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Of them, or many of them to be, not knowing
 More about that than about waves and foam,
 And white birds everywhere, flying and flying;
 Alone, with her white face and her gray eyes,
 She watched them there till even her thoughts were white,
 And there was nothing alive but white birds flying,
 Flying, and always flying, and still flying,
 And the white sunlight flashing on the sea.³

³ This article is reprinted from the *Radcliffe Quarterly*, XLVI, November 1962, by permission of its editor, Anna E. Holman.



E. A. ROBINSON AS SOOTHSAYER

By RICHARD CARY

IN common with most time-bound earthlings, Edwin Arlington Robinson often yearned to cut through the veils of the future and preview the "mintage of Eternity." There is no record, however, that he subscribed to astrology, phrenology, or palmistry. He is not known to have consulted gypsies, crystal balls, tea leaves, conches, Ouija boards, animal entrails, or footprints in ashes. Nor did he practice automatic writing or *sortes virgilianae*.

While he never pretended to Delphic wisdom, there was a touch of the mystical in his early claims to divination. "I have presentiments, and have always had them," he confided to his former high school mate, Arthur R. Gledhill, on August 20, 1895.¹ These intuitive flashes accord with his sympathy for Emerson's concept of the poet as seer, which Robinson poignantly expressed in his 1894 sonnet—a cry for a poet who would "rift this changeless glimmer of dead gray." Robinson's

¹ Ridgely Torrence (ed.), *Selected Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1940), 11.

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faith in occult cognition seems to have remained steady until the end of the nineteenth century. As late as April 18, 1900, he could say to comrade Daniel Gregory Mason, "I have a prophetic feeling. . ."²

The irruption of a new century had unquestionably less influence upon Robinson's shift of attitude than did his own maturing emotions and intellect. Thereafter he speaks with smaller confidence to Hermann Hagedorn about "my cloudy prognostications,"³ and comes close to disclaiming all fatidic vision on his part in an unpublished letter to Edith Brower. Contemplating public reception of shorter poems years hence, he wrote: "It is contrary to my nature to consider these contingencies, and you will have observed that no great amount of my time heretofore has been spent in considering them" (September 24, 1925).⁴

In his poems after 1900, the flow of the future takes on a cyclic appearance. Time is represented as a continuous holocaust in which old ways dissolve in flames as the new rise from among the ashes. Inherent in this endlessly repetitive scheme is man's tragic inability to alter his destiny. In so purposive a universe the wellsprings of prophecy are fed from more determinable areas than the purely visionary.

Merlin (1917), with its theme of inexorable futurity and a protagonist whose foresight "made other men / As ordinary as arithmetic," is perhaps the best illustration of Robinson's conclusive views on augury. Merlin is not a medieval wizard with wand, whiskers, and conical cap. He is a world-weary realist privy to time's grinding effect on human ideals. His clairvoyance comes of deep experience and a judgment made acute by knowledge of man's proneness to self-indulgence. He foresees, but he does not have the ubiquitous powers of a god or devil to manipulate events. Perceiving Camelot's coming collapse "as through a cracked and cloudy glass," he exclaims with impotent sadness: "I saw; but I was neither Fate nor God." Robinson thus reduces prophecy to modern, mundane

² *Ibid.*, 29.

³ *Ibid.*, 94. June 1, 1916.

⁴ This is from one of 190 unpublished letters by Robinson to Miss Brower now in Colby College Library. They are the gift of Mr. H. Bacon Collamore, and are quoted through the kindness of Mrs. Ruth Nivison, the poet's niece.

levels — a reliable extrapolation of the known, announced without sham or passion.

Irresistibly, but with increasing caution, Robinson indulged in speculation on the probable shape of things to come. His published letters yield a plenitude of predictions within a narrow range of topics: his development as man and writer, the success or failure of other writers, the direction of world events, and — most rarely — afterlife, about which he preferred to be agnostically vague. The cast of his recipient's mind apparently governed Robinson's predictive tendency. He was in general more apt to venture into the unknown with his artistic acquaintances than with those in the prosaic professions. Compare, if you will, the correspondence with Laura E. Richards, who had an affinity for whimsy, and that with Harry de Forest Smith, a friend of his youth who became a professor of classical literature.⁵ The first is lavish with annunciations; the second is almost devoid of them.

Perhaps because Edith Brower — who discovered genius in his first, self-published book, *The Torrent and the Night Before* — shared his fervor for poetry and for music, he could unbosom himself of numerous forebodings while writing to her. It may be that, as in Mrs. Richards' case, he felt the feminine temperament more receptive to unverifiable utterance and less inclined to scour him for demonstrated error. Whatever his motivation, Robinson sprinkled his long series of letters (1897-1930) to Miss Brower with forecasts, sometimes solemn, sometimes sportive, but always founded on the same brand of experience and judgment he attributed to Merlin. The following extracts from these hitherto restricted letters reveal Robinson's habitual resort to prevision and, a generation later, make for indicative comparisons between his anticipation and the actual outcome.

In the first two troublous years after the appearance of *The Torrent* (1896), his letters to Miss Brower are most heavily punctuated with assertions about his dubious prospect as a poet. He showed remarkable insight into his own personality, made some shrewd assumptions about particular poems, but

⁵ Thirty-five of Robinson's letters to Mrs. Richards are included in Torrence's *Selected Letters*; his letters to Smith are presented in Denham Sutcliffe's *Untriangulated Stars* (Cambridge, Mass., 1947).

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depreciated his eventual emergence as a public success. Keenly conscious of his ingrained reticence, he had told Smith in May 1894: "When I look far into the future, I see myself — sometimes in the light of a partial success — living alone in some city — Boston, most likely — with a friend or two to drop in upon me once in a while, and a few faithful correspondents."⁶ With similar surety he had declared to Gledhill in August 1895 that he would "never be a Prominent Citizen."⁷ Out of this firm self-knowledge he disclosed to Miss Brower (undated letter, March-April 1897) that "if ever I achieve worldly success, I'm half afraid it will finish me." He was to achieve worldly success but it did not finish him, for he never deviated from the design for living which he had outlined to Smith — mostly in New York City and Peterborough, New Hampshire, with charily selected friends and some excellent correspondents.

An amusing sidelight along these lines is Robinson's accuracy in predicting the behavior of Miss Brower's cat on his visit to her home in Wilkes-Barre in 1898. Miss Brower evidently warned him that her fifteen-year-old tom had all its life fled from anything wearing trousers and having a deep voice. Robinson, who in his time had consorted with a cat or two, wrote back evenly: "The cat and I are going to get along first rate" (January 6, 1898). Miss Brower later described the confrontation in "Memories," an unpublished reminiscence of her friendship with EAR. "The moment he laid eyes on Robinson, he went straight to him [and] jumped upon his knees." Miss Brower took this to mean that the poet was "all right."

His earliest conjectures on his ultimate evolution as a poet took on the darkling tone of this remark to Gledhill (October 28, 1896) in respect to *The Torrent*: "This book will probably mark the end of my poetical career."⁸ On April 10, 1897, Robinson ruminated moodily to Miss Brower: "I don't feel that I have done very much as it is, and I doubt very much, sometimes, if ever I shall do anything better." A fortnight later he rated her for calling him "a poet, a real one," and witlessly admonished her that "those words will embarrass you some

⁶ *Untriangulated Stars*, 156-157.

⁷ *Selected Letters*, 11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

day." The publication of *The Children of the Night* (1897) bolstered his belief that he was "going in the right direction," but did not dispel his low estimate of future growth. "I realize now [December 10, 1898] more than ever my one-sidedness. This need not prevent me from doing good work but one-sidedness doesn't often go with the production of anything great. . . . The thought that I shall ever do anything even approaching it sometimes makes me laugh." Public apathy and his impregnable modesty contributed more to this unprepossessing picture than any prescience on his part. All of these dismal monitions were to prove baseless.

Because taste and self-criticism were involved in his appraisal of individual poems, he more consistently forecast their probable status. "I have done forty Octaves," he told Miss Brower in April 1897, "but I do not think they will be very well received." He was right. His Octaves are rather formidable exercises in eight-line blank verse which now and again catch the eye of a scrupulous critic but have never registered with his larger reading audience. In July of the same year he called the turn correctly on "Richard Cory." To Miss Brower he said, "There isn't any idealism in it, but there's lots of something else — humanity, maybe. I opine that it will go." In company with "Miniver Cheevy" and "Mr. Flood's Party," it is one of Robinson's most widely known and anthologized poems.

The familiar axiom that every comedian wants to play Hamlet finds its counterpart in the heart of many a poet and novelist who longs to be a playwright. Flaubert and Henry James, among countless others, broke their lances in futile efforts to create dramas acceptable to theatre-goers of their day. And so it was with Robinson. He embroiled himself for at least a decade in writing, revising, and trying to market *Van Zorn* and *The Porcupine*. They were unanimously rejected by producers who squirmed uneasily under the heavy weight of their psychological themes. Pride and frustration must have clouded Robinson's prognostic faculty when, after admitting to Miss Brower on January 17, 1916, that both plays had "fallen utterly flat," he persisted: "I nourish a more or less idiotic faith in their coming to life some day." His faith was misplaced. Macmillan had published the plays in 1914 and 1915, respectively, but

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neither has kindled any coteries in the intervening half-century. *Van Zorn* was performed briefly by a community theatre group at the Brooklyn YMCA in 1917; *The Porcupine* never reached the boards.

Prompt to assess his own future, Robinson was no less loath to gauge the prospects of other authors and their works. Scores of such instances are to be met in his published letters and comments. After reading only three pages of A. E. Housman, he boldly asserted that this new bard "had come to stay." Robinson was quite as sharp about Nietzsche's continuing eminence, but he miscalculated G. B. Shaw as merely an "illogical composite of red rags and white corpuscles." About Thomas Hardy he vacillated wildly. At first laudatory (he wrote a eulogistic sonnet "For a Book by Thomas Hardy"), then dour ("Nearly all of Hardy will die"), later he foretold that Hardy would "take his place among the solid poets of England."⁹ While several of Hardy's novels are still at their peak of renown, the recent trend has been toward re-evaluation of his power as a poet; *vide* J. O. Bailey's *Thomas Hardy and the Cosmic Mind* (Chapel Hill, 1956), and Samuel Hynes' *The Pattern of Hardy's Poetry* (Chapel Hill, 1961).

Writing to Miss Brower, Robinson exhibited resources of strength and assurance he was not ready to unleash on the world at large. As yet a tyro (March 14, 1897), he slid from generalization to particularity with the ease of a vested pundit.

As for the popular American story writers, who command such prices and are so ridiculously overrated, — I advise you to steer clear of them. As long as they are well advertised they will make an impression on the public, but when they die, their work will die with them. Two or three stories by Miss Jewett, two or three by Miss Wilkins, one by F. J. Stimson ("Mrs. Knollys") and a few other scattered sketches will live; but they will only live for the spirit that is in them. None of them can live for the sheer art of their making.

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Art for art's sake is a confession of moral weakness. Art for the real *Art's* sake is the meaning and the truth of life. This is just beginning to be understood, and it is on this understanding that the greatness of future literature depends. If Mr. Howells could realize this, he might

⁹ References to Housman, Nietzsche, Shaw, and Hardy are from *Selected Letters*, 130, 136, 55, 45, 129.

write novels that would shake the world. . . . Zola is a parallel case, but his objective power is so enormous that his work must eventually have a purifying effect.

Robinson's inability to sell his poems at this time doubtlessly darkened his animus, but it is honest to say that throughout his life he contemned the glibly commercial writer. While he was sparse as to the number, he properly foretold longevity for the stories of Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, the sturdiest pair in the New England local-color school. F. J. Stimson has sunk from the memory of all but the more zealous graduate students of regional American fiction. Howells' congenital *bienséance* never permitted him to grasp the gist of Robinson's observation, and so his novels are still read without palpitations. On Zola, Robinson was unvaryingly right: here, in his 1896 sonnet, and in his letter (April 4, 1897) to Harry Smith: "Zola is the greatest worker in the objective that the world has ever seen, and someday he will be recognized for what he is."¹⁰

Another of Robinson's prophecies which missed its mark was based rather in his disaffection than on any visible omens. In a moment of weariness after "doing" twenty-eight hundred lines of *Tristram*, he wrote to Miss Brower on September 24, 1925: "A long poem nowadays is at best a getting down on one's knees to invite disaster, and . . . it is quite possible that even short poems in the future will have about all they can do to survive." Since 1915 he had been turning to the longer and longer poem as his vehicle. Of the briefer pieces he had formerly proliferated, he told friends: "They just don't come anymore." Almost four decades after his doomsaying, the short poem thrives and is likely to as long as poems are written and read.

Time and again he reverted to the prodigious name of Robert Browning, most often in the vein of "Not that I dislike Browning. . . ." Onerous upon his shoulders lay the mantle of "American Browning," an epithet foisted on him by his first critics and perpetuated *ad nauseam* to this day. Barring their common penchant to psychologize in depth, Robinson could not "quite see the relation between" himself and the man from

¹⁰ *Untriangulated Stars*, 282.

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Asolo. *The Ring and the Book* provoked Robinson's most frequent commentary but adduced only one prognostication (to Miss Brower, August 17, 1899). "If the poem holds its present place in nineteen hundred and fifty — for a round number — I shall be all wrong in my judgment." It has, if anything, increased in stature. In this half of the 20th century Browning, more cordially than his Victorian peers, is received as a poet of significance. Formalistic and semantic critics, particularly, uncover surpassing values in his tortuous themes and obscurant locutions. Upon Robinson, the unrelenting reiteration of the critics became more than he could bear. With jocosity born of exhausted repugnance, he finally capitulated on November 4, 1928: "I'm altogether too lazy to kill anyone — even a critic who calls me the American Browning, meaning apparently to give pleasure."

He said a good deal, too, to Miss Brower about his mid-western friend, William Vaughn Moody.¹¹ Despite some unconscious agitations roused in his breast by Moody's instant public acceptance, Robinson designated the approximate position now held by Moody in the hierarchy of American poets and dramatists. "I have convinced myself that he is one of the fellows whom the future will have to deal with," he wrote (December 16, 1900). On January 7, 1901, he energized this inert projection: "Moody is beyond doubt the coming man." Upon Moody's death: "He did enough as it was to give him his high place in English poetry — probably much higher than most of us realize today." This last is too generous. Moody's "Ode in Time of Hesitation," "The Menagerie," and "Gloucester Moors" are still staple fare in representative anthologies of American poetry, and *The Great Divide* must be taken into account in any history of the development of American drama. But Moody today is relegated to the echelon of minor giants, distinctly lower than Robinson himself.

In other cases where the work of his friends was involved, Robinson tended to exaggerate its potential durability. The fame of Josephine Preston Peabody, though not negligible in the first twenty years of this century, is undeniably quiescent today. Probably misled by her inspiring companionship and

11 For a full account, see Richard Cary, "Robinson on Moody," *CLQ*, VI (December 1962), 176-183.

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her valiant efforts to get *Captain Craig* published, he overrated her tenuous verse and poetic dramas on three occasions to Miss Brower. April 28, 1901: "Miss Peabody is here with a five act drama called *Marlow*. Two acts of it gave me an impression that it may take a pretty high place." November 4, 1928: "Her place is safe enough in American literature." February 18, 1930: "She has written several things that cannot easily die."

With even less justification he bespoke a future for Henry A. Wise Wood, a superlative engineer and inventor but assuredly no poet. Robinson may have been overly solicitous because Miss Brower had introduced them to each other. "Wood brought his book the other day," wrote Robinson on April 1, 1901. "I honestly believe that he will surprise people, including himself, in the course of two or three years." And on the 28th day of the same month: "I am more than half ready to believe that that single poem will give him a place, though I don't say it to him." The poem he refers to is "The Building of the Rose," which appears in the only volume of verse Wood published, *Fancies* (New York, 1903). Neither the poem nor the book has ever attracted more than bibliographic attention.

Miss Brower's exhilarating interest in his poems during his bleakest early era must have fostered Robinson's undue enthusiasm for her own writings. In February and March of 1897 he told her, "You are going to do something infinitely finer and stronger," and "[My] faith in your ability to do remarkable work is not weakened in the least . . . it is strengthened." Robinson had rushed to read all the essays and stories Miss Brower had contributed since 1888 to such periodicals as the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Lippincott's*, *Harper's Weekly*, and *Catholic World*. Although competent in their way, they induce no spontaneous expectations of "remarkable work" to come. It was simply another example of Robinson's personal sympathies impairing the acuity of his vision.

When Robinson turned his eyes toward the world at large, however, he allowed no such considerations to befog his view. It was to him clearly a matter of whether the world had succumbed to materialism or was to be sundered by moral obtuseness (themes he brought to fruition by 1917 in "Cassandra" and *Merlin*). Or, in his lowest moments, whether the mis-

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managed world was hellbent on *both* those wheels. He shied at international pacts and was skeptical about any parliament of nations. He was uncannily precise about Hitler (whom he called a "neurotic fanatic") and unholy alliances between Germany and Russia.¹² He heard, on the underside of the horizon, the portentous tread of dark-skinned peoples on the march toward domination of the planet.

War troubled Robinson in a different way than it does most; he pondered its deeper consequences on human morality rather than its immediate shocks and splendors. When, sixty-five years ago, the presence of an unfriendly foreign power in Cuba caused another American president to take drastic measures, Robinson decried the impending carnage but foresaw one boon to the United States: possible purgation of tawdry standards. On April 14, 1898 — three days after McKinley sent a war message to Congress — Miss Brower received Robinson's condemnation of America's "crudeness and general cussedness" which made him "sorry, and finally glad." "There will be a collapse before long," he avowed, "but it will be to get a new start." It was a dogma of his somber optimism that conscience could benefit from catastrophe, but it is a rare historian who will claim for American society any momentous gains from the experience of the Spanish-American War. Nevertheless, Robinson did recognize that this involvement might indelibly affect the U. S. attitude toward isolationism. "It is a war that will, I believe, be of tremendous historical importance," he said after the shooting started. "Cuba is a very small part of it."

In his forecasts of global events he could be grim or gay, sometimes both in the same breath. Although accepting subjugation as a transitory condition, he reaffirmed his romantic reliance in the freedom and primacy of the individual. "The socialistic dark ages are coming, and the individual is going to 'wither' as Tennyson foresaw, but he'll swell up again after a few hundred years, and knock down the whole damned business — which is description, not profanity" (August 26, 1928).

On November 10th of the following year Robinson was far less sanguine as he surveyed the current state of world brother-

¹² *Selected Letters*, 175, 115.

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hood and re-echoed his obsessive dread of the darker-hued races.

I have to bristle and spit at any League of Nations that would include this mishandled republic of ours. We would get into all sorts of a mess if anything really happened. So I believe in a League of Europe and let it go at that — though I don't see how such a thing can be with Russia and Mussolini in the way. Sooner or later the yellow men will come over and get us, and in about five thousand years there may not be any white folks left. It looks sometimes as if our part in the business will have been to make the world ready for the tinted and colored races to use. They can't do much worse with it than we have done. Meanwhile time means nothing to them — no more than life or death — and they are in no hurry — except just now in India. But that is more or less a local issue, though of course it might develop into something else. England will have to fight or get out before long — and either way will be bad for all concerned.

Passage of years has borne out Robinson's prudence in regard to international tribunals, Russia, fascist Italy, and liberated India. Jeremiahs of our day detect the yellow man's urge for world possession in Communist China's crass willingness to sacrifice one or two hundred millions of her population in a nuclear exchange with the West — confident that her remaining millions will then overrun the earth.

Conversely, Robinson could disguise prophecy as gently satiric paradox:

A few ultra-radicals don't like [*Cavender's House*] because it makes too much of love and marriage. But romance, judging from all the murders and suicides in the newspapers, isn't quite dead yet, and I shouldn't wonder if it outlived some of the ultra-radicals (June 24, 1929).

Or as burlesque:

What is New York going to look like in a thousand years, and what are people going to do with themselves? Maybe they are going to read sonnets, but there is just a possibility that the sonnets won't be mine. Perhaps by that time people won't read at all, but will just "listen in" and fly around the moon and chase after one another's wives — as they do now. Only by that time there won't be any wives, from present indications — which may simplify matters. Speaking of progress, some one with a far-seeing eye for trouble has prophesied that some generations of bobbed hair will result in whiskers on the faces of all the fairest women. It doesn't sound good, but the barbers may like it. Only there won't be any barbers, perhaps, by that time. God only

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knows what there will be, but one thing is certain, all sorts of people will be trying to do things that the Lord — if there is any Lord left — never meant them to do, and will make just as bad a mess of it as they are making now (September 9, 1924).

Droll about sonnets and wives and barbers, indeed, but what of only listening in and flying around the moon?

Life hereafter was a thesis Robinson chose not to joke about, nor to define too positively. In "Luke Havergal" he postulates a western gate where "the dark will end the dark" and the mysteries of afterlife unfold. In other poems he fixes his hope in a sourceless Light or a similarly vague orient Word. These were the eyes and voice of his inchoate God intimating — in the midst of this acrid existence — a far better one in the offing. With instinct his only weapon, Robinson took brave stance at the side of teleology. On June 1, 1919, he revealed this version of the universal plan to Miss Brower: "The world, meanwhile is undoubtedly a hell of a place; and I cannot see that there would be any logical reason for its existence if it were otherwise. For if we aren't continuous," he went on irritably, "what the deuce are we anyhow, and why?"

Less than five years later he promised Mrs. Richards that "If there shouldn't happen to be any next world . . . we shall go on somehow or other."¹³ Whether or not these maximal predictions of his were wellfounded, no Light nor Word has yet divulged.

In the opening scene of *Merlin*, Gawaine stares broodingly into space from a height over Camelot as Dagonet asks:

Gawaine, Gawaine, what look ye for to see,
So far beyond the faint edge of the world?

Some seventy lines later Gawaine rouses himself from forebodings of disaster and answers: "I look through Time, / For sight of what it is that is to be." Throughout his life Robinson strove to pierce the temporal mists that enveloped him. The past, with its haggard memories, was better forgotten. (A gift of apples from his sister-in-law "took me back into the past —

¹³ *Ibid.*, 142.

where as a rule I don't go.")¹⁴ He preferred to think that the value of history lies in its expositions of man's weakness and folly, that man is capable of using the sad lessons of the past as rungs toward a glorious summit.

He derived patent satisfaction from thrusting outward beyond mortal range. He would have enjoyed knowing how close he came to foretelling atomic warfare,¹⁵ the imminent moon shot, the fragility of the United Nations, and the ominous population explosion in the so-called underdeveloped countries. He may right now, in fact, be chuckling softly somewhere over the sagacity of his last line in "John Brown": "I shall have more to say when I am dead."

¹⁴ Richard Cary, "Robinson's Notes to His Nieces," *CLQ*, V (December 1960), 200.

¹⁵ To Mrs. Louis V. Ledoux, February 2, 1921: "The whole western world is going to be blown to pieces, asphyxiated and starved, and then, for a few centuries we poor artists are going to have a hard time." *Selected Letters*, 124.



TOCQUEVILLE AS A SOURCE FOR ROBINSON'S "MAN AGAINST THE SKY"

By FRED SOMKIN

IN the spectacular setting of "The Man Against the Sky" Edwin Arlington Robinson created what is probably his most unforgettable image:

Between me and the sunset, like a dome
Against the glory of a world on fire,
Now burned a sudden hill,
Bleak, round, and high, by flame-lit height made higher,
With nothing on it for the flame to kill
Save one who moved and was alone up there
To loom before the chaos and the glare
As if he were the last god going home
Unto his last desire.