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HE SHOUTS TO SEE THEM SCAMPER SO: E. A. ROBINSON AND THE FRENCH FORMS

By PETER DECHERT

The outlines of young Win Robinson's poetic involvement with Alanson Tucker Schumman, the homeopathic physician who lived next door to the Robinson family and wrote reams of verse, have been suggested in Hagedorn's biography and elsewhere.¹

In later years Robinson wrote warmly of "my old friend, Dr. A. T. Schumann, who was himself a prolific writer of sonnets, ballades and rondeaus, and a master of poetic technique. As I shall never know the extent of my indebtedness to his interest and belief in my work, or to my unconscious absorption of his technical enthusiasm, I am glad . . . to acknowledge a debt that I cannot even estimate. . . . I am sure that he was one of the most remarkable metrical technicians that ever lived, and an invaluable friend to me in those years of apprenticeship."²

Hagedorn tells of an incident during an informal evening at which Robinson and Schumann were present. When, "in the course of conversation, the doctor or one of his companions casually remarked that 'the perfect boozers live in Maine,' the rhythmic line was snatched up as the theme and refrain of a rondeau."³ Emery Neff carried this tale farther, drawing the conclusion that Robinson's "humor was a bond with his fellow townsmen. When he began to experiment with the French forms, he caught up a phrase from conversation, 'the perfect boozers live in Maine,' for the refrain of a rondeau."⁴

The rondeau, as a verse form, of course requires a two- or three-stress catch-line; the four-stress line cited by both biographers actually became the refrain line of a "Ballade of the Maine Law":

We have an elephantine law
In our remote and frigid state,
Framed, we are told, without a flaw,
Rum's ravage to annihilate.

1 Hermann Hagedorn, *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1938).

2 "The First Seven Years," *Colophon*, I (Part Four, 1930), n.p.

3 Hagedorn, 47.

4 *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1948), 89-90.

We recognize its worthy weight
(Haply they do in France and Spain),
Yet—why should we prevaricate?—
The perfect boozers are in Maine.

The judge protrudes his ample maw—
He seems, though little, to be great—
And with a voice harsh like a saw,
Decides vague issues to create.
With unctuous phiz and hairless pate,
The lawyer vilifies in vain:
The parsons from the pulpit prate;—
The perfect boozers are in Maine.

The seller sneers with coarse guffaw
And swaggers with defiant gait;
The officer, with brutal paw,
Drags the limp victim to his fate;
The justice rules with look sedate,—
How ponderous the mental strain!—
Pay, peach, or lounge incarcerate! . . .
The perfect boozers are in Maine.

ENVOY

How not the nuisance to abate
Each drunken year we find again:—
Hence we aver that, up to date,
The perfect boozers are in Maine.

Both biographers also erred in attributing this poem to Robinson: it was written by Schumann, and published under his name in the Gardiner *Reporter-Journal*.⁵

On October 5, 1893, Robinson wrote Harry Smith that "Schumann has written a 'Ballade of the Law,' with the refrain, 'He sells his soul for a paltry fee.' It is a very good thing, though perhaps a little strong in places. . . . He has another on doctors, 'This marvellous medical man.'"⁶ This is the "Ballade of the Law," which Robinson admired:

A shameful farce is your splendid law,
The world will know if it stop to think;

⁵ Quoted from an undated clipping found in the Schumann collection in the Gardiner, Maine, Public Library in 1953. All other quotations from Schumann in this essay are from manuscript or newspaper versions of his poems in the Gardiner material.

⁶ Denham Sutcliffe, editor, *Untriangulated Stars: Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson to Harry De Forest Smith, 1890-1905* (Cambridge, Mass., 1947), 110.

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Yet it holds the timid in servile awe,
And causes the valiant to quake and shrink.
As vague and keen is a lawyer's wink
As a flash of foam on a fickle sea;
And while the jurymen stare and blink,
He sells his soul for a paltry fee.

Mayhap he's a man with a massive jaw,
And the head of an ape and the teeth of a mink;
With a hoarse voice harsh as a raven's caw,
And the hairy phiz of the missing link;
With a bullet eye as black as ink,
And a poll as bare as a polished pea;
Perchance of the church he's the pride and pink:—
He sells his soul for a paltry fee.

Or his speech is as sharp as the hiss of a saw,
Or as thin as the pelf that he loves to chink;
Or he talks with his hand with a clutch and a claw
And his lies are as foul as a filthy sink;
Tho' he lean, tho' he leer, tho' he pose, tho' he prink,
Tho' he fret, tho' he fume, tho' he fawn, may be,—
Tho' squelched by the Court, and forced to slink,
He sells his soul for a paltry fee.

ENVOY

His home is a hut near hell's red brink;
And when he succumbs to death's decree,
To his ear as he drops comes the chill gold's clink;
He sells his soul for a paltry fee!

The "Ballade of Gardiner," whose title Schumann wisely changed to "A Ballade of Physic" when he published it in the *Springfield Republican*, is of the same style, as its envoy can indicate:

His cordials come from Tokay,
His drugs are from Biblical Dan:
Potatoes are often his pay—
This marvellous medical man.

Still another ballade, "Shooting Stars," is a member of this genre:

When ardent summer skies are bright
With myriad friendly lamps that glow
Down from their dark, mysterious height
To charm the shrouded earth below—
Lost in a faith we do not know,

Nor human discord ever jars
With eyes that wide and wider grow,
He sits and waits for shooting stars.

And when they slide across the night
Like arrows from a Titan's bow,
He shudders for supreme delight
And shouts to see them scamper so,
No sneering science comes to show
The poor brain crossed with silly scars;
But flushed with joys that overflow,
He sits and waits for shooting stars.

We call him an unlovely wight;
But if his wit be something slow,
Nor ever weary of the sight
That Adam saw so long ago—
Released from knowledge and its woe,
No gloom his constant rapture mars:—
Oblivious from head to toe,
He sits and waits for shooting stars.

ENVOY

Nor is it yet for us, I trow,
To mock him, or to shut the bars
Of scorn against him—even though
He sits and waits for shooting stars.

This poem is not Schumann's, however, but Robinson's. Published first in the *Globe* for December 1896, it has been reprinted in Hogan's *Bibliography* (173-174).

"Shooting Stars," although its opening and closing lines point toward Robinson's almost unique diction in his more mature poetry, does not represent the sort of verse that he later cared to perpetuate. He never reprinted it. In fact, he almost surely wrote it some considerable time before it was published; the *Globe* had a habit of holding poems for years before printing them. But he had been working an apprenticeship with the ballade form. His "Ballade of the White Ship" was printed in the *Harvard Advocate* for October 1891; reworked, it appeared as "Ballade of a Ship" in *The Children of the Night* before, like the "Ballade of Dead Friends," being excluded from the later collections.

Only two ballades were allowed to remain in the *Collected Poems*, both of which had appeared earlier in *The Torrent and the Night Before*. One, "Ballade by the Fire," is an exercise

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in irrevocable fate tempered by nostalgia, sentiments which too often occurred in his mentor Schumann's verse; with its envoy

Life is the game that must be played:
This truth at least, good friends, we know;
So live and laugh, nor be dismayed
As one by one the phantoms go⁷

it hardly seems worth taking very seriously.

The second, "Ballade of Broken Flutes,"⁸ was in fact dedicated to Schumann. This poem has been seen as a statement of Robinson's rejection of poetry in favor of prose as a medium for self-expression (it must be remembered that he spent some time in the 1890s trying to master the short story); it might just as easily be seen as rejecting the sterility of the French forms because they seemed incapable of handling complex contemporary thought, the "broken flutes of Arcady" representing the uselessly formal pastoral quality of the archaic forms. Robinson's thinking was growing more complex than Schumann's ever became. In this view, this ballade probably anticipates a point that will be discussed in a moment.

Robinson seems never to have taken the triolet at all seriously, his only remaining one being the offhand

Silent they stand against the wall,
The mouldering boots of other days.⁹

This *jeu d'esprit* was written early in 1891, and if one may be allowed to make a serious deduction from a single piece of frivolity it seems to me to indicate a lack of understanding about the essential nature of the triolet, where the particular joy of the game is to shift the context about so that the refrain lines accrete new meaning at each reappearance. This observation is entirely applicable to Schumann's triolets (of which far too many remain) as well. At one point, indeed, Schumann retold the story of Christ in a triolet sequence, with awesomely disastrous results. One of his lighter efforts may better serve to give the flavor of the triolet style to which he exposed Robinson; it also serves to show that even minor poets are not immune to editorial annoyance:

⁷ *Collected Poems* (New York, 1937), 76-77.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 77-78.

⁹ Estelle Kaplan, *Philosophy in the Poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1940), 6.

Who told you, my friend,
To tinker my verses?
To trim and to mend,
Who told you, my friend?
I pray you to end
Your mischievous mercies!
Who told you, my friend,
To tinker my verses?

With its "sassy" rhyme of "mercies" and "verses," this triolet has a certain felicitous appeal, but like Robinson's boot epic it fails to make really effective use of the refrain.

Schumann was particularly addicted to writing in the rondeau form, which he equated with the sonnet:

Two formal stars begem the sky of song,
The lofty sonnet and the high rondeau;
Both in their course imperially go. . .

From Robinson's practice, we must assume that he did not agree with the Schumann equation, although his only surviving rondeau shows reasonable facility:

In Harvard 5 the deathless lore
That haunts old Avon's classic shore
Wakens the long triumphant strain
Of Pride and Passion, Mirth and Pain,
That fed the Poet's mind of yore.
Time's magic glass is turned once more
And back the sands of ages pour,
While shades of mouldered monarchs reign
In Harvard 5.

Thin spirits flutter through the door,
Quaint phantoms flit across the floor;
Now Fancy marks the crimson stain
Of Murder. . . and there falls again
The fateful gloom of Elsinore
In Harvard 5.¹⁰

But this is no more than an exercise: it shows only that Robinson had studied the technique of the rondeau well enough to apply it in an offhand manner when the spirit moved him to a piece of occasional verse. He seems never to have fallen into Schumann's attitude of ascribing moment to the form.

¹⁰ Donald Hall, editor, *The Harvard Advocate Anthology* (New York, 1950), 55-56.

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He did, however, write one serious poem which seems unquestionably to owe its structural basis to the rondeau. Much of the aural effect of "Luke Havergal" derives from the fact that its long stanzas end in truncated echo lines. Unlike the short refrain lines of the rondeau, which echo the beginning phrase of the first line of the poem, those in "Luke Havergal" repeat the closing syllables of the first line of each stanza. Structurally, nevertheless, this device is quite close to that of the rondeau. And each of the four seven and one-half line stanzas is almost the structural equivalent of the opening long stanza of a formal rondeau, even to the rhyme scheme that Robinson employed, the only differences being that the entire seventh line echoes the entire first with the eighth line (the half-line) serving as re-echo, and that there is one less line than in the eight and one-half line opening section of a rondeau. A comparison of the opening stanza of "Luke Havergal" with the beginning of "In Harvard 5" quoted above will show the similarities, as well as the differences:

Go to the western gate, Luke Havergal,
There where the vines cling crimson on the wall,
And in the twilight wait for what will come.
The leaves will whisper there of her, and some,
Like flying words, will strike you as they fall;
But go, and if you listen she will call.
Go to the western gate, Luke Havergal—
Luke Havergal.¹¹

This poem has provided commentators with all sorts of leads to chew on. Fussell has found its roots in Poe and Longfellow,¹² for example. While the tone of the poem may be similar to the examples he cites, the tone in fact derives largely from the technique that Robinson used (the thought, the "situation," is relatively banal, as it often is even in great poems, which depend on the method of expression to carry them over the hump of pathos), and this technique in turn has much more obvious roots in the rondeau than it has in the work of other poets. That Robinson was successful in so modifying the structure as to adapt it to the mood which he wanted to express is a measure of the technical resources that

¹¹ *CP* (1937), 74.

¹² Edwin S. Fussell, *Edwin Arlington Robinson* (Berkeley, 1954), 16-17, 20-21.

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he had acquired during his apprenticeship. By the time that he wrote "Luke Havergal," he had advanced beyond Schumann's capabilities.

If Robinson did not himself take the formal rondeau structure very seriously, he actually suppressed one of his poems because it had mistakenly been taken seriously by several reviewers. He never reprinted the rondel, "Poem for Max Nordau," after *The Torrent*, although we can easily enough see it as another example, like "In Harvard 5," of his adapting a French form for satirical ends:

Dun shades quiver down the lone long fallow,
And the scared night shudders at the brown owl's cry;
The bleak reeds rattle as the winds whirl by,
And frayed leaves flutter through the clumped shrubs callow.

Chill dews clinging on the low cold mallow
Make a steel-keen shimmer where the spent stems lie;
Dun shades quiver down the lone long fallow,
And the scared night shudders at the brown owl's cry.

Pale stars peering through the clouds curled shallow
Make a thin still flicker in a foul round sky;
Black damp shadows through the hushed air fly;
The lewd gloom wakens to a moon-sad fallow,
Dun shades quiver down the lone long fallow.¹³

Considering the repetitive demands of the rondel form, "Poem for Max Nordau" is not an unsuccessful effort. But these formal demands, like those of the triolet, are hardly suited to the expression of the sort of things that Robinson increasingly felt that he had to say during the 1890s. Certainly, from the evidence that remains, and particularly from its facility, there seems to be no doubt that in his formative years Robinson did work diligently in the strict forms, under Schumann's aegis. He wrote to Smith of fiddling "too much over sonnets and ballades,"¹⁴ although he soon enough rejected the latter in favor of the former. And in 1894, sending Smith an early draft of his villanelle "The House on the Hill," he added that "These old French forms always had a fascination for me which I never expect to outgrow. . . . When one of the things

¹³ *The Torrent and the Night Before* (Gardiner, Maine, 1896), 33.

¹⁴ *Untriangulated Stars*, 115.

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begin [*sic*] to run in my mind there is little rest for me until it is out."¹⁵

Fortunately, he did outgrow the fascination. In fact, his "Villanelle of Change,"¹⁶ one of the two villanelles in the *Collected Poems*, seems (as do most of Schumann's villanelles) to be little more than a five-finger exercise, as, on the evidence of what he had written Smith, he may very well have regarded it himself. "The House on the Hill,"¹⁷ however, went through at least one major reworking and several minor revisions during its almost three years of growth. Apparently Robinson took it more seriously than he did most of his French form efforts, and it demonstrates not only the possibilities of this metier, but also the weaknesses that probably led him to abandon these forms.

In the earliest version of "The House on the Hill," found in a letter to Smith dated February 25, 1894, it is subtitled "(Villanelle of Departure)." Robinson noted that it was "made [yesterday] very quickly (in about twenty minutes)" and "is a little mystical perhaps. . . an attempt to show the poetry of the commonplace." Its second and third stanzas combine two of his early, relatively simple, attitudes toward death, with the quasi-religious echoing the fatalistic:

Malign them as we may,
We cannot do them ill:
They are all gone away.

Are we more fit than they
To meet the Master's will?—
There is nothing more to say.

Implicit in this version is the idea that Robinson was writing about a strongly specific "departure," a single set of deaths, and the "they" comes through as a specific family group; this implication is reinforced in the next stanza as well, particularly by the "the" in the second line:

What matters it who stray
Around the sunken sill?—
They are all gone away.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁶ *CP* (1937), 80-81.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 81-82. Earlier versions appear in the letter to Smith cited in note 15, in the *Globe*, and in *The Torrent*.

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The version sent to Smith was printed in the *Globe* with slight alterations in punctuation, but Robinson's one verbal change—"the sunken sill" became "that sunken sill"—made the particularization of the poem's theme even more apparent.

It is also interesting to see that at least two aspects of this early version indicate the continuing influence of Schumann on Robinson. The first, the "Master" theme, closely echoes Schumann's probably spurious religiosity; while "What matters it who stray" is pure Schumannesque diction, an example of the sort of rhetorical absurdities found in almost all of his poems. It seems obvious that Robinson, soon after writing this first version, realized the vapidness of such expressions and made a conscious effort to suit his diction more realistically to his subject matter, whether or not in the direction of a "poetry of the commonplace."

The other striking attribute of this early version of "The House on the Hill" is that, for all its "mystical" quality, it is still an occasional poem. That is, it is—as I have said—motivated by a specific subject. Schumann's attitude, the conventional one, toward the French forms was that they were primarily suited to the celebration of the specific; and Robinson in this instance seems to agree.

One of the things that makes a major poet, however—or a novelist, for that matter—is the urge, and the ability, to universalize. On the evidence at hand, Robinson, either instinctively or otherwise, began to realize this transformation from the particular to the universal in the period between early 1894, when he wrote "The House on the Hill," and 1896, when he sent *The Torrent and the Night Before* to the printer with a much reworked version which is practically identical to the one finally included in the *Collected Poems*.

Indeed, the most striking aspect of this revision is the way in which Robinson worked to substitute universality for particularization. The three stanzas quoted above, which are the most changed, now read:

Through broken walls and gray
The winds blow bleak and shrill:
They are all gone away.

Nor is there one today
To speak them good or ill:
There is nothing more to say.

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Why is it then we stray
Around the sunken sill?
They are all gone away.

The "one," the "we," the "they" here are much more ephemeral individuals than the corresponding figures in the early draft. "That sunken sill" has reverted to "the," and its placement in the stream of developing thought does not seem to insist nearly so strongly on its being unique. "The winds," by being plural, are also a strong universal symbol.

But a shift toward the generality of experience is not the only new note here. The two early attitudes toward death have both been erased; in their place, Robinson arrived at the idea of death as simple finality, not only of actual existence, but even of remembered existence: no one recalls the "they" who went away, for "good or ill." They have not gone, but vanished. This, of course, reflects his final mature attitude, one which continues relatively unchanged down through all the long blank verse narratives to *King Jasper*. The accretion of maturity over a two and one-half year period demonstrated by the development of "The House on the Hill" almost surely echoes a biographical maturing whose discussion is beyond our present scope. One clue, however: remembering that the implied formula "death equals forgetting" is equally validly stated "forgetting equals death," we can also remember the combination of factors which seemed to Robinson during these years to be isolating him as an individual.

In the process of revision, the nature of "The House on the Hill" changed from an occasional piece with an overtone of mysticism, if we accept Robinson's jocular evaluation, to a personal philosophical statement. Poetically it progressed along the line between jingle and tone poem as a result of Robinson's increased perception of his actual subject matter, and also because its verbal structure shifted from rhetoric toward the communication of specific images and felt ideas rather than conventional ones. Like Poe's "Raven," however, it in many ways succeeds despite itself: it is a tour de force still, as indeed must be the case with poems cast into one or another of the French forms, and perfecting it seems to have been among Robinson's final struggles with these restrictive forms. There is no evidence that he attempted anything serious in any of them after about 1895.

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Very little in the ultimate *Collected Poems* indicates Robinson's involvement with the stubborn formalities to which Schumann had introduced him. Only the technical facility of the two ballades and the two villanelles can lead us to infer hundreds of earlier attempts, almost all aborted, abandoned, or destroyed. Fortunately a few poems like "In Harvard 5," "Shooting Stars," the Boots triolet and "Poem for Max Nordau" remain to demonstrate that these conjectured hundreds did exist.

For the expert who wants to analyze the developing facility of a fine poet, it is frustrating to think of so much evidence, all gone. For the person who is interested in poetry as an end result, however, there probably is no need to mourn the juvenilia that we lack. The little that remains is poor enough to cause us to doubt the quality of the rest.

Poor, that is, as poetic expression. Robinson's handling of the forms was competent enough. Probably the missing rondeaus, rondels, ballades and villanelles were not, at their happiest, unlike the hundreds of Schumann's that we still do have. At their best, which is fairly represented by the two ballades which were quoted earlier in this essay, Schumann's poems were technically effortless, and their content could be both amusing and trenchantly caustic. Many of Schumann's neighbors also lived in Tilbury Town. But in the end, Robinson settled on the sonnet as the form best suited for the observations that he wanted to make.

It seems likely to me that the maturing Robinson found the jingle-effects of French form structure to be at cross-purposes with the increasing seriousness of what he had to say in the later 1890s. Life was beginning to close in on him. For the first time, he had been—or had imagined himself to be—in love: not once, but allegedly at least three times, with Mabel Moore, with Rosalind Richards, and with his brother's fiancée.

His mother died only days before he received the printed copies of his first book. Herman had lost the family fortune, such as it was. Harry Smith had married "on the night of a friend's wedding," and Robinson felt that he had finally become estranged from all of the few close friends that he had chosen over the years. Jobless in a job-oriented society, he was approaching thirty with a goal, but with no assurance of achievement.

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From his experiences with the French forms and from his other early practice, Robinson by this time had developed and honed the ability to express himself easily and to the point in structured verse. Far harder to construct as vehicles for meaning than the sonnet, the several French forms demand much of any poet if he is to use them to communicate anything but the barrenest of conventional sentiments, and "The House on the Hill" shows how far Robinson had come from being satisfied with entirely ephemeral purposes. The shape of his early verse no longer was congruent with the shape of his thoughts. But time spent in mastering strict formality is not time wasted, no matter if the forms themselves are ultimately abandoned for less meticulous structures.

Under the circumstances, then, and especially considering Schumann's often over-facile handling of them, it is not hard to believe that the French forms finally seemed too frivolous to Robinson, too lightweight to bear the reflective burden that he was now ready to impose on his verse. They had served their purposes by developing his facility at stanzafied self-expression and by allowing him an outlet for jejeune thoughts and humor; ultimately, however, they were playthings to be outgrown. He had had done with shouting at their scampering.

Shortly after *The Torrent and the Night Before* was printed, Robinson wrote his friend Art Gledhill that he had discovered that he must "write whatever I think is appropriate to the subject and let tradition go to the deuce,"¹⁸ and to Smith he added "Of course I like a joke, and I like art for its own sake; but these things in themselves are not enough."¹⁹

He was writing his epitaph for the French forms.

¹⁸ Ridgely Torrence, editor, *Selected Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1940), 13.
¹⁹ *Untriangulated Stars*, 289.