September 1969

The Octaves of E.A. Robinson

Ronald Moran

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, series 8, no.7, September 1969, p.363-370

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact mflakey@colby.edu.
Yet in the Brooklyn Eagle Tuesday, February 27, the day after the opening, Robinson’s play won the headline over all other reviews, including one on a revival of Henry VIII, starring Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree. But that was playing in Manhattan. The reviewer noted that a small audience called the actors forward five times at the end, and he agreed that they deserved the kudos. The extremely brief comments on the play in this long review were perfunctory for the most part. The critic thought Van Zorn, the fatalist, “something of an ass,” as Robinson had drawn him, but he found “genuine drama in the second act when Lucas hands over the vial of poison . . . . This scene was well written and splendidly acted.” The short shift given the play by this reviewer was echoed more politely by Hermann Hagedorn twenty-two years later: “At no point did the story come to life. The characters were like exquisite engravings talking.”

The Porcupine has never been produced.

THE OCTAVES OF E. A. ROBINSON

By RONALD MORAN

In April 1897 Edwin Arlington Robinson told Edith Brower that he had written forty Octaves, adding, “but I do not think they will be very well received.” And, as Richard Cary says, “He was right.” In light of Robinson’s splendid achievements in the short lyric and narrative forms, it is not surprising that his Octaves, neither lyrical nor narrative in manner, have been generally excluded from discussions of his poetry. Yet in one area of inquiry, the Octaves are indispensable: written when he was twenty-six and twenty-seven, they provide us with, as no other single body of his work does, statements in poetry

that disclose his beliefs on the function of poetry, the presence of God, the state of the age, the condition of man, and most importantly, the Octaves introduce us in his poetry to idealism as the basis for a life-style. We can say with authority that the speaker of the Octaves is Robinson, not a persona. For these reasons, the Octaves demand the attention of the serious student of Robinson. As collateral benefits there are some instances of remarkable writing (e.g. “like poor old astronomers/Who totter off to bed and go to sleep/ To dream of untriangulated stars” (XI); “Like scattered lamps in unfrequented streets” (VIII). But it would be misleading, perhaps even dishonest, to argue that the Octaves contain many instances of Robinson’s best work.

There are twenty-eight Octaves extant: a series of twenty-three in Collected Poems; two originally included in the series first published in The Children of the Night, but later deleted for Collected Poems; two printed together under the title “Two Octaves” in The Children of the Night; and one printed in the February 26, 1897 issue of the Boston Evening Transcript and later reprinted in Charles Beecher Hogan’s A Bibliography of Edwin Arlington Robinson. The term octave, as Robinson uses it, means a poem consisting of eight lines of blank verse; there are no other special properties. Neither does there seem to be any literary precedent to the form. Robinson, of course, had been writing sonnets before the Octaves, which could account for his choice of title, as could his fondness for music.

Since the Octaves are intense, personal statements, it would seem important to cite some of the circumstances in Robinson’s life during 1896-1897 that may indeed have influenced him to write this curious body of poetry, curious especially when we consider that his shorter poems are frequently ordered by suggestion rather than by the kind of statement characteristic of the Octaves. By 1896 his brother Dean was already addicted to drugs; Herman, his other brother, was taking alcohol in order to escape financial failures; the marital life of Emma Shepherd and Herman was becoming increasingly strained. In Where the Light Falls, Chard Powers Smith discusses, in as thorough a fashion as probably possible, the triangle relationship involving Emma, Herman, and the poet, a triangle whose lines never actually intersected, though Robinson apparently was in love with Emma. Smith tells of asking Ridgely Tor-
rence shortly after Robinson’s death: “Was E. A. celibate all his life?” “Hell, no,” said Ridgely. “Was there one great love?” “Yes,” he said. “It started back in Gardiner, and he fought it out in the Octaves.”

Smith concludes that only two or three of the Octaves “can be directly associated with Emma, though she probably knew that the personal aspect of the passion behind them was for her” (p. 170). Certainly the death of Robinson’s mother on November 22, 1896 is responsible as well for some of the intensity and for some of the attitudes set forth in the Octaves. In the March 15, 1897 letter to Harry de Forest Smith, Robinson mentioned the strains under which he was living and, presumably, writing: “The past three months of my life, however, are quite another thing. If they had come two years ago, or even one, I think they would have finished me.”

Why they did not finish him is revealed in those Octaves given over to idealism.

The Octaves can be grouped sensibly into categories according to primary subject matter: (1) poetry; (2) God; (3) condition of the times and state of man; (4) idealism. These categories are by no means mutually exclusive, for an Octave may involve more than one of the above subjects, but the categories do provide an external ordering device in the absence of an internal one. A few of the Octaves seem to follow others, but there does not appear to be in the sequence of twenty-three in the Collected Poems an overall design waiting to be discovered. The five Octaves independent of the sequence fit into the same categories.

Robinson did not write essays concerning the nature and purpose of poetry; neither did he lecture publicly on the subject of poetry or, for that matter on anything. It is therefore interesting for us to read his comments on poetry in his letters and particularly interesting to examine the several Octaves on the subject of poetry. We know from his letters that Robinson hoped his poems would be of practical value to readers, that his poems would make the lives of his readers more fruitful. Two excerpts from letters to Harry de Forest Smith, dated

2 Chard Powers Smith, Where the Light Falls (New York, 1965), 57. All subsequent page references are to this edition.
3 Untriangulated Stars, editor, Denham Sutcliffe (Cambridge, Mass., 1947), 279. All subsequent page references are to this edition.
respectively May 13, 1896 and February 3, 1897, bear on this discussion:

If printed lines are good for anything, they are bound to be picked up some time; and then, if some poor devil of a man or woman feels any better or any stronger for anything that I have said, I shall have no fault to find with the scheme or anything in it. I am inclined to be a trifle solemn in my verses, but I intend that there shall always be at least a suggestion of something wiser than hatred and something better than despair (p. 247).

* * *

I also make free to say that many of my verses [were] written with a conscious hope that they might make some despairing devil a little stronger and a little better satisfied with things—not as they are, but as they are to be (p. 273).

The Octave originally numbered I in the initial series in The Children of the Night reiterates in its closing lines the poet’s concern for his audience:

To get at the eternal strength of things,
And fearlessly to make strong songs of it,
Is, to my mind, the mission of that man
The world would call a poet. He may sing
But roughly, and withal ungraciously;
But if he touch to life the one right chord
Wherein God’s music slumbers, and awake
To truth one drowsed ambition, he sings well.

The analogy of poetry to music and the allusion to God are found as well in Octave XIX, which begins with this indictment of poetry then currently in vogue:

Nor jewelled phrase nor mere mellifluous rhyme
Reverberates aright, or ever shall,
One cadence of that infinite plain-song
Which is itself all music.

Robinson continues in XIX that “Stronger notes/ Than any that have ever touched the world” are needed; they must “ring like hammer-blows,/ Right-echoed of a chime primordial,/ On anvils, in the gleaming of God’s forge.” In Octave XX Robinson says that the poet must “work with something else than pen and ink” in order to “acknowledge and include/ The foregleam and the glory of the real.” These tools, he tells us, are “unseen implements that have no names.”
One of the clear impressions we receive from the Octaves is Robinson’s deep and sincere belief in God. Whether God is pantheistic, Christian, or what-have-you is never apparent. God in the Octaves is frequently introduced by light imagery, the same as, or at least closely related to, the light imagery Robinson uses in those Octaves setting forth his idealism. In some of the Octaves, such as XIX and XXII, God figures only in an image capacity; in others, notably I, VI, and VII, God’s greatness is the subject. Octave I is exemplary of this latter grouping:

We thrill too strangely at the master’s touch;
We shrink too sadly from the larger self
Which for its own completeness agitates
And undermines us; we do not feel—
We dare not feel it yet—the splendid shame
Of uncreated failure; we forget,
The while we groan, that God’s accomplishment
Is always and unfailingly at hand.

The incompleteness of man described in Octave I and the sad condition of the age provide subject matter for a number of the Octaves. Here are several passages that illustrate the scope and tone of Robinson’s indictments: “the days/ Of most of us [are] affrighted and diseased . . . In this the prentice-age of discontent,/ Rebelliousness, faint-heartedness, and shame” (“Two Octaves, I”); “the fulgid sun looks down/ Upon a stagnant earth where listless men/ Laboriously dawdle, curse, and sweat,/ Disqualified, unsatisfied, inert” (“Two Octaves, II”); “The legion life that riots in mankind/ Goes ever plunging upward, up and down . . . And ever led resourcelessly along/ To brainless carnage by drunk trumpeters” (II); “To me the groaning of world-worshippers/ Rings like a lonely music played in hell” (III). Octave XVI is extreme and inclusive enough to deserve reproduction:

Something as one with eyes that look below
The battle-smoke to glimpse the foeman’s charge.
We through the dusk of downward years may scan
The onslaught that awaits this idiot world
Where blood pays blood for nothing, and where life
Pays life to madness, till at last the ports
Of gilded helplessness be battered through
By the still crash of salvatory steel.

Robinson employs military imagery in three additional Octaves (II, IV, V) in which man and the times are objects of
his invective. The image "downward years" to indicate old age is to reappear later in the brilliant lyric "Eros Turannos."

In the March 15 letter Robinson wrote, "a glimpse of the real light through the clouds of time . . . makes me wish to live and see it out" (pp. 278-279). In a world where people and conditions seemed to demand only negative response, Robinson found the positive, and it is in the Octaves that the positive is first voiced with consistency in his poetry. The affirmation of idealism in the Octaves as an "unystematized" philosophy to which he could hold firm is paralleled by passages in his letters to Smith during the time he was working on the Octaves. On November 6, 1896 he wrote: "They [postage stamps] are so obviously material and my ideas are getting to be so thoroughly ideal, that the collecting of anything but wisdom seems like going back into ignorance and barbarism" (p. 263). On December 7, 1896 he wrote: "She [his mother] has gone ahead and I am glad for her. You see I have come to look on death as a deliverance and an advancement . . . and I am very glad to be able to stand up and say that I am an idealist. Perhaps idealism is the philosophy of desperation, but I do not think so. To me it is the only logical and satisfactory theory of life" (p. 264). Octave X is a poetic version of the above attitude toward death, though in the poem Robinson substitutes a "dead man" in the place of his mother:

Where does a dead man go?—The dead man dies;
But the free life that would no longer feed
On fagots of outburned and shattered flesh
Wakes to a thrilled invisible advance,
Unchained (or fettered else) of memory;
And when the dead man goes it seems to me
'T were better for us all to do away
With weeping, and be glad that he is gone.

The March 15 letter, which Chard Powers Smith calls the "prose equivalent" (p. 161) of the Octaves, contains a passage which suggests that by then Robinson had begun to live according to idealism:

I am not going crazy, for I see some things she [his mother] did not see—some things she could not see; but I am going to lose all those pleasures which are said to make up the happiness of this life and I'm glad of it. I'm glad to say that I am strong enough to do without them. There is a pleasure—a joy—that is greater than all these little selfish notions and I have found the way to it through idealism (pp. 279-280).
This idealism—the life within rather than the life without—is the subject of Octave V:

There is one battle-field whereon we fall
Triumphant and unconquered; but, alas!
We are too fleshly fearful of ourselves
To fight there till our days are whirled and blurred
By sorrow, and the ministering wheels
Of anguish take us eastward, where the clouds
Of human gloom are lost against the gleam
That shines on Thought’s impenetrable mail.

We are unwilling to wage war against those materialistic forces that must be overcome before we can know the light of idealism, the “gleam/ That shines.” Paradoxically the defeat we suffer is prerequisite to our inward triumph. The “gleam/ That shines” is synonymous with the “compensate spirit-gleams” in Octave VIII, the “glorifying light” in XII, the “foregleam” in XX, “God’s highways gleaming” in XXII, and it is perhaps synonymous with the “gleaming of God’s forge” in Octave XIX. The idealism of the Octaves seems to be based, at least in part, on the conception Robinson has of the glory of God, for the similarities in light imagery to describe both idealism and the attributes of God are more than coincidental. There is also in the Octaves an inner peace commensurate with the knowledge, wisdom, truth, and love that idealism radiates to man. This inner peace is perhaps best exemplified in the closing lines of Octave XVII: “The soul itself must insulate the Real,/ Or ever you do cherish in this life—/ In this life or in any life—repose.”

Chard Powers Smith recognizes and charts to an extent the significant role idealism plays in the Octaves. Smith is convinced that Robinson’s commitment to idealism must not be considered his final philosophical position. And, Smith cautions, Robinson never negated the “reality of Matter” (p. 289). In fact, Robinson acknowledged in the March 15 letter the “temporal necessities” of life, though he did so ironically: “The age is all right, material progress is all right, Herbert Spencer is all right, hell is all right” (p. 278). Smith concludes that Robinson’s idealism “was no more than an assertion of his preference for the life of the mind within ‘thought’s impenetrable mail,’ the contemplation by his outer conscious self of his inner unconscious self whose subsensuous activity was a
The Octaves should be read as somewhat random entries in a journal chronicling the attitudes a sensitive, intelligent young man held during a time in which his family seemed to be disintegrating. The Octaves tell us something about Robinson's feelings on the subject of poetry; they affirm his belief in "God's accomplishment [that] is always and unfailingly at hand"; they register his disgust with the age and with man's inability to make something of it and himself; and they contain the genesis of his idealism. Although there is no consistent design to the Octaves, the last, XXIII in the Collected Poems series, serves as a conclusion in that the poet has come to meaningful terms with himself:

Here by the windy docks I stand alone,
But yet companioned. There the vessel goes,
And there my friend goes with it; but the wake
That melts and ebbs between that friend and me
Love's earnest is of Life's all-purposeful
And all-triumphant sailing, when the ships
Of Wisdom loose their fretful chains and swing
Forever from the crumpled wharves of Time.

This serenity and confidence, quite far-removed tonally from the near frenetic quality of a number of these pieces, appropriately conclude the Octaves.

If [Robinson] had been able to abandon himself, he would have become not merely the greatest poet of America (he has, I think, become that), but one of the half-dozen of the world's greatest poets.

THEODORE MAYNARD (1922)