

Modern Critical Views

EDWIN ARLINGTON
ROBINSON

Edited and with an Introduction by
HAROLD BLOOM



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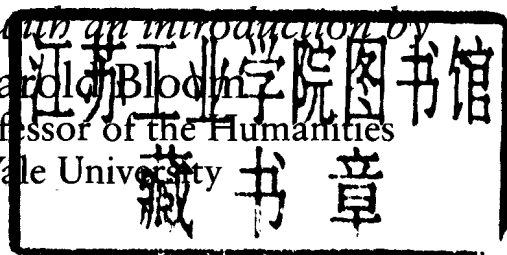
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Edited and with an introduction by

Harold Bloom

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EDWIN ARLINGTON
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Modern Critical Views

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Editor's Note

This book gathers together a representative collection of the best criticism devoted to the poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication. I am grateful to Neil Arditi for his aid in editing this book.

My introduction considers the early Robinson as an Emersonian poet, a Transcendentalist addicted to an asceticism of the spirit. The chronological sequence begins with Yvor Winters's review of Robinson's *Collected Poems*, a review that commends Robinson for having survived and carried on the tradition of Emerson and Dickinson.

Roy Harvey Pearce emphasizes Robinson's power at portraying failure, while lamenting Robinson's own failure as a philosophical poet. In a generous and informed estimate, Denis Donoghue compares Robinson's best shorter poems with Hardy's, while appreciating the American poet's deep need of the mythological aspects of his Arthurian poems.

The poet James Dickey, in a surprising tribute, commends Robinson for "answering little but asking those questions that are unpardonable, unforgettable, and necessary." A more Emersonian appreciation, by Hyatt H. Waggoner, rightly chronicles the influence of the severe, later Emerson upon Robinson, the idealist in extremis, or a Transcendentalist in the last ditch.

The long poem *Merlin* is analyzed by Nathan Comfort Starr as a poignant transformation of the traditional story into a tale of doomed love and of metaphysical disillusionment. Irving Howe, praising Robinson's grave and solitary voice, finds the lyricist of the shorter poems to be a crucial influence upon James Dickey, Robert Lowell, and James Wright.

The poet and critic Josephine Miles traces Robinson's relation to poetic tradition, while noting that "he praises with nostalgia and he blames with apprehension." In this book's final essay, John Lucas isolates Robinson's salient excellences as "plain realities," "surprises," and "an unflinching curiosity."

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Introduction

Emerson himself was a product of New England and a man of strong moral habits. . . . He gave to American romanticism, in spite of its irresponsible doctrine, a religious tone which it has not yet lost and which has often proved disastrous . . . there is a good deal of this intellectual laziness in Robinson; and as a result of the laziness, there is a certain admixture of Emersonian doctrine, which runs counter to the principles governing most of his work and the best of it.

—YVOR WINTERS

The Torrent and the Night Before (published late in 1896 by Robinson himself) remains one of the best first volumes in our poetry. Three of its shorter poems—"George Crabbe," "Luke Havergal," "The Clerks"—Robinson hardly surpassed, and three more—"Credo," "Walt Whitman" (which Robinson unfortunately abandoned), and "The Children of the Night" (reprinted as title-poem in his next volume)—are memorable work, all in the earlier Emersonian mode that culminates in "Bacchus." The stronger "Luke Havergal" stems from the darker Emersonianism of "Experience" and "Fate," and has a relation to the singular principles of "Merlin." It prophesies Robinson's finest later lyrics, such as "Eros Turannos" and "For a Dead Lady," and suggests the affinity between Robinson and Frost that is due to their common Emersonian tradition.

In *Captain Craig* (1902) Robinson published "The Sage," a direct hymn of homage to Emerson, whose *The Conduct of Life* had moved him profoundly at a first reading in August 1899. Robinson had read the earlier Emerson well before, but it is fascinating that he came to essays like "Fate" and "Power" only after writing "Luke Havergal" and some similar poems, for his deeper nature then discovered itself anew. He called "Luke Haver-

gal” “a piece of deliberate degeneration,” which I take to mean what an early letter calls “sympathy for failure where fate has been abused and self demoralized.” Browning, the other great influence upon Robinson, is obsessed with “deliberate degeneration” in this sense; Childe Roland’s and Andrea del Sarto’s failures are wilful abuses of fate and demoralizations of self. “The Sage” praises Emerson’s “fierce wisdom,” emphasizes Asia’s influence upon him, and hardly touches his dialectical optimism. This Emerson is “previsioned of the madness and the mean,” fit seer for “the fiery night” of “Luke Havergal”:

But there, where western glooms are gathering,
The dark will end the dark, if anything:
God slays Himself with every leaf that flies,
And hell is more than half of paradise.

These are the laws of Compensation, “or that nothing is got for nothing,” as Emerson says in “Power.” At the depth of Robinson is this Emersonian fatalism, as it is in Frost, and even in Henry James. “The world is mathematical,” Emerson says, “and has no casualty in all its vast and flowing curve.” Robinson, brooding on the end of “Power,” confessed: “He really gets after one,” and spoke of Emerson as walloping one “with a big New England shingle,” the cudgel of Fate. But Robinson was walloped too well, by which I do not mean what Winters means, since I cannot locate any “intellectual laziness” in Emerson. Unlike Browning and Hardy, Robinson yielded too much to Necessity, and too rapidly assimilated himself to the tendency I have named Merlin. Circumstances and temperament share in Robinson’s obsession with Nemesis, but poetic misprision is part of the story also, for Robinson’s *tessera* in regard to Emerson relies on completing the sage’s fatalism. From Emerson’s categories of power and circumstance, Robinson fashions a more complete single category, in a personal idealism that is a “philosophy of desperation,” as he feared it might be called. The persuasive desperation of “Luke Havergal” and “Eros Turannos” is his best expression of this nameless idealism that is also a fatalism, but “The Children of the Night,” for all its obtrusive echoes of Tennyson and even Longfellow, shows more clearly what Robinson found to be a possible stance:

It is the crimson not the gray,
That charms the twilight of all time;
It is the promise of the day
That makes the starry sky sublime;

It is the faith within the fear
 That holds us to the life we curse;—
 So let us in ourselves revere
 The Self which is the Universe!

The bitter charm of this is that it qualifies so severely its too-hopeful and borrowed music. Even so early, Robinson has “completed” Emersonian Self-Reliance and made it his own by emphasizing its Stoic as against its transcendental or Bacchic aspect. When, in “Credo,” Robinson feels “the coming glory of the Light!,” the light nevertheless emanates from unaware angels who wove “dead leaves to garlands where no roses are.” It is not that Robinson believed, with Melville, that the invisible spheres were formed in fright, but he shrewdly suspected that the ultimate world, though existent, was nearly as destitute as this one. He is an Emersonian incapable of transport, an ascetic of the transcendental spirit, contrary to an inspired saint like Jones Very or to the Emerson of “The Poet,” but a contrary, not a negation, to use Blake’s distinction. Not less gifted than Frost, he achieves so much less because he gave himself away to Necessity so soon in his poetic life. Frost’s Job quotes “Uriel” to suggest that confusion is “the form of forms,” the way all things return upon themselves, like rays:

Though I hold rays deteriorate to nothing,
 First white, then red, then ultra red, then out.

This is cunning and deep in Frost, the conviction that “all things come round,” even the mental confusions of God as He morally blunders. What we miss in Robinson is this quality of savagery, the strength that can end “Directive” by saying:

Here are your waters and your watering place.
 Drink and be whole again beyond confusion.

To be beyond confusion is to be beyond the form of forms that is Fate’s, and to be whole beyond Fate suggests an end to circlings, a resolution to all the Emersonian turnings that see unity, and yet behold divisions. Frost will play at being Merlin, many times, but his wariness saved him from Robinson’s self-exhaustions.

There is a fine passage in “Captain Craig” where the talkative captain asks: “Is it better to be blinded by the lights, / Or by the shadows?” This supposes grandly that we are to be blinded in any case, but Robinson was not blinded by his shadows. Yet he was ill-served by American Romanticism, though not for the reasons Winters offers. It demands the exuberance

of a Whitman in his fury of poetic incarnation, lest the temptation to join Ananke come too soon and too urgently to be resisted. Robinson was nearly a great poet, and would have prospered more if he had been chosen by a less drastic tradition.

YVOR WINTERS

A Cool Master

Near the middle of the last century, Ralph Waldo Emerson, a sentimental philosopher with a genius for a sudden twisted hardness of words, wrote lines like:

Daughters of Time, the hypocritic days,
Muffled and dumb like barefoot dervishes,
And marching single in an endless file,
Bring diadems and fagots in their hands.

And it was with Emerson that American poetry may be said to have begun. He was slight enough, but at his best a master, and above all a master of sound. And he began a tradition that still exists.

He was followed shortly by Emily Dickinson, a master of a certain dowdy but undeniably effective mannerism, a spinster who may have written her poems to keep time with her broom. A terrible woman, who annihilated God as if He were her neighbor, and her neighbor as if he were God—all with a leaf or a sunbeam that chanced to fall within her sight as she looked out the window or the door during a pause in her sweeping:

And we, we placed the hair,
And drew the head erect;
And then an awful leisure was,
Our faith to regulate.

From *Yvor Winters: Uncollected Essays and Reviews*. © 1973 by Janet Lewis Winters. The Swallow Press, 1973.

The woman at her most terrible had the majesty of an erect corpse, a prophet of unspeakable doom; and she spoke through sealed lips. She was greater than Emerson, was one of the greatest poets of our language, but was more or less in the tradition that Emerson began. She and Emerson were probably the only poets of any permanently great importance who occurred in this country during their period.

The tradition of New England hardness has been carried on by Mr. Robinson, in many ways may be said to have reached its pinnacle in Mr. Robinson. This poet, with a wider culture than his predecessors, has linked a suavity of manner to an even greater desperation than that of Dickinson's "The Last Night"—his hardness has become a polished stoniness of vision, of mind.

This man has the culture to know that to those to whom philosophy is comprehensible it is not a matter of the first importance; and he knows that these people are not greatly impressed by a ballyhoo statement of the principles of social or spiritual salvation. A few times he has given his opinion, but quietly and intelligently, and has then passed on to other things. A man's philosophical belief or attitude is certain to be an important part of his milieu, and as a part of his milieu may give rise to perceptions, images. His philosophy becomes a part of his life as does the country in which he was born, and will tinge his vision of the country in which he was born as that country may affect his philosophy. So long as he gives us his own perceptions as they arise in this milieu, he remains an artist. When he becomes more interested in the possible effects of his beliefs upon others, and expounds or persuades, he begins to deal with generalities, concepts (see Croce), and becomes a philosopher, or more than likely a preacher, a mere peddler. This was the fallacy of Whitman and many of the English Victorians, and this is what invalidates nearly all of Whitman's work. Such men forget that it is only the particular, the perception, that is perpetually startling. The generality, or concept, can be pigeonholed, absorbed, and forgotten. And a ballyhoo statement of a concept is seldom a concise one—it is neither fish nor flesh. That is why Whitman is doomed to an eventual dull vacuum that the intricately delicate mind of Plato will never know.

Much praise has fallen to Mr. Robinson because he deals with people, "humanity"; and this is a fallacy of inaccurate brains. Humanity is simply Mr. Robinson's physical milieu; the thing, the compound of the things, he sees. It is not the material that makes a poem great, but the perception and organization of that material. A pigeon's wing may make as great an image as a man's tragedy, and in the poetry of Mr. Wallace Stevens has done so. Mr. Robinson's greatness lies not in the people of whom he has written, but

in the perfect balance, the infallible precision, with which he has stated their cases.

Mr. Robinson's work may be classified roughly in two groups—his blank verse, and his more closely rhymed poems, including the sonnets. Of his blank verse, the "Octaves" in *The Children of the Night* fall curiously into a group by themselves, and will be considered elsewhere in this review. The other poems in blank verse may be called sketches—some of people the poet may have known, some of historical figures, some of legendary—and they have all the evanescence, brittleness, of sketches. However, there are passages in many of these poems that anticipate Robert Frost, who in at least one poem, "An Old Man's Winter Night," has used this method with greater effect than its innovator, and has created a great poem. Mr. Frost, of course, leaves more of the bark on his rhythms, achieves a sort of implied colloquialism which has already been too much discussed. But with Frost in mind, consider this passage from "Isaac and Archibald":

A journey that I made one afternoon
 With Isaac to find out what Archibald
 Was doing with his oats. It was high time
 Those oats were cut, said Isaac; and he feared
 That Archibald—well, he could never feel
 Quite sure of Archibald. Accordingly
 The good old man invited me—that is,
 Permitted me—to go along with him;
 And I, with a small boy's adhesiveness
 To competent old age, got up and went.

The similarity to Frost is marked, as is also the pleasing but not profound quality of the verse. It has a distinction, however, that many contemporaries—French as well as English and American—could acquire to good advantage.

"Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford," a much praised poem, seems largely garrulous, occasionally brilliant, and always brittle; and one can go on making very similar comments on the other poems in this form, until one comes to those alternately praised and lamented poems, *Merlin* and *Lancelot*. Remembering Tennyson, one's first inclination is to name these poems great, and certainly they are not inconsiderable. But there are long passages of purely literary frittering, and passages that, while they may possess a certain clean distinction of manner, are dry and unremunerative enough. But there are passages in these poems which are finer than any

other blank verse Mr. Robinson has written—dark, massive lines that rise out of the poem and leave one bitter and empty:

On Dagonet the silent hand of Merlin
 Weighed now as living iron that held him down
 With a primeval power. Doubt, wonderment,
 Impatience, and a self-accusing sorrow
 Born of an ancient love, possessed and held him
 Until his love was more than he could name,
 And he was Merlin's fool, not Arthur's now:
 "Say what you will, I say that I'm the fool
 Of Merlin, King of Nowhere; which is Here.
 With you for king and me for court, what else
 Have we to sigh for but a place to sleep?"

But passing on from this less important side of Mr. Robinson's work to his rhymed poems, one finds at least a large number of perfectly executed poems of a sensitive and feline approach. What effect rhyme, or the intention of rhyme, has upon an artist's product, is a difficult thing to estimate. The question verges almost upon the metaphysical. The artist, creating, lives at a point of intensity, and whether the material is consciously digested before that point is reached, and is simply organized and set down at the time of creation; or whether the point of intensity is first reached and the material then drawn out of the subconscious, doubtless depends a good deal on the individual poet, perhaps on the individual poem. The latter method presupposes a great deal of previous absorption of sense impressions, and is probably the more valid, or at least the more generally effective, method. For the rhythm and the "matter," as they come into being simultaneously and interdependent, will be perfectly fused and without loose ends. The man who comes to a form with a definitely outlined matter, will, more than likely, have to cram or fill before he has finished, and the result is broken. The second method does not, of course, presuppose rhyme; but it seems that rhyme, as an obstacle, will force the issue.

The best of Mr. Robinson's poems appear to have come into being very much in this second fashion. He has spun his images out of a world of sense and thought that have been a part of him so long that he seems to have forgot their beginning—has spun these images out as the movement of his lines, the recurrence of his rhymes, have demanded them. A basic philosophy and emotional viewpoint have provided the necessary unity.

This method inevitably focuses the artist's mind upon the object of the instant, makes it one with that object, and eliminates practically all individ-

ual “personality” or self-consciousness. The so-called personal touch is reduced to a minimum of technical habit that is bound to accrue in time to any poet who studies his medium with an eye to his individual needs. The man of some intelligence who cannot, or can seldom, achieve this condition of fusion with his object, is driven back to his ingenuity; and this man, if he have sufficient intelligence or ingenuity, becomes one of the “vigorous personalities” of poetry; and he misses poetry exactly in so far as his personality is vigorous. Browning, on two or three occasions one of the greatest of all poets, is, for the most part, simply the greatest of ingenious versifiers. He was so curious of the quirks with which he could approach an object, that he forgot the object in admiring, and expecting admiration for, himself. And it is for this reason that Mr. Robinson, working in more or less the same field as Browning, is the superior of Browning at almost every turn.

And it is for this reason also that Mr. Robinson’s “Ben Jonson” is a failure. For the poet, while in no wise concerned with his own personality, is so intent upon the personality of Jonson, his speaker, that, for the sake of Jonson’s vigor, he becomes talkative and eager of identifying mannerism; and the result is, that Shakespeare, about whom the poem is written, comes to the surface only here and there, and any actual image almost never.

The following stanza is an example of Mr. Robinson’s work at its best:

And like a giant harp that hums
On always, and is always blending
The coming of what never comes
With what has past and had an ending,
The city trembles, throbs, and pounds
Outside, and through a thousand sounds
The small intolerable drums
Of Times are like slow drops descending.

And there is the compact, intensely contemplated statement of “Eros Turannos,” a poem that is, in forty-eight lines, as complete as a Lawrence novel. And the nimble trickery of “Miniver Cheevy,” as finished a piece of burlesque as one can find in English. A few of us have feared, in the last few years, that Mr. Robinson was deteriorating; but going through this book one is reassured. If there is nothing in *The Three Taverns* to equal “Eros Turannos,” there are at least two or three poems as great as any save that one Mr. Robinson has written; and there is nothing in these last poems to preclude the possibility of another “Eros Turannos.”

Mr. Robinson, as probably the highest point in his tradition, has been followed by Frost, a more specialized, and generally softer artist. And there