

21 CRITICS DISCUSS

Edwin Arlington Robinson

(1869-1935)

“When we’re all dead and buried, E. A. will go thundering down the ages.”

William Vaughn Moody (c.1910)
rival poet

“He has an ascetic hatred for the trite word, the facile phrase, the rhetorical cadence. His individual idiom—as clearly marked as John Donne’s, whom he resembles in many ways—was apparent from the first....The thought is packed very tight, except in the humorous diffusion and willful Wordsworthian flatness of occasional passages in the monologues. The athletic sparseness of epithet, the suppression of climaxes, the projection of the planes of the poem beyond the lines of the poem itself—these are Robinsonian characteristics that will continue to repel some readers as certainly as they fascinate the adepts.”

Bliss Perry
New York Times
(21 December 1919) 765

“Robinson had discovered that simply by making a plain statement of certain important things, he achieved a poetic effect unlike anything known to poetry except possibly the ballad....Robinson wrote in the old meters. He often employed stock poetic phrases. But all the stanza forms he used resolved themselves to the level of the ballad statement of fact, and stock poetic phrases were an ironic reflection on the poverty of a life of which the phrase was the sole grandeur. Now Mr. Robinson is a dyed-in-the-wool New Englander, and that must never be forgotten. His tenacity of purpose is thoroughly New England, so is his austerity and his horror of exuberance of expression. His insight into people is pure Yankee shrewdness, as is also his violent and controlled passion. He is absolutely a native of his place, the trouble was that he was not a native of his time. He was twenty years ahead of his time, and that advance has set the seal of melancholy upon him; or, to speak in the cant of the day, it has wound him in inhibitions which he has been unable to shake off.”

Amy Lowell
Dial
(February 1922) 133

“Mr. Robinson, even in youth, was a poet of failure and regret. He was preoccupied with New England in decay. In the moonlight of an eternal autumn he sat brooding on the poor ghosts of men—brooding sadly rather than in grief....And since Mr. Robinson began in autumn he has never had his rightful spring. He was old from the very first. When his time came for him to be really old, his trees were doubly bare.”

Edmund Wilson
Dial
(May 1923) 516

“If the psychology of failure, or of that uncertain middle ground between spiritual success and failure, is Robinson’s recurrent motive, it may be interesting to study his attitudes and his methods in presenting that motive in art. It is heroic, not ignoble, struggle that engages him, or if not heroic, at least the struggle of highly strung, sensitive souls to fulfill their manifest destiny; ending either in acceptance of compromise, or in tragic spiritual revolt that induces some kind of dark eclipse. The form is usually narrative, with the poet as the narrator, under some assumption of friendship or at least neighborliness; but in the longer poems we have, as a rule, monologue and dialogue, the characters unfolding their perplexities, or recording their action upon each other, in long speeches which are not talk, as talk actually ever was or could be, but which

are talk intensified into an extra-luminous self-revelation; as if an x-ray, turned into the suffering soul, made clear its hidden structural mysteries.”

Harriet Monroe
Poetry
(January 1925) 210

“Mr. Robinson’s shorter poems are many and various, and the perfection they reach is remarkably many-sided. In blank verse, in talkative rhyme, in suave epigram, in running eloquence he has found his forms; in men of all conditions and characters he has found his material. But he is still consistent...in his presentation of the problem which existence is. A little light in a great deal of darkness, a wisp of music in a universe of irregular and ominous drums—it is in such images that he tells...of man’s never wholly vain struggle for self-respect.”

Mark Van Doren
Edwin Arlington Robinson
(Literary Guild 1927) 49-50

“Robinson’s portrait of the American failure (a failure arrived at through the misapplication of New England pragmatism) is so complete, that the fact many of his books became best sellers must be a source of quiet amusement to him. There lies the irony more profound than anything Robinson has written. He remains, as always, the most unshaken, the most unmoved of America’s critics, his clinical finger piercing an open wound. He has made his one discovery, has patented it; sometimes the statement produces poetry, sometimes merely words, but there it is; and it would take another reincarnation of Robinson to deny it.”

Horace Gregory
Poetry
(December 1934) 160-01

“His artistry has much of the Yankee in it: on the one hand, its laconic, word-sparing quality and its tendency to understatement; on the other, its gift for circumlocution when this device will either conceal or veil what the Yankee has in mind or what is in his mood....Moreover, it is this trait of expressing by indirection that makes Robinson seem more exclusively intellectual than he actually is. The man who does not wear his heart on his sleeve is not therefore heartless, but he is bound sometimes to produce that impression. And the man who on occasion talks by indirection or...so curtly that he throws away everything but the meaning—and keeps that to himself, does not always suffer from a tertian ague of tongue-tiedness and verbosity.”

Percy H. Boynton
Literature and American Life
(Ginn 1936) 804-05

“His lyric perceptions, like his human values, are rooted in the known and possible—the capacities of a man which survive even in his sorriest condition of stultification and confusion....He is a Realist not only in conscience but in style and diction; in *milieu* as much as in imagery; and this gives him his license to explore the problems of abstract casuistry and moral contradiction which he filed down into that style of attenuated rumination, impassioned hair-splitting, and bleak aphorism which will always remain unmistakably his own.”

Morton D. Zabel
Literary Opinion in America
(Harper, 1937) 405

“Edwin Arlington Robinson personified winter. Abandoning New England, he had carried to New York an aura of blight, desolation, decay, and defeat. His view of the world was wintry--so was his life--and his style and his personality were bleak and bare. Had there ever been a poet who loved life less or found so little joy in the turning of the seasons? In the down-east phrase, Robinson was ‘master chilly’.”

Van Wyck Brooks
New England Indian Summer

"In these early poems, strongly influenced by his reading of Hardy, he presents the first of his spare, incisive portraits of the people of his Tilbury Town, marked by a dry New England manner that proved cryptic to his few readers....Heir of the New England traditions of Puritanism and Transcendentalism, with their emphasis upon the individual....Robinson has been termed a sober Transcendentalist who dealt primarily with the ethical conflicts within the individual and measured the value of the isolated person by his truth to himself. With the reserve typical of the New Englander, he most frequently employed the objective form of dramatic monologue, and, with the traditionalism inherent in his background, confined his experimentation to the use of common speech rhythms, rather than to the creation of new stanzaic forms. His quality of mind is organically expressed by his style, which itself quietly fuses tradition with originality, and Romance with Realism."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

"I have expressed my belief that Robinson's long poems are mostly unsuccessful and represent a waste of effort; that the best of them is *Lancelot*, an impressive poem in spite of many imperfections, and that *Merlin*, though it is hardly a great poem, contains great poetry; that Robinson's most successful work is to be found among his shorter poems and poems of medium length, of which we may cite for the moment such examples as 'Hillcrest,' 'Eros Turranos,' 'The Wandering Jew,' 'Many Are Called,' 'The Three Taverns,' and 'Rembrandt to Rembrandt.'....

Frost resembles Robinson more closely than does any other, but the resemblance is stronger upon first glance than upon second and tends to disappear with reexamination. The resemblance is strongest between such poems as 'Isaac and Archibald' and some of Frost's narratives in blank verse; but the resemblance depends mainly upon the brute and impersonal fact that both poets come from much the same part of the country and sometimes write about it. The resemblance is in part due to the fact that Robinson is more nearly colloquial in a few such minor poems as this than he is in his greater and that Frost has tended to make a discreet mannerism of colloquial speech (which is not quite the same thing as the plain speech of the man of letters, such as one finds in Robinson's greatest work). The resemblance is due in part also to the fact that this poem by Robinson is minor; Frost is an Emersonian Romantic who celebrates the minor incident, the eccentric attitude and the fleeting perception; he frequently does it with extraordinary beauty, and I trust will long remain an ornament to our literature, but to compare him to the author of 'The Wandering Jew' and of 'Rembrandt to Rembrandt,' on the grounds either of resemblance or of greatness, is pointless.

I have already mentioned the poets who seem to me to have influenced Robinson; the two most considerable influences, I believe, are Browning and Praed. But of these, Browning is an influence only on a small portion of Robinson's work, and not on a very important portion, and Praed at most is a point of departure....I have called attention to his having certain more or less Jamesian vices as a narrator, but I am thinking now of his virtues: of the plain style, the rational statement, the psychological insight, the subdued irony, the high seriousness and the stubborn persistence. In respect to one or another of these qualities, one may find him related to such a mind as that of Henry James, but perhaps more obviously to Edith Wharton and Motley and Francis Parkman, and perhaps even at times to Henry Adams. He is, it seems to me, the last great American writer of their tradition and not the first of a later one...Robinson is more closely comparable to the great masters of prose than to the minor poets.

In reading Robinson's verse during a period of approximately twenty-five years, I have always felt a certain deficiency, even in some of the best of it, and I have heard the same deficiency mentioned by other readers: the deficiency is easy to indicate—it is a certain dryness, a lack of richness in the language—but it is not so easy to define with any precision. One may read such a poem as 'Hillcrest,' admire and recognize its greatness, and yet feel, however fallaciously, that one has more or less exhausted its interest after a few readings...[other faults include] a certain deficiency in Robinson's ear, which results at times in a somewhat mechanical and imperceptive rhythm—I am referring not to his meters or his stanzas, but to the way he uses them—and a distrust of the suggestive power of language in favor of an unnecessary fullness

of expository statement, a fullness which sometimes degenerates into simple cleverness...a slightly unnecessary subdivision and restatement of matter, a slight lack of concentration. These defects are the defects of Praed and Holmes and poets of their type, of poets who may be skillful, ingenious, civilized and amusing, but who are not quite serious about their subjects and not quite masters of their language. In Robinson's weaker poems, especially in his narratives, the defects are deadly.

In his secondary successes, such as 'Two Gardens in Linndale,' they are very obvious; and one feels them in some of his greater poems, slightly in 'Hillcrest' and 'Eros Turannos' and plainly in 'For a Dead Lady.' On the other hand these defects are diminished to the point of being negligible in such poems as 'Veteran Sirens,' 'The Wandering Jew,' 'Many Are Called,' 'The Three Taverns' and 'Rembrandt to Rembrandt.' If the tide ever sets against Robinson's reputation—and if it does not, sooner or later, his reputation will be an exceptional one—I think that these defects will be the reason. But it seems to me that the defects are merely defects, like any others, and should be given no more importance than the defects of many another great poet...It is unfortunate that Robinson published so voluminously, for one becomes irritated in reading him through, just as one becomes irritated in reading Wordsworth or Tennyson, and one becomes nervously aware of his faults and is inclined to see them even where they do not appear. No poet can publish in this manner with impunity, and as time goes by the risk will become progressively greater: even a genius as great as Wordsworth, a hundred or two hundred years hence, might succeed in burying his worth under the mountains of his mediocrity.

These defects are the initial defects of a manner and a temperament, defects which Robinson held under reasonable control in a great many poems, and eliminated, or all but eliminated, from seven or eight. In the diminution of these faults and in the more or less comparable process of universalizing his New England mind, he became on certain occasions one of the most remarkable poets in our language. His style at its best is as free from the provincialism of time and of place as the best writing of Jonson or Herbert. This impersonal greatness of style has been seldom achieved in the twentieth century; one finds it in some of the greatest work of the nineteenth century poets: In the 'Ode to Duty,' by Wordsworth; in 'Tiresias,' by Tennyson; in parts of 'The Pope,' from *The Ring and the Book*; in a number of lyrics by Hardy, such as 'In the Time of the Breaking of Nations'; and above all, perhaps, in a few poems by Bridges...It is among these British poets of the last century and of the turn of the century that Robinson seems at moments to find his closest relatives and quite possibly his closest rivals on this side of Milton and Dryden; and his position in relation to these poets is not that of the lowest."

Yvor Winters
Edwin Arlington Robinson
(New Directions 1946) 143-49

"As with the passage of time their quality stands out from the bulky later work that tends to hide them, as the nation in maturing, gains respect for the intellectual and contemplative virtues and sees behind material satisfactions the tragedy of the human condition and feels the glory of art that in accepting tragedy transcends it, Robinson's figure will grow."

Emery Neff
Edwin Arlington Robinson
(Sloane 1948) 259

"In the twenties, he was generally regarded as America's greatest living poet, and was awarded the Pulitzer Prize three times...Unmarried and shy, he lived quietly and inexpensively; he had little money, but, like another New Englander, Henry Thoreau, he could be rich by making his wants few. He published over twenty volumes of poetry...Though written in conventional nineteenth-century forms, Robinson's poetry is 'modern' in diction and temper. He may have been influenced by Robert Browning's dramatic monologue and analysis of men and women, but his view of life is nearer Thomas Hardy's than any other earlier poet's. His poetry is sober, reflective, pessimistic, and now and then obscure.

Robinson's development was, roughly, in two phases. Before 1916 he excelled in 'Tilbury' portraits which were sharply etched and indigenous to New England. In the second phase, Robinson became medieval and philosophical. He retold the Arthurian stories in *Merlin*, *Lancelot*, and *Tristram*, and gave free rein, in these poems and in others, to philosophical disquisition. At their best, the philosophical parts

have dignity and strength; at their worst, they are wordy and vague. Although his fame dates from the second phase, critical opinion today, ironically enough, seems to prefer the early portraits of Tilbury Town....Despite his use of Arthurian materials, Robinson is in the native New England tradition. He reflects that tradition, though, in the process of decay. The accent is still Puritan, but no longer vigorous and triumphant.”

Walter Blair
The Literature of the United States II, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953, 1961, 1966) 906-07

“Because his own poetry was based so firmly on his personal and sensitive appreciation of what was unchanging and available in the poetry of the past, Robinson was finally able to contemplate the future with some equanimity. Subsequent revolutions in taste have somewhat impaired the reputation he finally won toward the end of his career, but these revolutions have also shown that some of Robinson’s poetry did attain the stature at which he aimed and that it will not be quickly forgotten. There can be little doubt that his best work is now part of the ideal order by which he always wished to be measured.”

Edwin S. Fussell
Edwin Arlington Robinson
(California 1954) 186

“After the trumpet calls of Pound and Amy Lowell...American poetry seemed destined for a liberation. When poets talked of this renaissance, Edwin Arlington Robinson appeared to their mind among the prime precursors of the new art. At a time when American poetry had reached its lowest ebb, he in his obscurity had remained real and vibrant. His probing, questioning, doubting mind was the mind of the new generation. His austere integrity revived a vital strain of the New England tradition and his style cleared the ground for other growths....

There was something starved and cold about him, as if his clothes were too scanty and his blood was too thin, as if the Maine wind had invaded his marrow. Taciturn, shy as an owl, diffident, lonely, he could only establish relations with others by drinking. Unable to sustain himself by his writings, he had worked on the construction of the New York underground railroad and became vaguely known as the ‘poet in the subway.’ There, all day, in his long black coat and broad-brimmed hat, he paced the damp dark tunnel, with its odour of gases. If he saw a light at the end of the tunnel, it was usually choked with mephitic mist: it was not so much a light as a murky glimmer. And this was like the light in Robinson’s poems. His faith was only a dim conjecture. More often he looked out upon ‘dark tideless floods of nothingness,’ where men escaped from their dungeons only to drown. Most of Robinson’s ‘lost’ souls possessed some spirituality, and it was just for this reason that they were ‘lost.’...

He had his first popular success in *The Man Against the Sky*, which appeared as a part of the general chorus of new poets. The Yankees were writing again with talent and vigour, and the new writers, appearances notwithstanding, remained in the New England tradition which they seemed to flout. They sometimes thought they were outside it, they sometimes wished to be outside it, but unconsciously they were within it, which was more important; and was it not part of their tradition that they should flout tradition, even as the greatest of the Yankees had flouted it before them? That one should flout tradition was the first of laws for Emerson’s heirs.”

Van Wyck Brooks & Otto L. Bettmann
Our Literary Heritage: A Pictorial History of the Writer in America
(Dutton 1956-66) 232-33

“Robinson...invented his own variations on the nineteenth-century basic style and made it into an instrument for poetic fictions in which protagonists and circumstances so interpenetrate as to result in that marvelous complex of self-discovery and self-deceit which characterize the sort of understanding available to his modern men. Significantly, his poems at their best are anecdotal, tending toward the tale and thus toward the novelistic. Mediating between the realism of the best fiction of his time and the analytic and evocative power of poetry in the egocentric mode, the Adamic mode, Robinson’s best poems expound life in its ‘intenser phases.’ The intensity is great to the degree that the phases, the slices of life, are narrow and

constrained, quickly exhausted of their potentiality for freedom and joy. Robinson recognized the major voice in American poetry before his own time, a voice now falsely echoed by many, even as he who owned it was being virtually deified by his followers. The voice was Walt Whitman's; and Robinson acknowledged its power in a poem apparently written soon after Whitman's death....

These are the dwellers in Tilbury Town. Richard Cory, Charles Carville, Minniver Cheevy, Luke Havergal, Aunt Imogen, Briony (of 'Fragment'), Cliff Klingenhagen—these and others like them people that small world of which Robinson could make himself the master. It is a village world, to be sure, but a village world whose sense of community has been destroyed. Most of its inhabitants are failures: sometimes resigned to their failure, sometimes unresignedly crushed by it....[Robinson] best understands the living dead—Mr. Flood, old Isaac and Archibald, and the rest; for their state is the most direct and powerful metaphor for the spirit which is the *communitas* of Tilbury Town. The ending of 'Mr. Flood's Party' calls up that sense of loneliness and deprivation which informs so many of Robinson's poems....

Robinson moves from the expressive freedom of the line composed by his forebears to a line characterized by hard objectivity and tense restriction. He loads his lines with almost prosaic locutions; he is compressed rather than expansive; he seeks control rather than release. The poem is all *there*, even when it frames a vacuous situation, and does not depend for its power upon a consonance with the largest ranges of its reader's experience. It is, in a word, an end in itself, not a beginning toward something else. Robinson controls meters so as to achieve analytic power, as he controls rhyme too. With such control—and often with explicit statement—he tells us that *he* is there, as an observer; and he thus makes of us observers too, outsiders with him. He uses such traditional forms, the sonnet in particular, as will let him get a self-consciously formalized hold on his material. He is a self-consciously 'literary' poet, one who goes to other poets quite deliberately to learn how to see his world and compose it. Yet he puts what he learns to his own needs—which are to be an American poet, writing in an American tradition, for an American community whom that tradition has failed. The achievement of his technique is one of discovering how to record, with a frigid passion, the limitations of the expressivism cultivated by the major American poets before him....

He had within him a good deal of that old Adamic longing to subjectify his objects, to see more clearly what their inner light revealed, to discover such light in himself and then to report the discovery to the world at large. He wanted in the end to be as much a philosophical as a dramatic poet. Philosophical poetry was to be his means of establishing the sense of *communitas*—of ego-transcending human relations—which dramatic poetry requires. At this he failed just about completely. The great, the pathetic, example is 'The Man Against the Sky.' It is a confused and confusing poem, because Robinson cannot contrive the kind of subjective analysis he wants to make and yet hold to an adequate memorializing perspective on his protagonists. Indeed, they are hardly protagonists; they are given no life of their own; their problems are talked about, not projected directly into language; they are in no specific and clearly meaningful way caught up in the life of their milieu....The poet himself is too much involved in 'The Man Against the Sky'; he allegorizes aspects of himself. Yet he has no such solid foundation, no such cultural certitude, no such assurance of a community of believers, as will allow him to construct proper allegory. In proper allegory we can assent to the actions of the protagonists because the sum total of those actions is a manifestation of an authoritative system of belief, aspects of which we expect their actions to body forth....

Toward the end of 'The Man Against the Sky' the poet can only chant his ode to himself; even here his writing is not as strong as it is in the shorter poems, because he strives to express that which his own faith—and the technique it called forth—says is inexpressible...This is transcendentalism of a sort, to be sure—but transcendentalism without the crucial doctrine of Emerson's *Nature* and thus without Emerson's (and Whitman's) sense of the contingency and oneness of all things. There is lacking a principle of control whereby one thing the poet says follows necessarily from what precedes it....Robinson's greatest strength lies in the fact that, faced with the divisiveness of the modern world (see his 'Cassandra,' for example), he would not settle for a merely putative sense of oneness. Yet he longed for that sense. As New England American poet, perhaps he could not throw off his Adamic heritage, even as he saw that it was not enough. After writing poems in which he demonstrated, substantively and formally, that it was not enough, he found his own capacities drained. He looked for more than his talent, his heritage, his sensibility, and his technique would allow him to find, or to see....

When Robinson wanted to move away from those great memorializing poems of his, when he wanted something more than stoic objectivity, he turned to myth and to full-blown allegory. He was simply not equipped to write mythic or allegorical poems. Yet, however agonizingly he saw the need for a means to a poetic objectivity so great, a perspective so deep, as to urge him to leave behind—because it was not enough—the egocentric poem of his heritage.”

Roy Harvey Pearce
The Continuity of American Poetry
(Princeton 1961, 1965) 256-61, 265, 267-69

“Though now recognized as an important poet, Robinson was still largely dependent on his friends for a livelihood....Robinson’s faults were many: Too often his poetry was obscure, owing to unfinished thinking, a lack of concrete imagery, or indirectness of statement; it failed generally in lyricism, though occasional bursts reveal a fine ear for metrical effects; it needed vigor. Robinson inclined toward verbosity and circumlocution, perhaps a compensation for his inarticulateness in private life.

But at a time when American poetry was at a low ebb Robinson introduced a new honesty, concentration, austerity, and dignity, a precision and plainness of diction, which his successors made into a poetic renaissance. In a career which began in a time of flowery sentimentality and ended in the midst of untrammelled experimentation, Robinson himself stayed close to the conventions of form and technique; his short poems are mostly rhymed lyrics sometimes reminiscent of the 17th-century Metaphysicals, and his long poems are in rather rugged blank verse. Although Robinson denied that he was a pessimist, much of his best work deals with the themes of failure and alienation, in which the hope of the future is very nearly submerged. Yet in his best and most popular short poems—‘Eros Turannos,’ ‘The Mill,’ ‘Hillcrest,’ ‘The Sheaves,’ ‘Luke Havergal,’ ‘The Clerks’—Robinson’s stylistic strength and integrity produce an affirmative effect.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

“Though Robinson was not a formal innovator, he nonetheless played an important part in what became a diverse movement to bring poetry into consonance with the spirit of modern times. In his reaction against the poetry of the late nineteenth century, he broke sharply with the view that restricted the scope of poetry in subject, language, and form. He rejected the idea that only certain subjects were appropriate for poetry and that there was any such thing as ‘poetic diction.’ The function of the poet, he felt, is to deal truthfully with human experience as he sees it. The only limitations derive from the mind and temperament of the poet and the demands of art. The wide play of thought and emotion in Robinson’s poetry and his expressive use of language, ranging from the conversational rhythms of ordinary speech to formal patterns of eloquence, are part of his contribution to modern poetry. Though he wrote in conventional forms, he did so with consummate skill, adapting means to ends as only a master artist can. He restored to the sonnet a vigor long lost and extended its range to include the dramatic treatment of character and situation. His use of wit and irony, his intellectuality and objectivity, and his concern with the individual psyche and inner conflict place him in the mainstream of contemporary poetry.

Robinson’s most notable achievement lies in his perception and depiction of character. With penetrating psychological insight, he drew a gallery of portraits unequalled in American poetry—Aaron Stark, Richard Cory, Cliff Klingenhagen, Captain Craig, Isaac and Archibald, Aunt Imogen, Miniver Cheevy, Tasker Norcross, Fernando Nash, to mention only a few. In ‘Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford’ he gave us the liveliest poetic portrait that we have of Will Shakespeare....Cryptic at times and at times verbose, Robinson is at his best in dealing with specific cases, especially in the shorter poems of highly suggestive and concentrated power like ‘Eros Turannos’ and ‘Mr. Flood’s Party.’ Like Hawthorne, whom he resembled in his moral concern and in his interest in the hidden caverns of the mind and heart...

Poe’s slender offering, superb in its limited way, is no match, except in technical brilliance, for the range and profundity of Robinson’s work. Emerson, whom Robinson regarded as ‘the greatest poet who ever wrote in America,’ was as penetrating as Robinson and had a more seminal mind, but he is inferior to

Robinson in technical skill and mastery of form. Whitman, broader in range and at his best master of a different poetic mode, is too uneven and too often diffuse. Emily Dickinson, whose hard and iridescent gems glow with an intensity unmatched even in Robinson's concentrated shorter poems, is more limited, and she suffers, though no fault of her own, because so many of her poems never received the final polish....Of all of those variously regarded as 'new poets'—Frost, Sandburg, Masters, Amy Lowell, Fletcher, Lindsay, Williams, Pound, Eliot, and a host of lesser figures—only two appear to be of equal stature with Robinson, namely Frost and Eliot. Frost took the middle path, as did Robinson, adapting older forms to make modern poems; equally concerned with the human mind and heart, he has a more direct appeal than Robinson, but he is more of a regional poet and less profound."

Wallace L. Anderson
Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Critical Introduction
(Houghton 1967) 151-53

"It was not until 1916, when he was nearly fifty, that Robinson could bring himself to pay any sort of public tribute to Emerson. In that year he told Joyce Kilmer in an interview that he considered Emerson our greatest American poet, and thought that his best things, fragments rather than whole poems, were as great as anything ever written anywhere in any language. His praise thus exceeded even that of Frost... Emerson's influence on the poetry increases perceptibly through Robinson's first three volumes, then drops off after *Captain Craig*, finally to return to prominence in the last two long poems....

Reading the British astrophysicists Eddington and Jeans, who were Platonists and religious in tone, Robinson was encouraged to hope once more that his implicit Transcendentalism would not in the end prove utterly indefensible. There was, he decided in 1933, a new 'non-theological' religion on the way, to be 'revealed' by science when we had the wits to see it. To an age when churches were only buildings and theology had lost all meaning, the coming religion would bring fresh hope and a renewed faith in the transcendent self. This new confidence of Robinson's lies behind the affirmations he intended to make in *Amaranth* and *King Jasper*....

As a result of Robinson's intensive, grief-motivated rereading of Emerson in late 1896 and early 1897, his second volume, *The Children of the Night*, is markedly more Emersonian than his first....Robinson seems to have arrived at his interpretation by subtracting from Transcendentalism the elements that were meaningless to him in terms of his own experience. What was left after all the subtractions was a sort of stoical idealism....Emerson's impact on Robinson's work is clearest and most pervasive in *Captain Craig*, Robinson's third volume, which appeared five years after *The Children of the Night* and reflected the intensive rereading of Emerson that Robinson was doing in 1899 and 1900...

Robinson's decision to remove Emerson's name from the sonnet praising him shows that he was becoming sensitive to the charge of being an Emersonian. The charge would be, in 1902, in the eyes of his friend Henderson and many others, almost equivalent to being called a frustrated Romantic, or a wishfully-thinking Idealist, or even a mystagogue....With relatively few exceptions, Robinson's best later poems contain no suggestion of his debt to Emerson. Even when they include muted suggestions of ideas that might be Emersonian, or at least vaguely Transcendental, the *tone* is as completely un-Emersonian as it is possible to imagine any tone being....

A good many of his poems are weakened by the incompatibility of their emotional tone and their explicit statements of belief. It is not at all surprising that Robinson's first reviewer found the atmosphere of *The Torrent and the Night Before* to be like that of a 'prison-house.' He was anticipating Frost's reaction to all the later work—and not only Frost's, but that of what seems to be the majority of Robinson's critics. He was responding to a palpable atmosphere, to the work as poetry, in short, rather than to the many direct expressions of Emersonian idealism sprinkled through it....In the best of these studies of failure and alienation, the art is marvelously controlled. In the very best, there is a strong identification between the character in the poem and Robinson himself, or someone closely identified with him, leading to a balance Robinson could not always maintain between pity and humor. 'Mr. Flood's Party' clearly reflects Robinson's greatest short poem, clearly reflects his hopeless and tragic love for the incredibly beautiful Emma, brother Herman's wife....

The tragedy of Robinson's career was his failure to develop beyond the level of achievement he reached very early—in *Captain Craig* in 1902, and for short poems, in *The Man Against the Sky* in 1916. It is doubtful that he ever again wrote so fine a long poem as 'Isaac and Archibald,' in the *Captain Craig* volume, which strikes me as much greater than the long character studies of back-country New Englanders that Robert Frost would shortly do. And the title poem of the volume seems to me very much better than the infrequent and generally slighting comment on it would lead one to expect. As for the short poems, surely he never excelled 'Miniver Cheevy' in *The Town Down River* in 1910, unless it was in 'Hillcrest' or 'Eros Turannos' in *The Man Against the Sky*. The general opinion that the very long poems on which he spent most of his time after 1916 are for the most part quite unreadable needs a little qualifying but is not basically mistaken....

King Jasper glances at the social problems of revolution in the 1930's, with unyielding Capitalism and destructive Communism apparently equally to be deplored...The Emerson of Robinson's plays and late poems is an evolutionary theist who makes no mystical claims, who only calls for continued growth or self-transcendence, for the superiority of individual over societal claims, and for acceptance of one's destiny.... Robinson was much closer in his style, everywhere in his work, to Hawthorne than to Emerson. He seldom *sounds* like Emerson, but very often like Hawthorne. His preference for traditional meters and stanzaic forms, his diction, and especially his hesitant, tentative rhythms, draw him as close, perhaps, to Hawthorne as verse can ever come to prose. Both artists were men with the strongest feeling for ancient pieties and traditional verities; both had an instinctive sense that the more everything changed, the more it was the same...[Robinson] thought of himself as born in the wrong time—the wrong time at any rate for a man of sensibility who was inclined to be an Emersonian Idealist."

Hyatt H. Waggoner

American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present

(Houghton 1968) 267-68, 271, 273-74, 279-80, 282, 285, 289, 91-92

"America's first important poet of the twentieth century, Edwin Arlington Robinson is also the most prolific. Unlike his more prominent contemporaries—Frost, Stevens, Eliot, and Williams—Robinson devoted his energies exclusively to the writing of poetry. For that reason his life is markedly unremarkable, but he published an astonishing twenty volumes of poems which were eventually combined into *Collected Poems*, a volume of nearly 1,500 pages. It is a Robinsonian irony that today he is known for only a handful of poems of the sort he once complained were 'Pickled in anthological brine.'

Robinson was an innovator...most often providing psychological portraits of fictional and historical characters suffering an isolation of some sort. Frequently compared to Robert Browning and Henry James, he has been called variously realistic, romantic, naturalistic, and existential. His attitudes range from satire to understatement, from pessimism to compassion. His most pervasive attribute is his sensitivity to the struggle in the human condition between the mundane and the mystical....The famous 'Mr. Flood's Party' (the poem Robinson claimed was his favorite) transforms a boyhood prank in Gardiner....Both 'Firelight' and 'Eros Turannos' are interpretations of unhappy marriages that may be related to Robinson's observations of his sister-in-law's life. Robinson wrote poetry that is contrivedly unspectacular, a characteristic that has cost him readers in the second half of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the precision and skill with which he wrote and the human quality of his themes promise his work an enduring place in the American canon."

Nancy Carol Joyner

The Heath Anthology of American Literature 2

(D. C. Heath 1990) 962-63

Michael Hollister (2015)