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Colby Library Quarterly

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December 1960

No. 8

IN MEMORIAM:

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

In 1920 and again in 1922 EAR pondered the probability of his literary survival a quarter-century after his death. The number 25 gripped his imagination and seemed to assume for him a magical connotation. If he could just manage to continue being read that long, he felt, his immortality would be assured. The first of two statements to his eldest niece—"I shall begin to live, if all goes well, about twenty five years after I'm dead"—exudes larger confidence than the second—"assuming that in another twenty five [years] my books are not as extinct as I shall be."

Twenty-five years have now elapsed since the poet passed on, and they have exposed him as a poor prophet. In the first place, his works never "died" to the point of having to "begin to live" again. In the second, he is most positively not "extinct."

The fame of the three-time Pulitzer Prize-winner has pulsed steadily through several shifts in literary taste since his time. Editions of his books and commentary on his vision and esthetic have appeared with abounding regularity. Constant inclusion of "Miniver Cheevy," "Richard Cory," "The Man Against the Sky" and "Flammonde" in academic and general anthologies have given them a familiar place alongside Poe's "To Helen," Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," and Emerson's "The Rhodora" as indubitable short classics of American literature.

To the memory of Maine's most distinguished native poet and his perdurable accomplishment, this issue is dedicated.

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DOES IT MATTER HOW ANNANDALE WENT OUT?

By DAVID S. NIVISON

I

IT is a critic's business to criticize a poet's work, not his intentions. What the poet intends, or has in mind, or is prompted by, is not only distinct in being from his poem—it is even in a sense irrelevant to it. The poet has his own emotion or experience, but in the poem, if he does well, he communicates it in such a way that it ceases to be distinctly his. He universalizes it, so that any sensitive reader may grasp the poem's meaning and appreciate its value without privy knowledge of the poet's personal history.

This view seems to me to present a paradox: it is both compelling and perplexing. It is compelling because in a way it restates our common conception of what language itself is for. And it is perplexing, not only because one occasionally stumbles over counterexamples which make one blush, but also because it seems perfectly natural, when we are trying to understand a poem or judge its effect, to ask at once what personal problem the poet was mulling over, what he was trying to say, and why.

To anyone unable to stop worrying about this puzzle the poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson must be especially disquieting. Robinson sometimes assumes the role of narrator, and it is impossible to read such a poem as "Isaac and Archibald" and remain persuaded that the use of the first person is merely a formal device. Our impression is strong and persistent that his Tilbury Town is his home, Gardiner, Maine. He writes constantly of people. And, especially in the shorter poems, the people sometimes seem to us to be unusually real ones, not just successful characterizations but people the poet has known. Yet these characters stand on their own feet; the poems carry their own weight without any explanation of their background. It is difficult to see what would be accomplished by identifying the "real" Llewellyn or Mr. Flood, either for our understanding of these poems or for our evaluation of them.

And Robinson may well enough be talking about Gardiner when writing of Tilbury Town, in the sense of allowing his

memories to enrich or even to displace his imagination, without in any sense *referring* to Gardiner when he does this. If report be true, the poet himself has had his say about this matter. James Barstow, close friend of Robinson in Gardiner and later in New York, cites George Burnham, another Robinson intimate, as follows:

. . . . Mr. George Burnham has just recently told me—and I quote him literally—that Robinson said to him with emphasis “that neither Tilbury Town, nor any of the portrait sketches, nor the ‘Town Down the River’ referred to any particular place. In no instance whatever in any of his writings did he refer to anyone or any place. Tilbury Town might be any small New England . . . town.”¹

Mr. Barstow and Mr. Burnham were men I knew well and respected highly. I do not doubt them; nor need we question Robinson’s disclaimer. But the matter is not quite as simple as this. The interesting question is not whether or not Robinson dealt with actual places and persons. For Robinson did not create his characters and scenes *ex nihilo*. A poet is a “maker;” but he is not this kind of maker.

A more meaningful question is this: must we, if we are to understand parts of Robinson’s work, know certain things about Robinson himself—the memories, friendships, regrets, experiences, which were part of his history and so part of himself—as he brings himself to the task of writing? And if understanding a poem requires this knowledge, must we count this a defect in the poem? Many would stand on doctrine and answer that we must. Nevertheless I think I can point to cases where having additional information about a poem not only enables us to understand it better but also shows us values in it we would otherwise have missed.

“Miniver Cheevy” is one of the most familiar of Robinson’s poems, familiar enough so that perhaps I need not quote it in full. Its popularity is puzzling, for I think very few understand it completely (although what I shall say is really quite obvious, and may have occurred to some; I myself owe the idea to my mother, Ruth Nivison). A pair of stanzas will start us:

Miniver sighed for what was not,
And dreamed, and rested from his labors;
He dreamed of Thebes and Camelot,
And Priam’s neighbors.

¹ James S. Barstow, *My Tilbury Town* (Privately printed, 1939), 7.

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Miniver mourned the ripe renown
That made so many a name so fragrant;
He mourned Romance, now on the town,
And Art, a vagrant.

The poem is said to be one of Robinson's "character sketches." But Robinson's attitude toward this character cannot be matched elsewhere in his poems. Elsewhere we find deep sympathy and withheld judgment, as in "Bewick Finzer;" a constant sense that the human psyche conceals far more than we can ever have knowledge of, as in "Richard Cory;" a deep awareness of worth in apparent failure, as in "Flammonde;" and endless unanswered questioning, as we find even in "Llewellyn and the Tree," a poem Robinson manifestly enjoyed writing.

"When were thoughts or wonderings to ferret out the man within?" he asks in "Clavering." Still, Robinson is incurably thinking and wondering, and always asking us to do likewise. It is his way with his characters, and it must have been his way with his fellow men and with the world. But in "Miniver Cheevy" this trait of endless pondering is assigned to Miniver himself, and Robinson makes fun of him for it. Indeed, instead of sympathizing with his character and wanting us to ask what more there might be to say of him, Robinson laughs at him without reserve in every line, and leaves us with no compulsion to take him seriously or to go deeper into his make-up. His faults are lampooned with what we suspect is outrageous exaggeration. Even his harmless qualities and virtues, if he has them, are presented as absurdities. The poem is on the surface at least the opposite of serious; repeatedly we are entertained with what an unkind critic would call parlor-trickery (thus, "He missed the medieval grace/Of iron clothing").

In short, Robinson talks about Miniver as he could bring himself to talk about no other man, real or imaginary—except himself. And not even about himself, I think, except in the secure company of a group of intimate friends, and then only with a guarded wry remark or sly word. If we now reread the poem, we will see that if we make due allowance for exaggeration, what is said of Miniver is applicable to Robinson himself—even (for a season) the drinking part of it.

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I do not mean that *Miniver* is, literally, E. A. Robinson. I do mean that before we can understand the poem adequately we have to ask who it was Robinson was thinking of, and how. The "how" is important. For Robinson very often projects himself into his poems, in various ways and in varying degrees. "Mr. Robinson . . . withholds himself and studies his fellows" wrote Robert Hillyer.² But, of course, one can't "withhold himself" completely if one is to study his fellows sympathetically. In "*Aunt Imogen*," for example, after assembling his character he had to imagine what it would be like to be such a person. And he found that to a surprising degree he *was* such a person. To this extent the method of the poem is self-explorative. But if there is self-exploration in "*Miniver Cheevy*" it is of a very different kind. Here, Robinson is not exploring the unknown in a human individual by turning inward. On the contrary, he has set up a fiction and has developed this fiction by talking about him as he sometimes feels like talking about himself. And, of course, he is having fun—but serious fun. It is almost as if he wanted to see how the total composition would turn out if he gave this impulse free run.

Miniver, in a word, is not a character but a travesty, and "*Miniver Cheevy*" is not a character sketch and was never intended to be. How was this understanding of the poem reached? No esoteric information about the poem was needed (for there isn't any to be had). Close reading was all that was needed—or almost all. We also needed some knowledge of the poet's personality, and of his typical method (in order to notice that it is *not* exemplified here) of dealing with human character. The needed knowledge can be gained by anyone from a reading of Robinson's published work, taking together both poems and letters. But it is knowledge about the poet nonetheless, and is something more than a reading of this poem alone can give.

If this much be true of "*Miniver*," we can well imagine that Robinson may have other poems which yield their meaning less readily, requiring of us information harder to come by. We might want to complain in such cases that the poet is play-

² *New England Quarterly*, III (January 1930), 149.

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ing a private game, that he is not playing fair. But it is best and fairest to leave this question until the cases come up. Meanwhile, what of "Miniver Cheevy" itself? Robinson is not exactly obvious about what he is doing in this poem. Does the poem, for all we have said about it, still merit censure for making unfair demands upon the reader?

It seems to me at least arguable that Robinson's privacy in what he is about in this poem is as much a virtue as a fault. Suppose he had let us in on the game at once, by entitling his poem not "Miniver Cheevy" but, say, "Self-Portrait." I think anyone will admit that this would have been grotesque (as well as not wholly accurate)³—and worse, would have displayed a gross lack of modesty. Robinson does talk in this way about himself in letters to close personal friends (letters he usually asked them to burn). Here he has done the same thing in a published work of art, and the same need for privacy exists. Perhaps we should say that if he were consistent he should have burned his own poem. But I for one am grateful that he didn't.

II

I turn briefly to another example, less familiar and of a different kind. "Cortege," a poem of six four-line stanzas, is included in *Captain Craig* (1902). I do not know when it was written, but the extraordinary state of mind that produced it has a precise date. The poem has a surface meaning which is hardly difficult: two friends have died, their funeral is at hand, and the poem tells us how the poet feels about it.

But this much will satisfy scarcely anyone. And this time the widest reading of Robinson, coupled with the closest re-reading of the poem, will not remove all difficulty. It might be that more information about the poem would sustain what we see simply from careful reading. And it would still be possible to treat the poem as fictional—indeed if we take it literally it is necessary to do so.

Nonetheless the impact of the poem would be greatly augmented, for we would see that Robinson was impelled to write

³ A much closer approach to a self-portrait is "Old King Cole," another pseudo-character-sketch.

it by the extraordinarily intense emotion of a permanent quality, rooted in an indelible chapter in his personal history. So intense is this emotion that fragments of the actual incident, irrelevant to the poem "itself"—or at least inexplicable except through an exercise of pure fancy by the reader—are still in place: "four o'clock this afternoon," "fifteen hundred miles away." These shattered pieces do, however, support the almost explicit suggestion of a despair close to distraction, at war in each stanza with reiterated and unconvincing philosophizing of the kind we find in "Leonora:" "Best for them the grave today." We may view the poem as fiction if we prefer, but as a release of personal feeling it is not play-acting.

It would be a mistake, perhaps, to say that the situation which moved him to write a given poem is even a part of what Robinson *intended* the reader to think of. Nonetheless "Cortege" shows that this situation and Robinson's involvement in it is sometimes so important to him as to overshadow anything apparent on the surface in the poem itself. It must be granted that Robinson could scarcely have hoped that a poem like "Cortege" would be fully understood by anyone except a few members of his family. He surely didn't care. Such poems are in his collected works because they are a part of himself, which he might let time destroy, but which he had to preserve as long as he could. They are like personal memories, so intimately a part of what one is that one must concentrate on holding on to them yet strive to conceal them. We must grant also the unlikelihood that Robinson would have acquired the stature he has if this kind of poem were all he produced. Still, some of this poetry is very moving, and many poems which are independently quite excellent can only gain in value, it seems to me, if we know more about them. I must apologize for saying no more of "Cortege" at this time except that it was conceived one black afternoon in late winter of 1890, when Robinson's brother and sister-in-law left Gardiner after their recent marriage (figurative death?) on the four o'clock train for St. Louis—fifteen hundred miles away.

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III

The sonnet "How Annandale Went Out" presents us with all of these complexities together and an additional one: in this case, other parts of Robinson's writing may actually *mislead* us.

To begin with, this poem is a fascinating example of a familiar problem in critical theory. Some (e.g., I. A. Richards) have tried to patch up the idea that a poem "is" what the reader makes out of it (regardless of what the poet's intentions were) by admitting that not just any reader, or just any reading, will do. The importance of the poet's connection with his poem is brought back into the picture by suggesting that the poet himself is one of its readers, and that for the authoritative reading of his poem we should take the poet's own review of it at the moment creation is finished, when, God-like, he looks upon his work and sees that it is good. One trouble with this theory is that the moment of review is, of course, a "specious present." And in Robinson's case, never in the folklore of metaphysics was the specious present more specious. Not only did Robinson in this instance reread and mull over his own work; he did so over many years, and he kept on creating as he reread.

He has given us not one but three "Annandale" poems, written in different forms, in different moods and at widely different times. "The Book of Annandale" is in blank verse, and takes up more than sixteen pages of the *Collected Poems*. It first appeared in *Captain Craig* in 1902, but it was begun earlier, and is in two parts surely not written at one sitting.⁴ "How Annandale Went Out," a sonnet, was included in *The Town Down the River* in 1910. "Annandale Again," a poem of forty-seven quatrains, was first published in 1929, and was probably completed within a few years of that date.⁵

The first of these poems tells of George Annandale, of a book he wrote for his first wife without being able to show it to her before she died, and of the inner self-struggle of the woman who was to become his second wife. I believe (though

⁴ Edwin Arlington Robinson, *Collected Poems* (New York, 1945), 195-211. In a letter to Harry DeForest Smith dated January 13, 1898, Robinson says that he "did 24 lines this afternoon beginning 'George Annandale'—a long thing in blank verse which is either good or bad." Denham Sutcliffe, ed., *Untriangulated Stars* (Cambridge, Mass., 1947), 294.

⁵ *Scribner's Magazine*, LXXXVI (August 1929), 129-134. One stanza seems to allude to an incident which must have occurred in Boston in 1922 or 1923.

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I shall not press the matter here) that it is related to Robinson's personal history in the same way as is "Cortege"—non-referentially but as an intense emotional expression.

The sonnet is a monologue: a physician tells of attending a man named Annandale who is in some way fatally stricken and of ending his suffering, perhaps with a lethal injection.

HOW ANNANDALE WENT OUT

"They called it Annandale—and I was there
To flourish, to find words, and to attend:
Liar, physician, hypocrite, and friend,
I watched him; and the sight was not so fair
As one or two that I have seen elsewhere:
An apparatus not for me to mend—
A wreck, with hell between him and the end,
Remained of Annandale; and I was there.

"I knew the ruin as I knew the man;
So put the two together, if you can,
Remembering the worst you know of me.
Now view yourself as I was, on the spot—
With a slight kind of engine. Do you see?
Like this . . . You wouldn't hang me? I
thought not."

I see no indication other than sameness of surname that George Annandale and Annandale are the same person. The sonnet is a strange one. There is intensity here as well perhaps, but not the sustained psychological pressure of the earlier poem.

Robinson brings the two Annandales together as a single character in "Annandale Again." Clearly he was writing long after the composition even of the Annandale sonnet. The intense tone is now gone. The speaker is again the physician. Annandale appears at his door—"Almost as if my thought of him/Had called him from he said not where"—he might indeed, be an image arising in memory. The image speaks, however, recounting as his own story the story of George Annandale in "The Book," and dwelling affectionately on the character of his present wife. Then he leaves, and is at once struck down in the street by a moving vehicle. The physician goes to his aid and is present "to watch while Annandale went out." He then repeats his justification of his act in the sonnet:

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"mine was the one light I had/To show me the one thing to do."

In "Annandale Again" we at last have the whole story—or so it seems. Robinson has taken the earlier fragments of the Annandale picture, fitted them together, and filled them out for us. But in doing so has he necessarily given us merely what was in his mind from the start? I do not see that we have any reason to assume this. What he often does in creating a poem is to present a few pieces of a poetic conception—pieces which could be fitted into a *number of different* stories—and then to suggest, cautiously and tentatively, the direction our search for an understanding of them should proceed. This is not a detective-story device. It places us in the situation we are in fact always in when we must appraise people and situations. In "The Whip" we have the method within the confines of a single poem: the speaker sees, ponders, begins to grope toward understanding, then leaves us, with a question, to go on ourselves to whatever end we can reach. In "Annandale Again" the poet takes the earlier Annandale poems and does himself—here it becomes his method of developing his fiction—what elsewhere he invites us to do.

But if this be the case we might do well to look again at "How Annandale Went Out" and ask if other stories can be built out of what it provides. There is one significant difference between the sonnet and the later poem which is on its face so trivial Robinson himself may not have noticed that he left it for us. "Annandale Again" is told directly in the first person. We do not, of course, take the "I" here to be in an exact sense the poet himself, though often in this manner of poem it is. "How Annandale Went Out" is also in the first person—but no, not quite! The whole poem is in quotation marks. This in itself might not be significant; for Robinson often has used the monologue device without quotation marks. But here the difference is important. In the later poem, the speaker is doing what Robinson so often does—pondering over the meaning of a story he has told insofar as he is able to tell it. In the earlier one, Robinson is exhibiting another man's self-defense—sympathetically: Robinson has accepted the defense and wants us to also. Nonetheless the tone of self-

justification makes the inverted commas a necessary part of the poem. We learn nothing of the ordinary "I" of Robinson's poems save that he is meditative, puzzles over things, is sympathetic, observing, withholding judgment. Even in "Annandale Again," where the "I" is a physician, his physicianhood scarcely intrudes itself. The "I" in "How Annandale Went Out," on the contrary, is a definite character whom Robinson portrays by allowing him to speak. Apparently in twenty years' time our physician has changed his identity.

There are other things about "How Annandale Went Out" which may make us wonder whether Robinson's own extrapolation of it is the best possible one. "A wreck, with hell between him and the end" and "I knew the ruin as I knew the man" might, with a stretch of language, apply to an accident victim, but it would be more natural to imagine the physician's patient as the victim of a wasting malady for which no help could be given. Likewise "I watched him" suggests a long-enduring situation, hardly an accident scene.

I want now to suggest a way of thinking about this poem which I think will be worth trying. Consider again carefully the lines—"I knew the ruin as I knew the man;/So put the two together, if you can,/Remembering the worst you know of me." Let us try making the physical "ruin" ("They called *it* Annandale"—but is this the real Annandale?), the (real) "man", and "me" not three persons, nor even two, but *one*. We would have in the poem the words of a dead man, a physician, who had been fatally ill, justifying his own act of self-destruction. In this poetic apologia, as perhaps psychologically in life also, physician and "wreck" are split apart. Suicide becomes merely treatment of a case; he did the reasonable, if socially unapprovable, thing to do. We may also guess that something else unnamed—perhaps the nature of the malady, which he found himself (*qua* physician and *qua* "man") helpless to control?—constrains him to separate himself as "man," as human character, from himself as powerless in will, as "ruin." Now re-read the poem, and notice the Beaudelairian word "hypocrite" in line three.

I am not quite sure whether what I offer here will pass as an *interpretation*. For the words, "there/To flourish, to find

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words and to attend:" are altogether too easily taken as meaning just what they say: we know well enough how to recognize a doctor doing his job. It is an idea, however, which the poet seems almost to be expressing in spite of himself. Do we have here another case of a poem prompted by an actual incident—an incident developed by Robinson into a conception which on its face is fiction, but an incident which continued to have more of a hold on the poet's thought than the derivative conception he worked with?

Lawrance Thompson includes this poem in his selection of Robinson's verse entitled *Tilbury Town*, published in October 1953. He has a brief note on it, which reads, in part:

One particular example of "euthanasia" practiced by a doctor occurred in Robinson's own home; but with an ironic twist, in that it was self-inflicted. Robinson's brother Dean, who was a doctor, apparently used a needle to give himself a lethal "shot" of morphine, which was believed to have caused his death.⁶

Professor Thompson, perhaps wisely, refrains from drawing any inferences. However, if the line of thought I have suggested has proved at all tempting, this bit of family history ought to be of no little interest.

Horace Dean Robinson was twelve years older than his youngest brother. There are indications that the poet had a deep admiration and affection for him. In 1930 Robinson made a gift to the Gardiner General Hospital to equip a laboratory in Dean's memory. Details of "Captain Craig" reveal that Dean (along with Alfred Louis, an acquaintance) had much to do with the poet's conception of the "captain."

Dean, educated at Bowdoin Medical School in Portland, had started practicing in Camden. There, as the youngest member of his profession, he took the most arduous work, including frequent night calls to outlying islands. Vexed by excruciating sinus trouble and facial neuralgia, he began to relieve himself by imprudent self-medication. Presently he had become a drug addict. He returned to the family home in Gardiner, and his father bought him a drugstore, which kept him in morphine and deepened his addiction. He repeatedly

⁶ Lawrance Thompson (ed.), *Tilbury Town* (New York, 1953), 140.

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sought institutional treatment, but nothing could break the habit. He drifted gradually downward. For a time he served as city physician and was well enough to earn praise for his work. He later worked as an ice-cutter on the river. After the panic of 1893 and his brother Herman's business failures in St. Louis the family's financial situation was bleak and was becoming desperate. Dean's condition deteriorated; he was often bedridden and delirious, and from 1896 until his death the family had to engage an attendant to watch him.

Dean was fully aware of the burden he had become, and, both as a doctor and as an individual struggling helplessly with his addiction, he must have known the hopelessness of his case. On September 29, 1899, he died suddenly and from no apparent cause. Edwin was unwelcome at home because of a recent incident with his brother Herman, and had been living away from Gardiner for over half a year. He was quickly called back. My mother, then age 8, has written of this event as follows:

I remember vividly his sad pinched face lying in the casket, and the family arguing why and how he died. They decided that, realizing his plight, he had saved a little of each portion sent up from the store until he had accumulated a lethal dose. He was a Knight-Templar, and at his funeral the commandery marched in uniform to the "Dead March" in *Saul*.

Robinson left again at once.

The memory of his brother remained with him throughout his life, and with this memory a painful sensitivity about what others in Gardiner may have thought of Dean. When, in 1930, my mother suggested to him a memorial in the hospital, he took up the idea quickly, but expressed apprehension about how the proposal would be received. "I don't know anything about Gardiner now," he wrote, "but . . . it is barely possible that there are some who may not quite realize that Dean's unfortunate infirmities had no relation whatever to the fineness of his character. If he hadnt been so fine, he might be alive now and thriving."⁷

⁷ Quoted from an unpublished letter to Ruth Nivison, dated September 4, 1930, now at the Colby College Library.

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Are we to identify the Annandale of the sonnet with Dean Robinson? Here we must recall the poet's earlier objections: he might well protest that he was not, literally, writing about anyone. We can respect this protest and still ask if Dean's death supplied Robinson with his theme, his attitude toward that event becoming the attitude which we detect in the poet behind the poem.

In the spring of 1953 I was invited by a friend to spend an evening with Dr. Merrill Moore, late Boston psychiatrist and writer of many sonnets. I soon found myself with a group of others in the midst of a lively discussion of sonnetry and psychiatry with Moore at the Boston Harvard Club. Moore had been an intimate friend of Robinson's and, though this was unknown to me, knew other members of the family.

The evening with Moore I shall never forget. Moore had a genuine light-hearted and unconcerned humility about his own work which would have drawn anyone to him. His enthusiasm for his craft was contagious, and his sympathy for all human beings was irresistible. He read sonnets, he talked about the art of the sonnet, and of the different and unusual tasks to which the sonnet form can be and has been put. In particular he called our attention to the use of the sonnet to tell a story.

At this juncture I spoke up, observed that even dramatic monologue could be found in sonnet literature, and cited, "How Annandale Went Out." Moore looked at me sharply. "That poem is about your Uncle Dean," he said. I was dumbfounded. The "inner" explanation of the poem, and with it the whole story of Dean's end, had been, I thought, a dark family secret. "What do you know about Dean?" I shot back. "Oh, your uncle (*i.e.*, Edwin) told me a lot about Dean," he answered; and that was all he would say. I thought at the moment that in respect for my own feelings he didn't wish to go into the matter before a large gathering.

But at a subsequent meeting alone with Moore a week or so later I was unable to get any more light from him on the matter. Did he have misgivings about having said boldly in so many words that the sonnet was *about* Dean? Had he perhaps once talked with Robinson about the poem, to find the conversation shift abruptly but somehow naturally to Robin-

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son's brother, and then, familiar in his own work with a proximity between poetry and personal problems, made the identification of Annandale with Dean himself? Or did he sense in what Robinson had told him a reticence which, as a professional man accustomed to dealing with confidences, he felt still bound to respect? I shall never know.

I do know that it would not have been surprising for Robinson to have talked with Moore about Dean's case, and perhaps also about the case of his other brother Herman, who became an alcoholic after meeting with financial disaster. Both were "wrecks" in the eyes of the world. Both were men Robinson knew to be admirable. Both were elder brothers he had struggled with himself to analyze and justify. He could count on Moore's native human sympathy. And Moore must have been deeply interested. One of his principal professional interests in later years was the psychology of addiction.

I have one more detail to add, and this one too must end with a question. In 1931 Macmillan brought out a selection of Robinson's poems edited by Bliss Perry, professor at Harvard and for some years editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, whose acquaintance with the poet went back to 1902 when he had read the manuscript of *Captain Craig* for Houghton Mifflin and Co. Near the close of Perry's preface we find the following passage:

My function has been simply that of planning the contents of the book, and my pleasure in performing it is all the more keen because of the many sessions in which Mr. Robinson has generously given his approval of the choices made. Perhaps he will allow me to betray the secret that I have included one sonnet—impeccable in its art but *macabre* in theme—which he likes better than I do. But we drove a Yankee bargain over it, with the result that the reader now gets two additional sonnets for which the author's enthusiasm seems less warm than mine. I think that I—and the reader—have the better of this trade, but I wisely refrain from giving the titles of the sonnets under discussion.⁸

Now here is a puzzle! What is this sonnet "impeccable in its art but *macabre* in theme" which the poet would not give up despite his editor's uneasiness?

Of the twenty-six sonnets included in *Selected Poems*, I find not a few which could fitly be judged impeccable in art, but

⁸ Bliss Perry (ed.), *Selected Poems* (New York, 1931), vii-viii.

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only two, I think, which qualify as *macabre* in theme. These two, I suggest, are "Haunted House" (pp. 298-299) and "How Annandale Went Out" (p. 293). "Haunted House" is indeed chilling.⁹ Still, I find it difficult to see what there might be in it that would have given Professor Perry such pause. "How Annandale Went Out" is another case entirely. It deals approvingly with euthanasia, and perhaps also with suicide; and Perry, I fear I must recall, was a member of the Boston Watch and Ward Society! And it is extremely—well, realistic. One can almost feel the needle—"Like this . . ."! One can only guess what the offending poem was, but I find it fascinating to speculate that Robinson may have insisted on the presence of the Annandale sonnet in the selection, possibly without being able to bring himself to own his own motives.

For if what I have said of it has any justification, "How Annandale Went Out" is like "Cortege"—so important to the poet that it was almost a part of his being, to be guarded as though it were a piece of himself. It is more accessible than "Cortege." We need no privileged information to make sense of it, indeed, to make sense of it in different ways. And perhaps Robinson intended us to have this multiple possibility of interpretation. He may even have preferred to have us take the obvious choice, of seeing in it simply a doctor's account of his dealing with a patient. The obviousness of this interpretation is perhaps a needed disguise—just as "Miniver Cheevy" needed to be at least thinly disguised—protecting the privacy of the poem's associations for Robinson himself.

Still I do not think we would want to miss the opportunity to consider the alternative I have suggested; psychologically it seems to me to be far richer. And I feel we are poorer if we are unable to consider what this poem meant to Robinson, its intimate connection with a painful memory, a case in his own life and family of that problem which always absorbed him, of worth in apparent failure, of the man enduring through the ruin. For at the level to which criticism must rise in Robinson we deal with more than just the poem; we deal with the poet as well. Criticism is more than just an esthetic-semantic prob-

⁹ But I will not force upon the reader the experience it will give him; it is found in *Collected Poems*, p. 870.

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lem having to do with words, and with meanings which are attributes of words—it becomes a moral problem of judging attitudes, which are the attributes of a man.

In a sense, however, it does not matter how Annandale went out. What matters is the kind of question Robinson put to the event. Here in life he was confronted with the problem which is presented in poem after poem, of a human enigma in which we must learn to accept that we must remain in ignorance and doubt. The physician is not telling us what happened—he is saying what Robinson conjectures he might have said could we ask him. For no one knows how Annandale went out, really. Except, perhaps, Annandale himself.



MOODY AND ROBINSON

By MAURICE F. BROWN

ON May 8, 1898, William Vaughn Moody wrote from Chicago to Daniel Gregory Mason in Cambridge, "Note what you say of Robinson with interest. Do not know his work. Wish you could get me a line of introduction from some friends."¹ Mason's eventual introduction of the two poets began a friendship, important to the careers of both, which lasted until Moody's death in 1910. Biographers and critics, with the exception of Hermann Hagedorn, have tended to shy away from the thorny problems involved in speculation on the nature and impact of the relationship.

There is some difficulty in understanding why Moody might have been interested in knowing Robinson: differences in their characters and poetic aims are so striking they would seem to make any kind of friendship impossible. Moody, the Midwesterner, was spontaneous and emotional, "florid and careless" in dress, with a "barbaric taste for magnificence in waistcoats,"

¹ From a letter in the Princeton University Library. Published by permission of the Library and William Vaughn Moody Fawcett.