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Lewis E. Weeks, Jr.

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MAINE IN THE POETRY OF  
EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

By LEWIS E. WEEKS, JR.

In "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford," Robinson has Jonson speak worshipfully of Shakespeare as one who "out of his / Miraculous inviolable increase / Fills Ilion, Rome, or any town you like / Of olden times with timeless Englishmen."<sup>1</sup> What Robinson is emphasizing here is the English quality of Shakespeare's work, as well as its permanence. On the other hand, to emphasize, as he does, this English quality is to minimize somewhat the universality that has made Shakespeare known and beloved throughout the world. That Shakespeare loved England, that he was even chauvinistic, is undeniable. Many studies have emphasized the influence of time and place upon his work, but the local habitation and the name are only incidental to the universal.

Robinson was born and bred a Maine man. However, he left Maine when circumstances permitted, and there is little evidence that he did so with regret. He was not a "professional Mainiac"; and the move to Boston and then New York may be considered an indication of his broader interests, the trend of the times, and the fact that it is generally in a peripheral way that the Maine influence makes itself apparent among the more universal qualities of his poetry. Yet one does not spend the formative years of his life and most of his early manhood in one place without absorbing its influences and recording them in his work. Robinson was no exception. The place, the people, and the times—these are among the major forces that help shape, influence, and direct an artist's work. To speak of the Maine elements in Robinson's poetry, however, is to generalize and then to recognize immediately that all generalizations are but the pathway to exceptions. To catalog and characterize Maine and then to find in Robinson images of those elements is to minimize both Maine and Robinson: for Maine is of New England, America, and the world, as Robinson is of Maine and of mankind. In addition, there may be more per-

1 Edwin Arlington Robinson, *Collected Poems* (New York, 1961), 20. All future references to Robinson's poems are from the above volume and are given in the text by page numbers in parentheses.

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sonal forces that are mistaken for or are more important than those of place.

As place, Maine is the northeasternmost of the States, the largest of that particular group called New England. It is an ocean of green, heaved high by great Ktadhin and the lesser mountains, that rolls northwesterly towards the St. Lawrence and southeasterly towards the Atlantic. On its coasts, the sea of evergreens is divided from the ocean by a thin line of red and gray granite that beats back the white rush of foaming waves. Rugged headlands thrust long fingers and clenched fists into the surrounding sea; and the tides intrude on the land, flowing freely into long tapering estuaries, great bays, harbors, and quiet coves. Offshore, the many islands, most of them coloring the blue-green sea with the more intense green of their spruce and fir, balance a multitude of lakes and ponds that flash silver and blue at random in the dark mass of the forests. Both north and south the great rivers of Maine flow: the Allagash and the St. John; the Penobscot and the Kennebec, which surges past Robinson's Tilbury Town on its way to the sea. A host of lesser rivers, streams, and brooks plentifully lace the rugged land with flowing water.

Sea and river, farm and forest, these are the essential physical realities of Maine. Each in its own way and in its own time has provided a harsh and rugged way of life. There was the great age of sail, when Maine men and Maine vessels plied the far seas; there was the time of the off-shore fisheries, when island settlements flourished in the days before power eliminated their advantages; there were the days when most of the coastal villages and towns boasted a shipbuilding industry, in which the demand from the sea and the materials from the forest met to be shaped on the shore. There were the salt-water farms along the coast, on which lived those who took toll of both sea and land as opportunity, interest, and ambition directed. Farther inland, forest clearings were made; homes were built; the stones were slowly and laboriously cleared from the land and piled in the endless walls that fenced the fields that fed the families that grew up to people the land. In addition the exploitation of the forests took place; the rushing rivers, a highway for the logs and the water, sometimes tidal, a source of power for the sawmills. Robinson's father

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made a comfortable fortune as merchant and dealer in timber during this era. As the flow of lumber increased and the axe moved ever farther inland, so the shipping industry grew to handle the seemingly endless torrent of tall trees. With increasing settlement, came the establishment of cotton, woolen, and paper mills along the rivers, sources of power and repositories for pollution. Subsequently came the exodus from this lovely but harsh land to softer climes, more fertile acres, and to the city. Now the forests creep back into the fields, and the stone walls are overturned; the farmhouses have been abandoned and are falling in upon themselves. However, many of them have been purchased and renovated by the reverse tide of migrants spilling into the Maine that is becoming a vast retirement farm and seasonal playground.

A climate equal to the land in ruggedness is also part of the environment. Four sharp seasons flavor the year: Harsh, raw, bitter, but beautiful winter has its driving storms of blinding snow and its sullen seas, alternating with the devastation of blue, green, and white when the weather clears. After long winter, spring comes tenderly, green and mild, never failing to fulfill and renew with its longed-for release from winter rigor. Summer, golden with sun and fulfillment, all too soon bursts into the fiery apocalypse of autumn. Then increasing gold and drabness slides into winter's green and white and blue once more.

Given this place, the character of its people was predictable. Shaped by land and sea and season or perhaps drawn to this outpost by some consanguinity of nature, the people were independent, individualistic, tight-fisted, and close mouthed; laconic, feeling deeply, yet generally avoiding outward show of emotion; shrewd, hard-working, tough in body and mind; puritanical and straitlaced, yet exploding from time to time in independent frenzy; economical in word and action, yet saying much in few words and accomplishing prodigies with little apparent effort. Here was the Yankee character in the extreme, perhaps less provincial than might have been expected because of the wide freeway of the sea that led all over the globe.

The formative times of Robinson were those of the Gilded Age, an era of boom and bust, of runaway speculation, of opportunism, and of shady dealings. The fact that his own family

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suffered a deadly decline in fortune therefrom was not without its influence. And Gardiner, too, was undergoing its own general decline during Robinson's later years there.

Robinson is obviously not a nature poet in the conventional sense; his interests lie almost exclusively in character, psychology, the conflict of personal and social forces, and questions of a man's place in this sorry scheme of things. Many poems are completely without nature images. Others, however, employ them with startling and effective skill. As one might expect from a Maine poet, forest, farm, town, stream, and above all, sea images predominate.

In "The Clinging Vine" (pp. 8-11), which depends for much of its effect on the tension between controlled comment and halfhidden hysteria, the first two and the last stanzas draw on sea imagery. The wife asserts in the first stanzas, "I'm calm as this Atlantic, / And quiet as the moon;" and in the second, "I'll be as rocks and sand; / The moon and stars and ocean / Will envy my command." Finally the poem ends, "For moon and stars and ocean / And you and I are cold." These few images stand out, supporting brilliantly the relationship of the wife and husband, past, present, and future, developed within the poem. They define the relationship with a finality as complete, as distant, and as vast as space and as substantial as rock, sand, and sea.

"Eros Turannos" (pp. 32-33) is interesting in terms of the flexibility with which Robinson uses water and tree imagery in the same poem. The story is a psychologically complex one of a misalliance and its consequences, and cannot be analyzed fully here. However, the first image visually suggests one of the reasons, in spite of many opposing ones, that "she secures him." Her "fears [of him] / Are less than are the downward years, / Drawn slowly to the foamless weirs / Of age, were she to lose him." Here the image of the mill pond with its quiet, almost imperceptible current toward the dam is apt and ironic, figuring, as it does, the slow passing of time. The next image shifts, and "A sense of ocean and old trees / Envelops and allures him." In this image, the ocean and old trees suggest ironically from "his" point of view the stability and protection inherent in her social position. Disillusionment is swift to come; and there is all the sadness of autumn and the

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force of fall storms suggested when "The falling leaf inaugurates / The reign of her confusion; / The pounding wave reverberates / The dirge of her illusion." The next two images, of home, and town and harborside, have an enclosing quality that ironically plays upon the image of "ocean and old trees" mentioned above. For home is not a place of peace but one where "passion lived and died" and where she now "can hide," surrounded by the town and harborside, which "Vibrate with her seclusion." Imprisoned in her house, she is enclosed by the gossip of the town; and the harbor image, which should indicate safety and protection, is used ironically to suggest another prison of wagging tongues. The final images of alternating quiet and violence repeat, with a difference, those already used once to suggest, in the crescendo of the last four lines of the poem, the power of a fated passion: "Though like waves breaking it may be / Or like a changed familiar tree, / Or like a stairway to the sea / Where down the blind are driven."

In "Stafford's Cabin" (pp. 14-15), which is a macabre horror story involving an unsolved murder, an apple tree is mentioned three times and goldenrod once. The repeated tree reference and the final line, "And overgrown with golden-rod as if there were no ghost," are typical of how Robinson suggests an oblique relationship between nature and man. The apple tree, which was there when the murder took place, still goes through its annual cycle of rebirth, blossom, and fruitage; and the goldenrod, wild weed that is like but also unlike the flame that consumed the cabin, are ironic punctuation marks in this story of man's perversity.

One of the numerous ship images that Robinson uses shows his sensitivity to nature and the effectiveness of his imagery. It appears in the sonnet "On the Night of a Friend's Wedding" (p. 9). He refers to the possibility of losing friends' esteem for his poetry, as being "Like a tall ship that floats above the foam / A little while, and then breaks utterly."

"Late Summer" (pp. 525-8), a poem in which the dead past lays its heavy hand on the future of a man and a woman, has a number of effective images of nature, sea, and shore. Often Robinson uses the movement of tide or wave to suggest the pulse of human life with its various rhythms. The title itself, "Late Summer," suggests one of the movements of nature. The

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characters are in the late summer of their lives; the opportunity for life and love dealt with in the poem is a late one that will have no repetition. A little effort on her part would help time, the painful past "wash out, like the tide that washes / Out of the sand what a child has drawn there." Here in the image of sand and fringed wave lapping repeatedly with slowing advancing erasure, the scratches in the sand until their roughness is smoothed down to mere contours and finally the contours are leveled once more into the perfect smoothness of the million-grained sand, is a perfect figure for time's effect on the wounds of the mind. Again halfway through the poem, "He stared then / Down at the sand where the tide threw forward / Its cold, unconquered lines, that unceasingly / Foamed against hope, and fell." In this image, the sea, with her obduracy, will eventually overwhelm his hope. The first use of the waves is an image of what might have been; the second is for what will be. The poem ends with her gazing "away where shadows were covering / The whole cold ocean's healing indifference. / No ship was coming. When the darkness / Fell, she was there, and alone, still gazing." Like the apple tree and the goldenrod in "Stafford's Cabin," nature remains and offers a certainty that human desperation and perverseness does not.

In "Avon's Harvest" (pp. 564-8), a poem of terror and the supernatural, Robinson makes a brief excursion to a lake in the Maine woods. But as usual, nature has no fixed values but only reflects the psychological state of mind of his characters. Avon says of the wilderness lake surrounded by trees, "I never knew the meaning of October / Until I went with Asher to that place." And later he continues, "So for a frosty fortnight / We had the sunlight with us on the lake, / And the moon with us when the sun went down. / 'God gave his adjutants a holiday,' / Asher assured me, 'when He made this place'; / And I agreed with him that it was heaven,— / Till it was hell for me for then and after." After the place became hell because of a terrifying "nightmare," the "black lake" becomes a "glimpse of black light"; there are "no stars"; and there is only a "late wreck" of a moon, which is "consumed" by the "black trees." So great is the effect upon Avon of his experience that even Asher can no longer bring himself to return to his cabin on the lake in Maine.

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Another Maine image appears in "Vain Gratuities" (pp. 576-8). The sonnet is an ironic commentary on gossip and misplaced sympathy for a woman whose husband is ugly as sin but who loves him and is happy with him. "And all they said would have been heard [by her] no more / Than foam that washes on an island shore / Where there are none to listen or to care." The image is a particularly effective one in that it is both a visual image, evoking the isolation and loneliness of a small island surrounded by the vast expanse of ocean and an oral image, involving the virtual impossibility of hearing froth washed ashore even if anyone were there to listen or care.

The sonnet "Recalled" (p. 578) could be discussed as a Maine poem from three different points of view, but I want here to refer only to the central image, which conveys magnificently the emotional impact of the theme that evil is ugly and destructive. The image is of the cellar of the "place"—Robinson does not dignify it by calling it a house or home—where lived the evil ones. It is now "But a walled hole where fruitless vines embrace / Their parent skeletons that yet survive / In evil thorns." Why is this image so effective? First of all, it is perfectly true to nature. Blackberry or raspberry bushes have an affinity for old cellar holes; and the old canes die, to be surrounded by new growth each year. Next the cellar is a "walled hole," suggestive of imprisonment and in the word *hole* of an entire gamut of vaguely unpleasant implications. The sterility of the vines is apparent in the word *fruitless*. The word *embrace* coupled with *parent skeletons* is more than a little suggestive of a kind of macabre, incestuous relationship that is appropriate to the subject of the poem. *Skeletons* is apt visually because that is what dead canes are, but it is also suggestive of violence, fear, and death. "That yet survive" implies the ultimate extinction of even so hardy a perennial as the blackberry. And finally, though the charge of pathetic fallacy may be leveled, the Freudian image of the "evil thorns" embrace is penetrating.

The setting of *Tristram* provides an opportunity for Robinson to reveal his mastery of seashore imagery, and he makes the most of it. The poem both opens and closes with Isolt of Brittany and with the same sea imagery, rich in its suggestiveness of Isolt's character, her situation, and of the eternal fate



of those like her, suspended between heaven and hell by infinite and unrequited love. As the poem begins, Isolt of the white hands is gazing northward, where nothing more is to be seen "Than a blank ocean and the same white birds / Flying, and always flying, and still flying." As the poem ends, she is once more gazing northward, now without hope. "And there was nothing alive but white birds flying, / Flying, and always flying, and still flying, / And the white sunlight flashing on the sea."

Space does not permit a detailed analysis of the many uses Robinson makes of the sea imagery that came so naturally and truly out of his Maine background. It is, however, varied and rich in the extreme, appealing vividly to the senses of sight, of sound, and of touch. It serves as a reflection of the moods and circumstances of the characters, expanding and adding a universal dimension to their emotions and conflicts. King Mark expresses the dominant use of the sea imagery when he says, "Perhaps the sea is like ourselves, . . . / And has as much to say of storm and calms / That shake or make it still, as we have power / To shake or to be still. I do not know." It is this sense of fated and unalterable doom that haunts the events and characters of *Tristram* which is suggested, supported, and magnified by the inexorable surge of tide and wave against the rocky coasts.

*Roman Bartholow*, another of Robinson's long narrative poems, has a number of Maine influences in it. The setting is recognizably Gardiner, Robinson's home town.<sup>2</sup> The changing seasons are brilliantly depicted. Umfraville, one of the characters, a thing of rags and tatters, a trout fisherman, and a classical scholar, is typical of what may be called the Maine eccentric. The seasons and the setting take on symbolic values as the poem develops. Indeed the symbolic relationship of the new season, with which the poem begins, to Roman's rebirth is immediately and movingly apparent:

Where now the morning light of a new spring  
Fell warm on winter, patient in his grave,  
And on a world not patient, Bartholow—  
Like one above a dungeon where for years

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Laura Richards is authority for the fact that Roman's ancestral home is actually in its externals "Oaklands," the Gardiner home in the town named after the family (Laura E. Richards, E.A.R. [Cambridge, 1936], 54).

Body and soul had fought futility  
 In vain for their deliverance—looked away  
 Over the falling lawn that was alive  
 And green again between him and the river.  
 Steel-blue below him, through a yellow dusk  
 Of trees, he saw the flowing gleam of water,  
 Whereon his fancy limned the mirrored face  
 Of spring, too blind again with her own beauty  
 To measure man's advantage,—though he might  
 This morning have addressed a votive shout,  
 Affirming his emergence, to the Power  
 That filled him as light fills a buried room  
 When earth is lifted and the sun comes in.  
 He would have raised an altar now to spring,  
 And one to God; and one more to the friend  
 Who, coming strangely out of the unknown  
 To find him here in his ancestral prison,  
 Had brought with him release. Never before  
 Would he have said that any friend alive  
 Had magic to make light so gross a weight  
 As long had held him frozen out of sense  
 And hearing of all save a dead negation  
 That would not let him die. (pp. 733-4)

The poem ends in the fall of the year, with the lives of the main characters — the savior-betrayer Penn-Raven; the tormented, unfaithful wife, Gabrielle, who commits suicide; the strange, eccentric friend, Umfraville; and the curiously resurrected Roman Bartholow, likened to "The weird existence of a tangled vine / Too vaguely intertwined and involved / For sanguine gardeners, who might only prune / Or train a few new branches" (p. 856). Finally, Bartholow turns the key and walks away from his ancestral home, "Knowing that he had seen for the last time / The changeless outline of those eastern hills / And all those changing trees that flamed along / A river that should flow for him no more" (p. 856).

Within the poem, the house, the river, and the row of trees that separates the river from the house are the symbolic aspects of the setting that are repeatedly woven into the narrative. The grim stone house, overgrown with ivy, represents the past; the river represents the flow of life and the potential of the future; the trees suggest the problems of the present. Roman, after his recovery, hopes to build a new house and life with Gabrielle; but she can offer little encouragement. He then determines to thin the trees that cut off the view of the river from

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the house but manages to fell only one. It is in the river that Gabrielle drowns herself.

A number of the longer poems, such as *Cavender's House*, *The Glory of the Nightingales*, *Matthias at the Door*, *Talifer*, "The Book of Annandale," and *King Jasper*, employ settings and images that are recognizably influenced by Robinson's Maine background in ways similar to those already dealt with in *Tristram* and *Roman Bartholow*.

In turning to a discussion of character, which was among Robinson's chief preoccupations, one finds it difficult to be dogmatic about the typical Maine characters in his gallery of portraits; for to say that this or that quality is peculiar to Maine is, as I suggested in my introduction, to minimize the universality of his appeal. Generalizations about the Maine qualities result, not from objective statistical analysis but from the recognition of certain characteristics that stand out sufficiently to be categorized. They are not always clear. In fact, exactly the opposite characteristics may, on different occasions, be claimed as typical. Sometimes one is tempted to think of a person presented by Robinson—Mr. Flood, Isaac, or Archibald—for example, as a typical Maine character, when it is primarily the setting and circumstances that have a Maine flavor.

It does seem to me, however, that there is a good deal of Maine in the much beloved poem of Robinson's, "Isaac and Archibald." First of all, Isaac and Archibald are old, and there is something ancient about Maine and her people. Perhaps it is that Maine people are generally still close to the elemental forces of nature—the sea, the land, the rivers, the forest. The typical Maine "character" is often old. Is it because time is necessary to form character, or do we need the prominent features that time seems to sharpen and exaggerate before we can recognize it? Next there is the fact that age and youth are concerned with, interested in, and have much to offer each other. There is the deep and affectionate mutual concern of Isaac and Archibald and behind that their lifelong friendship. The mingled sadness and delight with which each observes the other's encroaching infirmities and yet the vigor with which they both front their declining years is as admirable as it is amusing. Their willingness, even eagerness, to talk is typical, although a quality of the Maine man is supposed to be his taciturnity. The

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location of Archibald's house and its appearance is indicative of character, a quality not always appreciated. The house is on a hilltop, not sheltered but exposed to the elements; and it is there because of the sightly view. Cider, of course, while available and drunk in other places, is as pure Maine as is old Isaac's almost infinite capacity.

"Mr. Flood's Party," which offers a painfully contrasting picture of lonely old age, avoids the shoals of sentimentality by the companionship of Mr. Flood's double vision and the repeated toasts drunk with his other self. Robinson marvelously and appropriately touches with nobility Eben and Isaac by introducing skillfully the classical allusions to Roland and Homer respectively and then gives Archibald, who is without heroics, the final word through his triumph at cards over Isaac.

Of all Maine characters, the teller of tall tales is perhaps most universally recognized. Lord of the Deacon's Bench in the logging camp, the fo'c's'le on the high seas, the wharf's end on the coast, and the porch of the general store, he reigns supreme. Robinson has paid tender and vivid tribute to him in "Uncle Ananias" (pp. 337-8), who "Of all authoritative liars" was crowned loveliest and who by "every child who knew him, far or near," was loved faithfully. Archibald himself is no mean story teller, as are many of the shadowy figures, the unnamed narrators, that Robinson uses to tell his tales, both short and long.

Another type may be somewhat vaguely called the eccentric individualist. Archibald in "Archibald's Example" (p. 492) has cut down a row of trees that were on an adjacent hilltop and interfered with his view of the sunsets. Here in Archibald is the contradiction to the stereotype of the money-grubbing, hardheaded Maine materialist. Not only has he set his house upon a hill, but he has cut down trees that spoiled his view. In this poem, Robinson suggests an intimate relationship with nature that goes far beyond her commercial exploitation and that is often a very real element in the Maine character. Archibald does not say whether he drew the logs he cut, down to the mill.

In "Two Gardens in Linndale" (pp. 355-8), appears another eccentric, the delightfully stubborn Oakes, of the brothers Oliver and Oakes, intent on artichokes. Hector Kane (pp. 1210-12), "at eighty-five" "the youngest man alive," was not

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about to think himself an early grave over his sorrows. But, Captain Craig (pp. 113ff.), the most fully developed of Robinson's eccentrics, did get himself buried appropriately to the "Dead March" from *Saul* blared indiscreetly by the Tilbury band.

Robinson himself may be considered perhaps his own best eccentric—in his choice of and persistence in a career that was not "profitable"; in his personality, with its painful shyness, yet magnetism for friendship; and in the independence of his poetic practice.

There is in the Maine character a refusal to bow to the blows of fate, a kind of stoic resignation in the face of what can't be changed. Perhaps it comes from fronting Maine weather, which can be rather difficult on occasion. Old King Cole (pp. 17-20) is one of this fraternity and faces the fact of his two sons' rascality with a resigned and gentle tranquility flavored by a dry and understated humor, which is another Maine characteristic. The appropriately unnamed "wolf-haunted wife" of "Neighbors" (pp. 459-60) faces her trials until:

At last, when we had all forgot  
That all is here to change,  
A shadow on the commonplace  
Was for a moment strange.  
Yet there was nothing for surprise,  
Nor much that need be told:  
Love, with its gift of pain, had given  
More than one heart could hold.

Cliff Klingenhagen (p. 87) is perhaps the epitome of the stoic and his satisfactions, for Cliff poured two glasses, one of wine and one of wormwood and took the wormwood for his own.

One of Robinson's great achievements, "Aunt Imogen" (pp. 184-9), reveals the firmness of character that accepts great loss and makes much of what is given. In this case, Aunt Imogen is unmarried, but she has her nieces and nephew to love. When the latter wakes from his nap, "'Twas only in old concord with the stars / That she took hold of him and held him close, / Close to herself, and crushed him till he laughed." Closely related to Aunt Imogen is the subject of "The Poor Relation" (pp. 45-7), although she has not the inner resources at Aunt Imogen's command.

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Every Maine town has its ne'er-do-well, and each one has his own peculiarities, especially as seen through Robinson's perceptive eyes. In "A Man in Our Town" (p. 886) is presented a combination of the Yankee genius, the eccentric, and the rebel against the Protestant Ethic. Although he is criticized for his "improvidence," he has a "homely genius for emergencies"; and with characteristic understatement, Robinson suggests, "it was good / For more than one of you that he was here."

"Miniver Cheevy" (pp. 347-8) gives us the town drunkard but also indicates the cause of his discontent and offers an ironic commentary on the short-sightedness of the romantic visionary. When all is said and done, the fact remains that "Miniver coughed, and called it fate, / And kept on drinking."

Just as every town has its derelicts, it also has its gossips. However, in Tilbury Town, there is one who, in "Glass Houses" (pp. 888-9), refuses to gossip, in order to keep friendships from breaking and warns that "Two others once did love each other well, / Yet not so well but that a pungent word / From each came stinging home to the wrong ears." And there is also Flammonde, who brought friends back in line.

There are a number of themes that Robinson develops which stem from the times and place in which his formative years were passed. As a child of New England and the Gilded Age, Robinson was torn by devotion to and reaction against the Protestant Ethic. His family life, with its early promise and happiness followed by tragedy must have complicated and emphasized this ambivalent attitude. His two brothers' brilliance and early achievements, his father's personality and success as a businessman, and the general attitude of friends and neighbors towards his literary career—or the lack of it—complicated the situation even more. A number of poems deal with this theme. Most personal and specific, of course, is his sonnet "Dear Friends" (pp. 83-4), which concludes, "The shame I win for singing is all mine, / The gold I miss for dreaming is all yours."

The sonnet "New England" (pp. 900-1) is probably the best treatment of this general theme, done in an ironic vein and dealing with the repression of the emotions of love and joy, contempt for poetry, suspicion of enjoyment, and submission to a conscience "that tortured into fits / The first cat that was

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ever killed by care." The "man" in "A Man in Our Town" (p. 886) is frowned upon because of his improvident ways. In "The Book of Annandale" (pp. 195-211), Damaris and Annandale both have to struggle with their consciences to rid themselves of an inappropriate sense of guilt before they can find happiness in each other. The wife of "An Evangelist's Wife" (p. 528) is neglected for her husband's fanatical love of God.

Another theme that Robinson returned to from time to time involves his distrust of and concern over the materialism that was so prominent a part of the Tilbury Town in which he grew up. "Cassandra" (pp. 11-12) draws upon the classical story to emphasize Robinson's pessimism over the failure of America to learn the lessons of history and place human values above those of money and property. When he is called to bear witness to the death of pastoral simplicity, represented by the shrunken old woman Amaryllis (pp. 84-5), he says, in the sestet of the sonnet:

Far out beyond the forest I could hear  
The calling of loud progress, and the bold  
Incessant scream of commerce ringing clear;  
But though the trumpets of the world were glad,  
It made me lonely and it made me sad  
To think that Amaryllis had grown old.

"The Torrent" (p. 108) begins in the same vein, describing the beauty of the stream's fall soon to be destroyed by "the coming of hard men / To cut those patriarchal trees away / And turn to gold the silver of that spray." Yet the sonnet ends on an ambiguous note, with the poet apparently accepting the necessity for such destruction and fusing it into a mystical union with the earlier vision of beauty. The brilliant series of visual and auditory images that is the sonnet "Aaron Stark" (p. 86) in all his self-satisfied miserliness may be grouped here as well as "Karma" (p. 871) and the long poem *King Jasper* (pp. 1397ff.).

A prominent, if not the most dominant, theme in all of Robinson's work is that of destruction, dissolution, defeat, decay. This is not his final word, however, but it is persistent and many-sided. It appears in terms of internal character deterioration; in the destruction that one individual can wreak on

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another, often in the marriage relationship or in the realm of friendship; in the wearing away that accompanies the passing of time and the destruction that inevitably accompanies changing times; and finally in the brilliant images of decay and destruction that are so powerful a part of the poetry.

To say that Robinson's times and place in Maine were alone responsible for this pervasive thematic quality in his work would be obviously ridiculous. The personal tragedies that surrounded the early deaths of his brilliant brothers, Dean and Herman, and the dreadful circumstances shrouding his mother's fatal illness must have been central among the many other influences that shadowed his view of life so darkly. But Maine and Gardiner during his later years there were changing. The depression of 1893 affected his family's fortunes and Herman's life. Old ways and means were being exhausted and replaced, and Maine was never to rise very high on the ladder of economic prosperity, compared with other parts of the country. The fact that Robinson was brought up in a town the size of Gardiner seems to me to have been very important. It would be interesting to know what percentage of the germinal ideas for the poetry that was based on direct, personal experience as distinct from literary, historical, and secondary influences, came from his Gardiner years and how much came from his later life. I have a feeling that by far the larger part came from the Gardiner experience. For here was a town that was large enough to offer a remarkable variety of people and experience yet not too large to be talked about, known, and assimilated thoroughly by a curious, imaginative, and sensitive youth and young man. Robinson was there in a time when a permanence and stability in people's way of life existed that was soon to disappear and change to the constant movement that is typical of today and that does not permit roots to be put down very far into the soil of a community. A person could not avoid knowing the intimate details of townsmen's trials and tribulations, triumphs and trepidations, perversities and eccentricities.

Space does not permit an examination of all the poems dealing with this theme of decay. However, a few generalizations will show its extent.

Among those whose lives seem to have been destroyed through suicide and drink or to have failed because of some



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personal inadequacy or inborn weakness—Robinson puzzled over the origin of these forces, sometimes presenting them as beyond the control of his characters and at other times insisting or having his characters insist on their own responsibility—are some of the poet's best known characters. Flammonde; the central character in "Old Trails"; Theophilus; the lonely friend in "The Dark House"; Richard Cory; Lorraine; Levi, in "The Field of Glory"; the "he" of "But for the Grace of God"; Miniver Cheevy; Tasker Norcross; the "he" of "Discovery"; The Rat; Fernando Nash, of *The Man Who Died Twice*—all fail in some way within themselves.

The largest group of poems deals with the abrasive destruction of one person on another. The most common among the relationships is that of marriage. The marriage may simply have been a mismatching, or there may be a triangle situation. Often illusion or self-deceit has played an important role in the disintegration of the relationship that was built originally on what simply did not exist. Greed, fear, jealousy, and pride also play their parts as destructive agencies in love and friendship. Among these poems are the following: "The Clinging Vine," "John Gorham," "Eros Turannos," "The Unforgiven," "Another Dark Lady," "Lisette and Helen," "Llewellyn and the Tree," "Bokardo," "An Old Story," "Her Eyes," "The Story of the Ashes and the Flame," "The Tavern," "The Woman and the Wife," "The Corridor," "The Whip," "An Evangelist's Wife," "Avon's Harvest," "Ben Trovato," "Job the Rejected," "Afterthoughts," "The Long Race," "Genevieve and Alexandra," "Not Always," "Mortmain," "If the Lord Would Make Windows in Heaven," *Cavender's House*, *Roman Bartholow*, *The Glory of the Nightingales*, and *Matthias at the Door*.

A smaller group of poems bears the marks of the times and of time itself. Among the latter are "Veteran Sirens," "The Clerks," "Leonora," "The Poor Relation," "Villanelle of Change," and probably one of Robinson's most powerful and moving short poems on this theme, the lovely and haunting "For a Dead Lady" (p. 355), with its brilliant and inevitable last stanza:

The beauty, shattered by the laws  
That have creation in their keeping,

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No longer trembles at applause,  
Or over children that are sleeping;  
And we who delve in beauty's lore  
Know all that we have known before  
Of what inexorable cause  
Makes time so vicious in his reaping.

More pertinent to this paper and limited in number are the few poems that have a fairly direct connection to Robinson's times and perhaps to Gardiner and Maine. "Bewick Finzer," "The Dead Village," *King Jasper*, and especially the poem "The Mill" come to mind. Although "The Mill" deals with the passing of the water-powered grist mill, that had been displaced before Robinson's time, its theme of change and displacement and the suffering that is always entailed is as fresh today as at any time; for life itself always involves change. This fact is one of the reasons the poem is so effective; its theme is truly universal. Its power is also apparent in the human terms with which it confronts change and in the force of its moving images.

Finally, Robinson uses many images throughout the poems to communicate this theme of decay. A few of them have been discussed in detail in other connections. From time to time houses provide the central image for short poems; sometimes it is the absence of a house that is used to suggest destruction. "Stafford's Cabin," "The House on the Hill," "Recalled," "The Haunted House," and "Fragment" are all in this category. In "Fragment" (pp. 48-49), "Faint white pillars that seem to fade / As you look from here are the first one sees / Of his house where it hides or dies in a shade," suggests the many Maine mansions whose owners made fortunes, built houses to match them, and then in later generations moved away or declined. Sometimes it is an entire village, as in "The Dead Village," that has faded away. In a number of the longer poems, Robinson uses the recurrent images of decaying or run-down houses to suggest the condition of the inhabitants. "Tasker Norcross" (pp. 499-509) offers a good illustration of this use:

See for yourself this house of his again  
That he called home: An old house, painted white,  
Square as a box, and chillier than a tomb  
To look at or to live in. There were trees—  
Too many of them, if such a thing may be—  
Before it and around it. Down in front

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There was a road, a railroad, and a river;  
Then there were hills behind it, and more trees.

Anyone familiar with the town of Gardiner would recognize the salient features of this description—house, hillside, road, railroad, and river. The amazing thing, in view of the fact that this last theme discussed represents a sizable fraction of Robinson's output, is that one does not have an overwhelming sense of dismay and bleakness after reading his poetry.

To sum up, there are a number of Maine influences in Robinson's poetry. His imagery owes much to the sea, streams, towns, farms, and forests of Maine; the weather also had its impact. Robinson's chief interest was in character, and there were a number of recognizable "Maine" types that he presented: the tall-tale artist, the eccentric individualist, the ne'er-do-well, the strong-willed stoic, and the gossip. His themes were frequently related to Maine character and times. The Protestant Ethic in both its positive and negative aspects played its role. The theme of decay and dissolution was probably most prominent and revealed itself in his characters and in the images that pervade much of the poetry. As a final word, however, I repeat my introductory suggestion that Robinson is a poet who transcends the regional and reveals the universal.



### ROBINSON BOOKS AND PERIODICALS: II

By RICHARD CARY

Installment I of this annotated registry (see preceding issue of *CLQ*), presents all published materials in the Colby College Library written by Edwin Arlington Robinson and inscribed by him. This segment lists all publications written by others and inscribed by *EAR*.

It is a misfortune to latter-day biographers and critics that his overweening respect for the printed word deterred him almost totally from marking texts, even those he used in classes at Gardiner High School and Harvard College.