

INTRODUCTION



Edwin Arlington Robinson

(1869-1935)

E. A. Robinson wrote at least a dozen great poems--critics disagree about which are the best--while bridging the 19th to the 20th century in literary history by using traditional poetic forms to express a modern sensibility. Robert Frost said Robinson was "content with the old-fashioned way to be new." When reviewers asked him why he refused to abandon rhyme and meter for free verse, Robinson replied, "I write badly enough as it is." He is most admired for his portraits of characters in his mythical Tilbury Town--especially Miniver Cheevy and the sadly humorous Mr. Flood--poems influenced by the dramatic monologues of Robert Browning. As a New Englander, the austere Robinson sustained the long tradition of Emersonian Idealism, but tempered darkly by his alienation, the stoicism of Thomas Hardy and a moral perspective that makes him comparable to Hawthorne. Before the emergence of Frost, Robinson was considered the greatest living American poet and was awarded three Pulitzer Prizes.

BIOGRAPHY

Robinson came on both sides from old New England stock, including carpenters and shipwrights. His father was a businessman and his mother descended from Thomas Dudley, the second colonial governor of Massachusetts, and from Dudley's daughter, a sister of Anne Bradstreet the first American poet. His parents already had sons and they wanted a daughter. They were so disappointed they did not even name him. They just called him "the baby." Months after his birth, some people they met while on vacation put names in a hat and one whose hometown was Arlington pulled out the name Edwin.

Shortly after his birth his family moved to Gardiner, Maine, which became his Tilbury Town. He led a quiet life, except when one of his teachers struck him, permanently injuring an ear. For the rest of his life he experienced acute pain and the fear that the damage might reach his brain and cause insanity. Shy and insecure, in high school he learned to write verse from an amateur poet interested in the French forms--the rondeau, the ballade, and the villanelle. He was able to attend Harvard for awhile, but had to return home without graduating when his father's health failed. His mother needed his help. One of his brothers had become a drug addict, an alcoholic and a burden.

PARANORMAL EXPERIENCES

While his father was dying, various articles of furniture in the house levitated, a row of books got swept off a shelf, the piano moved by itself, there were table rappings and other paranormal events. Robinson

could never forget such evidence confirming the existence of a spiritual dimension beyond the material and it became the experiential basis of his Idealism, expressed in “Credo” and “L’Envoi.”

POET IN POVERTY

Living in Gardiner, in 1896 he published his first book of poems, at his own expense. He had his photo taken: “I have a look that might lead one to think that I had just eaten the lining out of my own coffin, but that is the fault of an uncomfortable feel somewhere in my spinal column.” Just before his book came out, his mother died suddenly of black diphtheria. The doctor and the undertaker refused to touch the body. Robinson and his brothers had to lay her in the coffin. The minister read the service through the front window of the house. Then a reviewer of his book called his poetry too somber: his “humor is of a grim sort, and the world is not beautiful to him, but a prison-house.” Robinson replied in a letter to the magazine that published the review: “I am sorry that I have painted myself in such lugubrious colours. 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.”

The following year a friend paid for the republication of his first book, retitled *The Children of the Night* (1897). He went to New York and with financial help from a relative and another friend, self-published a second collection, *Captain Craig* (1902). Genteel editors did not care for his realistic poems. He got rejected consistently. Lonely and depressed and barely getting by, he became an alcoholic like Mr. Flood, but it wasn’t funny. He nearly died. At the time, free lunches were available with the price of a drink in saloons. A friend got him a job working on the New York subway then under construction. For two dollars a day he clocked workers and tallied supplies in the dark endless tunnels.

“THE GLORY OF THE LIGHT”

Then, as if by divine intervention in 1905 President Theodore Roosevelt, a patron of the arts, read his poetry. He invited the poet to the White House, casting the national spotlight upon him. Yet Robinson had to decline because he felt too ashamed of his shabby clothes. Roosevelt published an article praising his poetry, but the literary critics of the day responded with elitist scorn and belittled Robinson as a minor poet undeserving of such publicity. Undaunted as always, Roosevelt influenced Scribner’s to bring out several of Robinson’s poems in their monthly magazine and secured him a position in the New York Custom House, an echo of Hawthorne in the Salem Custom House. Unlike Hawthorne, however, Robinson did little work and spent little time in the office. After 4 years, with the coming of the Taft administration in 1909, Robinson was threatened with having to work regular office hours if he stayed.

He published another collection, *The Town Down the River*, and in 1911 visited the MacDowell colony of artists at pastoral Peterboro, New Hampshire. He made friends there and returned every summer after that for a quarter century, until his death. The flamboyant dancer Isadora Duncan tried unsuccessfully to seduce him. He never married. He lost his fiancée, Emma Shepherd, to his brother Herman. Escaping from the modern world like Miniver Cheevy, he spent the last decades of his life writing long Arthurian poems that, despite fine passages here and there, critics have been unanimous in finding unsuccessful. Robinson excelled in his shorter early poems, but was not able to evolve into as fine a philosophical poet. He depended on friends for financial support until 1927 when *Tristram* brought him fame at last. Just 8 years later he died of cancer in New York. Most critics include among his best poems “Eros Turannos,” “For a Dead Lady,” “Many Are Called,” “Hillcrest,” “Luke Havergal,” “The Sheaves,” “The Clerks,” and “Rembrandt to Rembrandt.”

Michael Hollister (2015)

CRITICAL ESTIMATE

“Robinson was not a systematic thinker, and his thought shows conflicting tendencies. I believe that Robinson is essentially a counter-Romantic, and yet he resembles other great counter-Romantics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the uncritical fashion with which he adopts a few current notions of a Romantic nature as if they were axiomatic....There is not any change in Robinson’s thinking from the beginning to the end of his work; and if there is any change of emphasis, it is indistinctly perceptible....

Except in 'Hillcrest,' Robinson probably never succeeds very brilliantly with the didactic or philosophical, whereas he often succeeds brilliantly with the poem of the particular case. It is curious to see a poet handle 'abstract' language so brilliantly as in this poem and in 'Eros Turannos' and so ineptly as in 'The Man Against the Sky' and certain other poems...But what I want to point out above all is this: ...[that] Robinson has written a poem ['Hillcrest'] which is rational in general structure, packed with thought in its detail, perfectly clear in its meaning and development, and nearly free from sensory imagery, and that this poem is one of the great poems not only of our time but of our language....

Three of Robinson's later sonnets seem to me among the greatest of his works: 'Lost Anchors,' 'Many Are Called,' and 'The Sheaves.' In fact if one adds to these sonnets and 'The Wandering Jew' two or three of the blank verse monologues--'The Three Taverns,' 'Rembrandt to Rembrandt,' and perhaps 'John Brown'--one probably has Robinson at his greatest....Nearly all of Robinson's best poems appear to deal with particular persons and situations; in these poems his examination is careful and intelligent, his method is analytic, and his style is mainly very distinguished....Robinson exhibits the New England taste for practical morality, a passionate curiosity about individual dramas, and...in examining them he is guided by the moral and spiritual values of the general Christian tradition as they have come down to him in the form of folk wisdom or common sense, although in the application of these values he shows a penetration and subtlety which are the measure of his genius. In his more generalized, or philosophic, poems, he is almost always careless in his thinking and equally careless in his style, and it is in these poems that one may see--often in the method and sometimes in the form of the thought--the influence of Emersonian Romanticism. 'Hillcrest' is the most notable exception to this last statement....

The greatest poems, not all of which achieve perfection, are probably the following: from *The Children of the Night* (1890-97), 'Luke Havergal' and 'The Clerks'; from *Captain Craig, Etc.* (1902), none; from *The Town Down the River* (1910), 'For a Dead Lady'; from *The Man Against the Sky* (1916), 'Hillcrest,' 'Eros Turannos,' 'Veteran Sirens' and 'The Poor Relation'; from *The Three Taverns* (1920), 'The Wandering Jew'; from *Avon's Harvest, Etc.* (1921), 'Lost Anchors' and 'Many Are Called'; from *Dionysus in Doubt* (1925), 'The Sheaves.'...These eleven poems can be equaled, I think, in the work of only four or five English and American poets of the past century and a half."

Yvor Winters
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(*New Directions* 1946) 29, 39, 57-59

Michael Hollister (2021)

