no more degrees from universities. He enjoyed his fame but did not exploit it. Within three weeks of the triumphant reception of Tristram he returned to his studio in Peterborough. By seniority as well as distinction he had become the colony's first citizen and he carried the responsibility with unpre-

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[1] Hagedorn, 346.

tentious dignity. He was a joy to Mrs. Mac Dowell for his stabilizing effect on the colony. His industry set a standard which would not vanish with him, his integrity challenged loose thinking and loose living, and his equable temper deflated the temperamental. He judged no one and interfered with nobody, but his gentleness and a certain aristocracy in him had their effect. His name took on an authority which even the young "rebels-against-everything" accepted.[1]

In 1927 the second of the collected editions appeared, but for some unknown reason it did not receive many reviews. Possibly it was overshadowed by the success of Tristram that year. Stewart Beech paid Robinson the traditional compliments in The Independent and added that in the final analysis perhaps it was Robinson's refusal to find poetry either "divine or extraordinary as a medium for his thoughts" which kept him so long in the background. Tristram convinced a wary public that it was "as natural, for him at least, to think in poetry as to think up poetry." He had touched an "immortal beauty with the colors of a simple and honest mortality" and it was in this that his "genius" lay.[2]

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[1] Hagedorn, 350.

[2] Stewart Beech, "Harvest of a Major Poet," The Independent, CXX (January 21, 1928), 68.

An edition of sonnets, collected from 1889 to 1927, was published in 1928, receiving more critical notice than the 1927 collected edition. William Rose Benet's review was rather general but mildly and quietly complimentary.[1] Conrad Aiken was more explicit in The Bookman. He felt that Robinson treated the sonnet formally, a little abstractly, at a "low pitch of intensity;" he was not much gifted on the "sensuous side;" there was a kind of Puritan bleakness in him which rather fortunately blended with his intellectual irony and dry Yankee humor; and if his sonnets never glowed or became radiant or melted "into a sort of white-hot integrity, as one feels the best sonnet should" they were nevertheless excellent. Aiken read them with a genuine pleasure and the feeling "rare enough in poetry that one's mind" was being "employed"; but afterward he failed to remember them particularly because they were "just a little colorless."[2]

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[1] Wm. Rose Benet, "Sonnets 1889-1927," The Saturday Review of Literature, V (November 24, 1928), 412.

[2] Conrad Aiken, "Unpacking Hearts with Words," The Bookman, LXVII (January 1929), 576.

Cavender's House, published in 1929, inaugurated Robinson's custom of publishing one book a year until his death. It was greeted with at least as many reviews as Tristram. Newspapers scattered all over the country capitalized on its news value after the success of Tristram and titled their reviews accordingly.[1] Most of the impor-

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[1] I was not able to locate any of these articles in Michigan libraries, but to show the scope of opinion indicated in the titles and the nation wide interest I have selected eleven to cite from the thirty-nine of which I have a record:

Anon., "A New England Tragedy," Cincinnati Times-Star (May 28, 1929), 9.

Annie-Eunice Browning, "New Robinson Study Annoys This Reviewer," The Tulsa Tribune (June 16, 1929),10.

Nathan Haskell Dale, "A Dramatic Narrative Poem by Maine's Great Poet and Author of Tristram," Portland Evening News (January 23, 1929), 5.

Vardis Fisher, "Neuroses in Poetry," The Critical Review - New York University Daily News Literary Supplement (May 1929), 2: 6, 22.

Ferner Nuhn, "Thoughtful Finished," The Des Moines Sunday Register (February 9, 1930), 3.

R. G. Mc Williams, "Leading Master of Verse Shines in Latest Volume," The Birmingham News (May 12, 1929), Magazine Section, 5.

"Robinson's Contemporary Poems Free of Miltonic Words; Reveal Feeling of Simplicity and Restraint," The Daily Messenger (Canandaigua, New York) (June 3, 1929), 6.

John Wm. Rogers, "Dark and Illusive Poem is Robinson's Cavender's House," Dallas Times Herald (May 19, 1929), Pt V, 9.

(Footnotes continued next page)

tant magazines reviewed it, also under equally interesting titles. Louis Untermeyer considered the "unfolding of the tale" rewarding but decided that it was the sheer poetry of it that was compeling and convincing. He was moved to denounce the French addition to English poetic form: "Whatever the definition of poetry may be, poetry itself has little to do with rhyme and meter." The lift or intensity of thought in Robinson's poem carried the words beyond thought, even beyond feeling and entered "that other dimension which is poetry" where "meanings lie beyond meanings," and "sense and sound, sense and essence are one."

> Behind the austere introspections, the half-lit silences, the syntactical convolutions, a richness that is part tone, part texture, manifests itself. It is a reticent color that in the midst of darkness - a darkness in which the poem is dyed - makes itself somehow felt, now in a flicker of wit, now in a page of music, now in a philosophical aside.

Footnotes continued from previous page)

"Sternly Tragic Mood Pervades Robinson Poem," The Salt Lake Tribune (May 5, 1929), 11.

Floyd S. Van Vuren, "Tragedy of Cavender's House," The Milwaukee Journal (April 27, 1929), 6.

Thomas K. Whipple, "Ghosts," The Argonaut (San Francisco) (May 18, 1929), 55; 4-5.

But more than any other "feature" Cavender's House revealed to Untermeyer Robinson's restless, uncertain but persistent search for moral values - a quest and a questioning of ultimates. Untermeyer noted that this search seemed to be running through an age no longer satisfied with skepticism. Even the "brilliant explorer of 'The Wasteland'" could not live in the limbo he explored; it was significant that the same year that Eliot turned to a faith beyond intellect, Robinson was "driving past reason" to find:

> . . . . . there must be a God, or if not God
> A purpose and a law.

The poem was not so grammatically involved as some of Robinson's, but the critic suspected the poet of taking a perverse pleasure in writing sentences as contorted as:

> There might be so much less for us to learn,
> That we who know so little, and know least
> When our complacency is at our best,
> Might not learn anything.

He admitted that this was an "exceptionally calisthenic construction" and that for the most part the new poem proceded without "such verbal back-somersaults." Cavender's House was "less panoplied" than Tristram, "less dramatic" than The Man Who Died Twice, and while simpler it was no less characteristic of its author. It was one of his major creations and one which had "the deep breath of permanence."[1]

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[1] Louis Untermeyer, "Essential Robinson," The Saturday Review of Literature, V (May 11, 1929), 995-996.

Helen Mac Afee felt that Robinson was "more himself than in Tristram." His revelation of tragedy had a stark, intense vitality "unrelieved by ornamentation or picturesqueness" of any kind, though his verse was "often tortuous by reason of its attempt to follow ascertainable facts to their hidden tangled roots."[1] Ben Ray Redman (a critic who wrote a complimentary book about Robinson in 1926 the year before Tristram in which he called him the "greatest poet whom this country has yet produced"[2]) felt that the "chill wind" that blew through Cavender's House was "somewhat disappointing after the white fire and red fire of Tristram."[3]

Conrad Aiken thought that diffusion was carried too far; it was a little bit thin; there was too much mere dialogue and too little scene; and while the poem as a whole was skillfully managed the reader was apt to come away from it "feeling a little empty handed." Robinson's "curious dry euphuism," "careful balances and repetitions," "elaborate bandyings of set phrases to and fro between the speakers, like alternating themes in a piece of music" became monotonous and cloying; by reminding one so forcibly of all the other conversations in all his other poems he

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[1] Helen Mac Afee, "The Dark Hell of the Muses," The Yale Review XVIII (June 1929) 813-814.

[2] Ben Ray Redman, Edwin Arlington Robinson, 95.

[3] Ben Ray Redman, "Old Wine in New Bottles," New York Herald Tribune Books (September 8, 1929), 10.

weakened the reader's "belief in the actuality of the two present protagonists." Aiken believed that "The Man Against the Sky" was the finest of Robinson's poems and that Merlin was the best of the longer narratives.[1]

Jessica North believed other poets had all "gone astray after color and form;" one poet alone "has resisted the warm appeal of the senses to spend his life putting down the elusive intricacies of the mind." She felt that if Robinson could be less elaborate and less devious his poems would be "more moving;" he would never be content to "take an idea by the throat neatly and efficiently" but liked "to play with his conceptions letting them almost escape and then snatching them back," so that they "were sometimes in a bedraggled condition at the finish;" he neglected all sorts of virtues which modern poets were taught to pursue, such as "subtlety of rhythm, economy of words, and realism in conversation - that he can make us forget his shortcomings even momentarily amounts to genius." She admired his deft musical phrases, his sincerity of craftsmanship, his sustained elegance of expression, and his really profound knowledge of the ways of the human mind.[2]

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[1] Conrad Aiken, "Poetry," The Bookman, LXIX (May 1929), 322-323.

[2] Jessica North, "A Classic of Indirection," Poetry, XXXIV (July 1929), 233-236.

Cavender's House was neither generally condoned or condemned. The critics had begun to realize that Robinson's forms and methods were merely vehicles for his thought; the beauty that he achieved was in general neither sensuous nor colorful (though his descriptions of Vivien in Merlin were an exception), but a result of his ability to intensify thought and describe his characters by indirection. His ability to comprehend psychology was not doubted, but his style and "calisthenic constructions" too often obscured his meanings.

The third collected edition, published in 1929, let the new American Literature magazine to announce that though it was not the policy of the magazine to review the works of living poets or novelists the editors felt that all who took a "serious interest in contemporary literature" would welcome this new edition.[1] Louise Bogan believed that though Robinson's success with the Arthurian legends was greater than Tennyson's, the poet did not realize that the "lust, barbarity, and agony inherent in these tales could not be tamed to Tilbury Town's measure." Their power under such treatment thinned out to the "back-chat of gaffers around the stove of a country store." She found Robinson's Arthur

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[1] Anon., American Literature, I (1930).

a disgruntled weakling; Lancelot a young and Merlin an old fool; Guinevere and Vivien, a queen and an enchantress; and those other women "big and fit for warriors display the wiles of rather sentimental schoolmarms." The poet's "style failed the matter;" the philosophy that "can bear only the weight of disillusion breaks down and a kind of dispirited mysticism is the result." The non-legendary narratives from Avon's Harvest on, she thought, bore the mark of the same thinning resolution; the stories were compounded of horror and despair - full of ghosts as Henry James later work was "full of terrors and revenants;" Robinson's style, like Henry James, spent itself in weakening modifications, afterthoughts, and negations. Miss Bogan felt that the later sonnets, notably "The Sheaves" and "New England," belonged to the poet's best work. In spite of his limitations she believed that he "stands in our literature as a figure of undoubted strength."[1]

Robert Hillyer in the New England Quarterly attempted a rather comprehensive evaluation of Robinson's work in just four pages. He believed that there was not a more careful craftsman than Robinson - in his first two books he had mastered the sonnet form and blank verse as

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[1] Louise Bogan, "Tilbury Town and Beyond," Poetry, XXXVII (January 1931), 216-221.

mediums which in the main served him throughout his career; "these are both literary forms and call for an intellectual rather than an emotional or sensory response." Hillyer believed that his artistic purpose was "nothing less than the exposition of the human mind" - which theoretically meant that the scope of his material should be as great as man's experience, but actually it was limited by Robinson's "inability to portray the emotions and sensations which cause states of mind."

It seemed to the critic that modern verse in general contained no human beings but only "birch trees and larks . . . with the shadow of the author like that of a bad photographer falling across the picture." Robinson was different in that he withheld himself and studied his fellowmen:

> In the shorter poems he employs direct description or narration, leaving implicit the person behind the event; in the longer forms he reverses the method, and by discourse, as with Captain Craig, or almost chemical analysis, as with Fernando Nash, he fishes cell after cell from the agonized brain-pan and establishes - not perhaps the character - the separate parts of a character.

Hillyer believed that the method of the shorter poems would be more enduring because he could remember "The Veteran Sirens," "Luke Havergal," and "Miniver Cheevy" long after he had ceased to follow the "hesitations of Tristram."

The critic felt that Robinson's great virtue lay in his delineation of the "actual, that moment which implies all the past and all that is to come;" when he paused too long "what is ponderable becomes merely heavy." The poet's vices were his lack of lyrical cadences when he wrote in three or four stress metres and the lack of lyrical feeling in the longer poems; Robinson could compensate for the lack of musical exaltation in poems where the thought itself was intense - not in the long poems for they contained too few fine passages to elevate an entire book, but in the sonnets, epigrams, and shorter character sketches. It seemed to Hillyer that only "the flawless literary technique and the grave and sweeping thoughts" of "The Man Against the Sky" and "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford" sustained at any length the full poetic gifts of their author - the first by its philosophical breadth and the second by "simple insight devoid of crabbed and dubious psychology." He thought that Robinson might agree with him because "The Man Against the Sky" was put at the beginning of this collected edition.

Hillyer thought Robinson to be the "most impressive figure on our literary horizon" not only because of his success in the shorter works but also because of his great

failures which though "in themselves frustrate" imparted to every sonnet and character sketch the "sense of powers held in reserve; if his major works were not of great beauty at least his minor works bore the "impact of a major poet."[1]

Horace Gregory, a young poet himself, acknowledged the debt of all living poets to Robinson for bringing to poetry the "dignity of serious performance." He believed that Robinson had established the tenets of his own faith sometime between the writing of Captain Craig in 1902 and The Man Who Died Twice in 1924 and that all that had remained for him to do was to perfect his technique and perform the physical labor of writing poetry to test "the validity of his own dogma" in the three divisions of his work. These were: the semi-dramatic narratives of which Captain Craig was the first and The Glory of the Nightingales (1930) was the latest; the Arthurian legends reworked in modern terms; and a sizable quantity of short blank-verse narratives and miscellaneous lyrics which included a "fairly large collection of sonnets."

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[1]Robert Hillyer, "Collected Poems," The New England Quarterly III (January 1930), 148-151.

Gregory felt that Robinson, like Hardy, had developed a principle of self criticism which prevented him from committing any of the grosser errors evident in the work of such contemporaries as Edgar Lee Masters and Vachel Lindsay (though he failed to mention what they were) and had composed the bulk of his work within what the critics had come to "recognize as Robinson's own standard of excellence."

It was unfortunate that some book club hadn't steered The Glory of the Nightingales into the best seller class, Gregory thought, for it was "easily read and almost as easily forgotten;" given a wide distribution the story with its "subdued gun play and delicate moderation of melodrama" could become popular in a worthy sense and serve as an attractive introduction for Robinson to people who merely knew him as a name discussed in literary company. The poem had all the "high polish and slickness of a well turned detective story." The critic thought that Robinson had never shown the technique of his narratives to a better advantage. His blank verse had become a flexible medium with stops and pauses that reflected the "tempo of our speech," and almost needless to say there were no heavily dramatic gestures in the phrasing of individual lines.

Gregory considered that this poem in realtion to the main body of the poet's work merely proved that he had said very nearly everything that he had to say about human weakness, mortality, and the study of the great American failure that he had begun in the Mauve Decade; if the poem contributed little or nothing to the advance of Robinson's fully recognized reputation it certainly verified the opinion that he was an "artist of remarkable ingenuity." [1]

William Rose Benet, in his review of Robinson's latest poem, took time to evaluate his progress in relation to his contemporaries:

> Robinson's success as an innovator becomes more apparent with the passing of years. The progress of his quiet creation has not been even, but when one compares it with the development of the talents of most of his contemporaries it gathers to itself an astonishing mass and variety of accomplishment. Our best modern poets seem to have worked at their highest pitch for but a few years. Then if death did not intervene, we continued to hear their voices in repetition and in a less striking repetition of their most characteristic utterance. A few with the inevitable lessening of the lyrical impulse seemed rather to go to pieces: they were no longer surprised by

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[1] Horace Gregory, "The Glory of the Nightingales," The New Republic, LXIV (October 29, 1930), 303-304.

> impetuous inspiration. They were neither self-critical enough nor assiduous enough sagaciously to build on their initial promises, developing their most native virtues, discarding the experimentation that proved uncharacteristic. Robinson more than any of them, save perhaps Frost, was able wisely to weigh his particular powers, to proceed along the individual trail he had blazed at the start.

Benet felt that though Robinson's manner had frequently become mannerism and he had repeated himself, just at the moment when the critics' axes were about to fall some new creation of the poet's made its "unobtrusive appearance with force and freshness sufficient to cause the gossipers to look a little silly." The poet's first innovation was the transformation of the sonnet into a vehicle for a novel "in petto;" he brought a new tone into the lyric, invented Browningesque tales of characters, developed the dramatic lyric, and proceeded to psychological analysis in his long poems in blank verse. Though Robinson's idiom had never changed, Benet felt that they needn't so long as he "continually conquered new provinces." Contrary to some of Robinson's other critics, Benet felt that the poet's first concern was to present human beings in action and his chief comment was on fata l-ity. If The Glory of the Nightingales was not one of the poet's greatest achievements, Benet considered it just one

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more example of the poet's ability to analyze the human spirit "under all manner of special strains and stresses;" above being a poet he could be the most profound psychological novelist of the day if his characters didn't "talk Robinson" and not as "they might speak in life."[1]

Odel Shepard, who seems never to have been overly appreciative in his reviews of Robinson, suggested in The Bookman that the other reviewers had praised The Glory of the Nightingales on the basis of the poet's reputation and not on its worth. He felt that the book contained "no glory and no song;" that the title had been chosen with sardonic intent; and that the subdued and level tone of the blank verse was the work of a highly skilled craftsman in words but that "not one memorable line stands forth." The story itself was depressing rather than impressive, in Shepard's opinion:

> We see love and friendship ruined, honor sullied, even hatred - the one bright thing before us - made futile, and a firm intention to commit murder foiled by mocking chance. To phrase it crudely, Mr. Robinson seems to say that in our time the purposes and even the strongest passions of the individual are

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[1] William Rose Benet, "Round About Parnassus," The Saturday Review of Literature, VII (September 20, 1930), 142.

> compelled into channels of no individual's choosing . . . It may be that Mr. Robinson more or less consciously intended this strange and forbidding narrative poem as a prophecy of years coming on into which neither he nor any other sensible man would care to live. But the poem is not altogether a prophecy; in some respects it is painfully like a description of what we now see about us.[1]

Though Robinson's critics were well aware of his preoccupation with fatality from 1902 on, the publication of Tristram, Cavender's House, and The Glory of the Nightingales led them toward the conclusions that the poet was a fatalist and an agnostic, as he is labelled in most anthologies, textbooks, and biographical surveys. Many times during his poetic career the critics had reason to believe that he was slipping, but each time he changed his form and his style just enough to regain their interest. It was a source of satisfaction to Robinson when a French scholar, Charles Cestre, in lecture courses on his poetry at Bryn Mawr and at Harvard, called him America's classical poet in whom "poetical genius" had "perfect equipoise of thought." His publication of one book a year from 1929 on to the time of his death endangered his reputation, but his growing economic security compelled him to do so even at the risk of having it said that he was capitalizing on his fame. His friends

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[1] Odell Shepard, "The Glory of the Nightingales," The Bookman, LXXIV (September 1931), 97-98.

tried to make him see that, even though he had nothing, they would not let him want. "That's well enough for a poet who is producing," he said, "but a poet who has stopped writing is just an old man, and he can't be helped." [1]

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[1] Hagedorn, 365.

THE RECEPTION OF THE "ANNUAL POEMS"

Robinson wrote the 2500 lines of Mattias at the Door in a white heat during the summer of 1930. Still possessed by the theme, he turned to the third chapter of the gospel of St. John which had been his inspiration, and in three days he let Nicodemus "write itself." Hagedorn recalls a letter Robinson wrote in his youth to his friend Arthur Gledhill in which he said:

> I fear that I haven't the stamina to be a Christian - accepting Christ as either human or divine...though I see a glimmer of light once in a while and then meditate on possibilities.

Hagedorn felt that these poems came from Robinson's unconscious ancestral resevoir as the "song of the intellectual mystic, who wanted to give himself wholly yet could not quite manage it."[1]

Matthias at the Door was published in 1931. Eda Lou. Walton's review in The Nation attributed Robinson's success with the narrative form in which almost all other narrative poets failed to his selection of highly significant and symbolic incidents; the aesthetic result of his fusion of the reality of the subject - the scene and the character - with the poet's vision was a high level in beauty of language and feeling. She noted that though it had often been said that

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[1] Hagedorn, 261-263.

Robinson's deepest concern was with the idealism at the root of failure it was rarely noted that the intensities reached in his narrative poems were those of the dramatic interaction of character upon character. The last three poems proved to the critic that Robinson had ability in the treatment of human drama. They were a profound and important elaboration of the themes of his earliest verse, matured by a greater understanding of human nature and the forces that motivate it. She felt that no more could be asked of a poet than that he

> widen and deepen his observation until it becomes a comprehensive study of life, a poetic philosophy which is illuminating and satisfying to both the heart and mind, and this is the accomplishment of the mature Robinson.[1]

Harriet Monroe found the characters in Matthias at the Door "a bit theoretic and shadowy;" the story ran more simply and swiftly than was customary with Robinson through the flowing rhythms of his "beautifully orchestrated blank verse." The talk of the four characters was "more like talk" and was less burdened with psychological analysis such as "clogged the dialogue of Tristram." She noted that Robinson's ill-assorted couples were always childless and seemingly oblivious of the existence of children but Miss Monroe

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[1]Eda Lou Walton, "So Wrapped in Rectitude," The Nation, CXXXII (October 14, 1931), 403-404.

thought that it was because the "fearsome sanity and directness of children," and the "thrilling emotions" they generated often straightened out marital tangles so that no story was left for the "poet resolved for tragedy." She noted that he had perfected his blank verse since he had written Captain Craig, which was "stark and a bit frigid," though even then it often attained subtle harmonies. His verse had become "singularly responsive" with a restrained music in conformity with highly intellectualized motives.[1]

Odell Shepard found Matthias at the Door more satisfactory than The Glory of the Nightingales. Rather flippantly he said:

> To those who know Mr. Robinson's style and manner it is unnecessary to say that the poem is subtle in thought, often obscure in expression, replete with ironic innuendo and understatement. There is to be sure no suggestion of song or of ecstacy anywhere in it; the mood is monotonous and weary; for sentences at a time, the verse is differentiated from prose - and a prose quite lustreless and dull - only by the beat of the metre. Yet the poem works out to a conclusion of tragedy rather than mere despair which lifts it to a high level. The lives of two men and one woman are thwarted and wrecked to work the cure of an

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[1] Harriet Monroe, "Robinson's Matthias," Poetry, XXXIX (January 1932), 212-217.

> almost impregnable pride in the righteous and admirable Matthias. They die that he may be born. We feel that any one of them is worth far more in actuality than he can ever be after any conceivable purification, but this Mr. Robinson implies is one of the mysteries of life and death, and of all sacrifice.[1]

Nicodemus, published a year later in 1932, did not fare much better than its predecessor. Babette Deutsch found it much like Robinson's other work in form and matter, but wished that in "travelling the old road he had discovered more of the old beauties;" the familiar melody was too insistent, the basic fact of character was not "sufficiently explicated by the verse." Of his use of drama she said:

> It is of course a poet's distinction to have a voice of his own, but when he is writing poetry that verges on drama (the nearest thing to poetic drama that we seem to have), his problem is how he shall weave back and forth between his personal tone and that of the men and women he is representing. It is a delicate business and one that lies, possibly, not within the province of the poet's consciousness. Yet Robinson has himself carried it through more than once, never more victoriously than in "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford." That success is nowhere repeated here.

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[1]Odell Shepard, "Recent Verse," The Yale Review, XXI (March 1932), 591.

Miss Deutsch noted that the title poem had an anti-climactic conclusion and felt that "The Prodigal Son" was the most satisfactory and rereadable poem in the book.[1]

Harold Rosenberg noted that it was difficult to find images or lines in Nicodemus which were poetically rather than philosophically trenchant because Robinson's unit of measure was larger than the image on the line - the tension was carried by the whole passage. He overlooked the title poem and cited "The March of the Cameron Men" for its passion built up by the entirety of what had preceded, "here intoned by Robinson with admirable clarity" and an absence of wordiness, in a "language cadenced by feeling and rhythmically complicated within the tradition of its formal line."[2]

The reviews of Talifer, published in 1933, were no more encouraging. R. P. Blackmur, writing in Poetry, damned Robinson by saying that he had a "negative competence;" the emotional content of his poem was not great nor did its rhythmical texture require much emotion; the verse scanned easy and assured, both in subject and meter, and

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[1] Babette Deutsch, "The Hands of Esau," The New Republic, LXXII (October 5, 1932), 213-214.

[2] Harold Rosenberg, "Judgement and Passion," Poetry, XLI (December 1932), 158-161.

had "most of the negative virtues of sound versification." The critic felt that the people were treated as pawns and Dr. Quick as an interlocutor - for such treatment both wisdom and humor should have been firm and specific, but instead both were adulterated, one with kindliness (which was the ruination of rhetoric because it left so little to be definite about) and the other with verbiage, so that ultimately Dr. Quick has "the force, not of a brimming reservoir of human character, but only that of a Dickensian 'character'." He cited The Man Who Died Twice as an opposite example "where the conceptual strength alone is enough to hold the elements of character in undissolved combination."[1]

The critics were not alone in their confusion and misapprehension of Robinson's later long poems. The Poet's old friends too had trouble with the psychological studies, groping clumsily for words to express their admiration for poetry which they did not understand or feel at ease with. "Newcomers among the professional critics began to speak of Robinson as 'cerebral' and to intimate" that the poet who had "painted Vivien at Broceliande and written the long duet of the lovers at Joyous Gard, lacked emotion and passion." One young rebel was bold enough to tell Robinson

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[1] R. P. Blackmur "Verse That is Too Easie," Poetry, XLIII (January, 1934), 221-225.

one day in the dining-room at Peterborough that his work was not vivid enough, being all blacks and browns and grays. Robinson puckered his lips and let the criticism have its moment of sultry silence. "Those are pretty fast colors," he answered.

The criticisms on the whole were not unfavorable, though reserved, and only a few were savage; but Robinson had for so long received the critics general approval that it was a shock for him to face the decline which came during the period in which he was writing too much. He was bewildered by what he called the "blast of imbecility" which greeted Talifer, the inability of the reviewers to see that the poem was a comedy and not a well of esoteric philosophy. He sputtered when passages which he had fancied as rather amusing were presented as examples of "unconscious humor." He decided that it was "dangerous to be different" and to turn again to "suicide and gloom." It was partly because of its effect on the sale of his books that the adverse criticism troubled him, but each new book sold eight or ten thousand copies regardless of the critics. Another reason such criticism bothered him was that he was not so sure as he pretended to be regarding posterity's verdict on his work.[1]

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[1] Hagedorn, 364-366.

Amaranth, written during the summer of 1933, exhausted Robinson physically, for he had been stricken with a succession of headaches which probably were the result of his having been knocked down accidentally by a baseball two years previously in Boston. Though X-ray examinations revealed nothing, he continued to feel the consequences, particularly in his ear; whenever his ear was seriously affected, he was inclined to think that death might not be far. After the exhaustion that Amaranth precipitated his friends felt that a smash-up seemed imminent.

The new book was published in 1934. One critic at least realized what it meant to Robinson. Robert Hillyer recognized it as an allegory that reflected that "dark night of the soul" which even the greatest artist passes through when he doubts his powers. He found in it "hints of the futility of all human endeavors" when Amaranth "the unfading flower - the genius of Time itself - looks upon them with his unconquerable eyes." The critic saw in it a steady argument for form and seriousness in art; a "quiet onslaught, also, against the precious school of criticism which maintains that poetry need not mean anything."

The almost prosey quality of Robinson's blank verse disturbed Hillyer by its lack of integrity within the line; the "enjambments" very often seemed "merely fortuitous as if the author had reached the end of his five feet and so started another line;" his ear was also disturbed by an "unintentional jingle of rhyme, sometimes of false rhyme." Hillyer believed that when Robinson said of Fargo that he made "an oily-fiery sacrifice one day" instead of clearly saying that he burned his paintings, the poet was "padding." The critic thought that although the allegory sometimes became obscure, the merits of the poem vastly out-weighed the small faults; the epigramatic quality was well able to point satire or sharpen pathos, no other work of Robinson's was so rich in memorable phrases; almost without exception the characters, although personifications of general types, were also "laughably real."

Hillyer believed that the poem had "wit, shrewdness, and some majesty" and that those readers who had been disappointed in Robinson in recent years would "welcome this rejuvenation of his powers." He would go so far as to say that the poet had never surpassed Amaranth.[1]

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[1] Robert Hillyer, "Amaranth," The New England Quarterly, VII (March 1935), 113-114.

Horace Gregory took an opposite view, commenting that Robinson's annual book was written to help him escape boredom. He reiterated his idea that Robinson had said all that he wished to say when he completed The Man Who Died Twice. The Arthurian cycle was merely an elaboration of his thesis that gave him the proper feeling of detachment from his material and it amused him to do the legend well, to give it fresh meaning, to show that Tennyson had by no means exhausted its possibilities. Gregory felt that Robinson's art and psychological insight were limited and dull - Amaranth, Tristram, and a half dozen others he could add were examples, but the poet did understand the psychology of failure. The characters in Amaranth the critic believed were not motivated by their own volition, but by "that curious will we recognize as Robinson's mind."

Gregory made the point which most other critics consistently had either missed or left unsaid - that Robinson's "survivors" (Eben Flood, Ben Jonson's Shakespeare, and Merlin) all had the "gift of self knowledge equal to genius which implied the intelligent use of irony and that vaguely defined quality, integrity." [1]

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[1] Horace Gregory, "The Weapon of Irony," Poetry, XLV (December 1934), 157-161.

Carty Ranck greeted Amaranth with an enthusiastic review in The Boston Transcript;[1] Percy Hutchison was warm in his praise in The New York Times Book Review;[2] and the western reviewers were kind; but The New Republic dismissed the poem in four inches of cold contempt as

> a most pathetic revelation of the bitter - yet heroic - self-doubt in the mind of a poet who had once struck genuine fire, knows that he did, and fears that he never will again.

Other reviewers said the book was "just another evidence of hardening poetic arteries." Some declared the theme "sentimental", others found the material "workable" enough, but the treatment "vague and superficial." Hagedorn found it ironic that the most savage assault on the fame of the "one conspicuous mystic in contemporary American poetry, the creator of the reborn Matthias, the interpreter of the Christ-hungry Nicodemus," should have been published in The Christian Century.[3]

Robinson, who was always acutely sensitive to criticism, was hurt deeply. He mused that a man might dream half a life time over some conception and a critic would presume

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[1] Carty Ranck, "An American Poet in a Nightmare Land," The Boston Evening Transcript (September 26, 1934), Pt. III,2.

[2] Percy Hutchison, "Edwin Arlington Robinson's Dramatization of a Dream," The New York Times Book Review, (September 30, 1934), 4.

[3] Merrill Root, "The Decline of E. A. Robinson," The Christian Century, LI (December 5, 1934) 1554.

Cf. Hagedorn, 371

in half an hour to understand and appraise it. His distress deepened the physical exhaustion in which his summer had ended. His friends persuaded him to submit to an exploratory operation the following January which revealed a cancer that could be removed only at the cost of hastening his death. The incision was closed and the doctors told him that he was suffering from arthritis and "stomach trouble." He remained in the hospital and there corrected the proofs for King Jasper. He exulted when The Atlantic Monthly printed a favorable review of Amaranth,[1] lamenting that the critics had been pretty severe with him, but he acknowledged at the same time that he had published too frequently during the last ten years; no poet could afford to have a new volume year after year, "But what could I do? I needed the money." He died not long after and King Jasper was published posthumously.[2]

Robinson had always been distrustful of contemporary themes but he was unable to resist the temptation to write what he called his "treatise on economics," titled King Jasper after the mine down which the last of his patrimony had vanished thirty-five years before. He gave the poem a triple significance - first as a story of six unhappy beings,

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[1]Theodore Morrison, "Modern Poets," The Atlantic Monthly, CLV (March 1935) The Atlantic Bookshelf, 10, 12.

[2]Hagedorn, 372-383.

caught in a cataclysm of all that is life to them; then, as a symbolic drama of the disintegration of the capitalistic system; and last as an allegory of ignorance, knowledge and aspiration. Robinson had always been preoccupied with the paradox of those "who having eyes see not" and it had permeated much of his work. The poet had intended to write a brief foreward to King Jasper but with his customary distaste for preface he changed his mind.

The critics were kinder to this last poem and made concessions to Robinson's taste. M. Boie in The New England Quarterly called it a dramatic story, skillfully constructed and subtly told and enlarged his idea:

> The power and movement of the characterization; the natural exposition through the actions and speeches of the characters; the preparation for the struggle; hinted in the ironic beginnings of the first sections, and woven into the narrative with tightening suspense; and the division of the action into episodes that rise steadily to the climax, vigorously pose the conflicts until they are dramatically resolved, and the end of the poem rises, as in all true tragedy to a note of exaltation through suffering.

The critic wished that Robinson had chosen less time-worn symbols to embody a story that was so essentially timeless - the struggle of the evils of individual desire for power as against the evils of revengefulness and violence with both failing through "lack of knowledge and lack of respect for the ideal life."

Boie felt the blank verse was pliable and perfectly suited to the quiet rhythms of the poet's thought:

> It is the tone qualities of the whole poem - the beautiful slow music of contemplation, excited at times by conversation and action, by terror and pity; varied by the constant use of run-on lines, changing sentence structure and caesuras, double endings, hovering accents, and metrical silences - that are arresting and memorable.

It was passages rather than individual lines that Boie noted he read again, passages that revealed Robinson himself - it was "this quiet persistence in being his own self that is most revealed and most to be respected in King Jasper" because Robinson knew and proved the necessity for a man to think and write in his own way; "in his own loneliness he wrote, not of himself, but out of himself."

He admired Robert Frost's preface to the book in which Frost stated that a poet's thinking and caring about life and human beings, and his expression of it in his own way - the way that what he is and what he has to say dictate, are what matters most.[1]

F. O. Matthieson thought that the tone of Robinson's most enduring work, the earlier dramatic monologues which voiced the loneliness of the individual, rose from the cour-

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[1] M. Boie, "Review of King Jasper," The New England Quarterly, IX (March, 1936), 154-156.

age with which they faced the failure of the Emersonian tradition to resolve the problem of society and solitude - against the meaningless chaos of the world they posed a self-reliance that was no longer hopeful, but beneath its ironic wit, stoical to the verge of despair.

The partial failure of Robinson's effort to come to grips with contemporary society in King Jasper, Matthiessen believed, was attributable to the long solitude of the poet's grief for the lot of individual man which disqualified him for the full handling of the social problems and caused his treatment, despite the energy of his thoughtful verse to fall into allegory that was bare and obscure.[1]

William Rose Benet felt that as the last work of a man who had dedicated a long life to poetry, worked more assiduously at his craft than most artists, wielded a style that was "one of the most saliently individual of our time in literature," and sometimes failed in the significance of what he had to say - King Jasper was a narrative of extraordinary directness and vitality. "Its characteristics are really symbols, but they are symbols significant of our era." [2]

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[1] F. O. Matthiessen, "Review of King Jasper," The Yale Review, XXV (Spring 1936), 603-07.

[2] William Rose Benet, "The Phoenix Nest," The Saturday Review of Literature, XIII (November 16, 1935), 8.

THE CRITICISM SINCE ROBINSON'S DEATH

The general trend of the criticism of Robinson did not change appreciably after his death, except that it tended to deal more than previously with the development of his philosophy. Floyd Stovall in 1938 noted that

> Robinson looks beyond the tragedies of persons and societies and beholds life as an eternal and creative will evolving through a succession of changing patterns toward an ideal of perfection.[1]

In the same year Frederic Carpenter stated that in Tristram Robinson realized for the first and perhaps the only time, the positive implications which had been implicit in transcendental philosophy from the beginning.[2] In 1940, Winfield Townley Scott ventured the opinion that though he might yet be applauded or censured for insisting that Robinson was America's greatest poet, he believed that the eventual valuation of Robinson would have to evaluate the American concept that would preserve both the rights of democracy and of the individual, for Robinson had stated his adherence to that concept, and had revealed all its consequences, more often and more brilliantly than any other poet.[3] The same year H. H.

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1 Floyd Stovall, "The Optimism Behind Robinson's Tragedies", American Literature, X (March 1938), 1-23.

2 Frederic Ives Carpenter, "Tristram the Transcendent", New England Quarterly, XI (September 1938), 501-523.

3 Winfield Townley Scott, "Robinson to Robinson", Poetry, LIV (May 1939), 92-100.

Waggoner wrote a review of the pertinent details of Robinson's "lifelong struggle against the unyielding despair of scientific determinists."[1] Louise Dauner felt that the concept of "the good man" assuming a personal obligation to his society, and reinvesting his resources for the "enrichment of the 'Whole Good' underlies both the 'character' poems and the 'social' poems."[2] Richard Crowder observed that by the frequency of their recurrence the problems of social man were more important to Robinson than those of the intellectualist and the aesthete; his preoccupation with the relationships of men and women indicated that the problem of love was fundamental to his thinking; Robinson's own complex attitude was a mixture of the theoretic, the aesthetic, the religious , the political and the social--that is, he was analytical, sensitive to beauty, mystic, desirous of recognition, and deeply aware of man's relation to society.[3]

Of the books published about Robinson and his work, four are particularly worth study. Charles Cestre, the French scholar, who once called Robinson America's classic poet in

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1 Hyatt Howe Waggoner, "E. A. Robinson and the Cosmic Chill," New England Quarterly, XIII (March 1940), 65-84.

2 Louise Dauner, "Vox Clamantis: E. A. Robinson as a Critic of American Democracy", New England Quarterly, XV (September 1942), 401-426.

3 Richard Crowder, "Here Are the Men; E. A. Robinson's Male Types", New England Quarterly, XVIII (September 1945), 346-367.

whom poetical genius had its "perfect equipoise of thought", published his modified Bryn Mawr lectures in 1930 as An Introduction to Edwin Arlington Robinson. Cestre characterized Robinson as the heir of the romanticists in his enrichments of his poetry, the precursor of the imagists but thoroughly himself in his balanced interpretation of conduct and his vigorous insight into the permanent truths of life. It is a particularly important book because Robinson felt that Cestre understood him perhaps better than any other critic.

Estelle Kaplan's book, Philosophy in the Poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson, published in 1940, is one of the Columbia Studies in American Culture, suggested and guided by Professor Herbert W. Schneider. Miss Kaplan thinks that

> The point is not so much that Robinson is an idealist, as that perhaps, through the influence of Royce, he is willing to allow full range to the skepticism implicit in idealism rather than to the dogmatic fatalism of materialism. His skepticism means that one can never know, not that knowing is useless. The puritan trait seems to indicate that in his letters, as in his poems, he is talking not only about material things but also about heaven and hell in the human soul. He is carrying on the gospel of Emerson and of New England deepened by an idealistic appreciation of pessimism. His conscience is 'New England' and is preoccupied with his own spiritual state--his soul; it is in truth a spiritual selfishness 'that hangs to a man like a lobster', especially in New England. This combination of puritanism, transcendentalism, and pessimism (Hawthorne, Emerson, and Hardy) gradually crystallized into a permanent pattern for his poetry, but it was at the same time an expression of his 'New England conscience'.[1]

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[1] Estelle Kaplan, Philosophy in the Poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson, 11-12.

One of the most valuable little books to the student of Robinson's poetry is Yvor Winters' Edwin Arlington Robinson published in 1946. It considers the influences on Robinson's style (Browning and Praed), tells the stories of the narrative poems, and evaluates the poet's work as a whole. Winters feels that Robinson's most successful work is to found among his shorter poems such as "Hillcrest", "Eros Turannos", "The Wandering Jew", "Many Are Called", "The Three Taverns", and "Rembrandt to Rembrandt". Despite a lack of richness in his language, Winters thought that Robinson found his "closest relatives" among Wordsworth, Tennyson, Browning, Hardy, and Bridges, that "his position in relation to these poets is not that of the lowest".[1]

The only biography of Robinson to date is that of Hermann Hagedorn, a fellow member of the MacDowell Colony who first induced Robinson to go there in 1911. The book was published in 1939 just two years after Robinson's death. On the whole it is a very good piece of work; but while it has much wit and is well written, one has the feeling that there is much more to be said. Perhaps Hagedorn was hampered by the fact that those of whom it might be said were still alive and would not particularly appreciate Hagedorn's or the public's interest; though his descriptions of Alfred Louis, Joseph Lewis French, and Isadora

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1 Yvor Winters, Edwin Arlington Robinson, 144.

Duncan stand out--but perhaps they would in any book. The book is written with the sympathy of a friend and Robinson, fine as he was, was made to appear too often as a virtuous prig rather than as Hagedorn intended when he surrounded his New York Clan life with strong drink, pornographic pictures, and wild stories. Robinson's early and middle years are fairly well covered but the last twenty years are treated in a pointillistic fashion. There is a need for a definitive biography and though there have been rumors that various writers are contemplating one it has yet to be confirmed.

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103

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