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### MOWRY SABEN ABOUT EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

By RICHARD CARY

Saben and Robinson met in the fall of 1891 when both were coverage freshmen at Harvard. Both were born New Englanders but their differences in temperament, outlook, and comportment were antipodal. What they had in common was love of literature, in each an invincible magnet that drew them together and sustained their relation over the next forty-four years to Robinson's death. And beyond, for Robinson remained in Saben's memory an indestructible image which he often evoked with mismatched feelings.

The trend and tone of Robinson's letters to Saben, soon to be published, subtly elucidate the overt and subliminal nature of the tie between the two men. Profound respect prevailed on either side, and profound disagreement. Constitutionally outspoken, Saben nonetheless tempered his articulation and in general adopted a line of address consistent with a sensitive friendship. More deeply indicative of his attitudes toward Robinson were Saben's statements, private and public, about the poet after his death. Freed from his inhibiting desire not to alienate Robinson, Saben dispensed several provocative insights to Hermann Hagedorn for the biography, described Robinson with expansive candor to Denham Sutcliffe,<sup>1</sup> wrote an obituary and two reviews for *The Argonaut*, and a brief piece for the *Colby Mercury*. In all, they present a view of Robinson like in many features to the received portrait but diverse enough in specifics to warrant quotation and discussion.

#### *Saben*

Israel<sup>2</sup> Mowry Saben was born in Uxbridge, Massachusetts, on March 24, 1870, to a family the newspapers termed "prominent." Hagedorn observes that Freud would have been ecstatic over Saben,<sup>3</sup> and he does seem to have fulfilled the requirements

<sup>1</sup> Five letters by Saben to Sutcliffe and copies of three letters by Sutcliffe to Saben are now in the Edwin Arlington Robinson Memorial Room at Colby College Library.

<sup>2</sup> "He has dropped the 'Israel.'" Robinson letter, October 15, 1896, in Denham Sutcliffe, editor, *Untriangulated Stars: Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson to Harry De Forest Smith 1890-1905* (Cambridge, Mass., 1947), 259. Hereafter referred to in the text as *US*.

<sup>3</sup> Hermann Hagedorn, *Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Biography* (New York, 1938), 64. It is an amusing turnabout that Saben became ecstatic over Freud in the Twenties.

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for a classic case of psychoneurotic father-rejection. A child phenomenon who knew the alphabet before he could talk and who read the Bible through before he was seven, Saben scored top marks in every academic subject except his father's, an esteemed mathematician. Stung by this anomaly, the father took stern measures which drove the boy into a state of chronic in-communication. His only solace and outlet were books, and he systematically devoured Shakespeare, the classics, the great historians, and the Protestant divines. Physical defects and psychological stress combined to bring about a breakdown, which he survived on a regimen of ice baths and Graham bread.<sup>4</sup> His delayed entry at Harvard was accomplished over the objection of his doctor, who foresaw collapse and death from the excesses available to Saben in the unconstrained community of Cambridge. The dour prognosis eventuated, but only to a point. Saben did eat, drink, and whore to his heart's content while in college; perversely, instead of dying, he battered on this program, rising to better health than he had known for years.

Saben stayed in attendance at Harvard College for 1891-1892, switching to the Law School the following academic year. He contemplated enrolling next in the Divinity School, but Robinson says that by October 1893 he had "given up for good his idea. . . . He thinks his past life and reputation there would render it impossible for such a course to be taken seriously by either the students or the faculty" (*US*, 114). In May Saben sailed for Europe, where he spent nearly four years, partly in studies at Oxford and Heidelberg universities, more largely in pursuits of ruddier stripe. Back in the United States, he traveled through it exhaustively, then turned to lecturing. "Later I drifted (drifted is quite the proper word for it) into journalism, becoming an editorial writer, in which capacity I have served eight daily newspapers, and written at space rates for a number of others, including the *New York Times*, *Boston Transcript*, *Baltimore American*, and the *Louisville Courier-Journal*" (*HCC*, 549).

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<sup>4</sup> Once again, in the Twenties, Saben went through a precarious period. Victim of "a pathological condition" he did not specify, he had undergone two unsuccessful operations and was declared a hopeless case. He persisted, however, enduring thirteen more operations over a span of 365 days and, by what he calls a miracle, was cured. He reported no recurrence since the spring of 1925. Autobiographical sketch in *Harvard College Class of 1895: 1895-1945* (Cambridge, Mass., 1945), 548. Hereafter referred to in the text as *HCC*.

Although late in life Saben spoke bravely of sending off essays to the *Atlantic* and *Harper's*, in his time he succeeded in placing precisely five articles in the *Forum* between 1912-1914. These and other views on nature, society, morals, sex, literature, and democracy he incorporated in a book, *The Spirit of Life*, issued by Mitchell Kennerley in 1914. Reviewers generally concurred that he had failed to prove his case as either idealist or skeptic, that he was a better metaphysician than sociologist.<sup>5</sup> Earlier he had devised a 74-page book, *The Twilight of the Gods* (New Bedford, 1903), out of a lecture delivered in Philadelphia. He transformed the ancient Teutonic legend of the passing of the gods in Valhalla into a plea for sweeping away the old imperfect ways and instituting modern reforms. He proposed to utilize this text as the exordium of a more pretentious volume to be titled *The Gospel of Freedom*, which never materialized.

In the summer of 1925 Saben was appointed special assistant to James J. Davis, Secretary of Labor for three consecutive terms under presidents Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover. Saben's own account of his performance is engagingly characteristic:

...most of my duties [consisted] in writing his speeches, magazine articles, state papers, and letters to the press. A biography of this gentleman says that he reached the high water mark of his oratory in three addresses, one of which the biographer printed in full. Two of these, including the printed one, were wholly, both in respect of words and ideas, of my composition. On another occasion, when the putative author of a magazine article, written in reply to an article by a former French Premier in the same magazine, was the Cabinet Secretary, the actual author was none other than your old classmate, and if the article were as brilliant as some of the critics said it was, the honor should have been mine also, for it was written without a single suggestion from the man who signed it. Once I got the Secretary in some difficulty with his own political party because of a letter that he asked me to write to a foreign newspaper, which was also written without suggestions from him or editing (*HCC*, 548-549).

Before leaving government service Saben also filled the post of Federal Commissioner of Conciliation.

His final stint involved a rather turbulent tenancy as editor of the San Francisco literary weekly, *The Argonaut*, notable for

<sup>5</sup> In an unpublished letter to George Burnham, Robinson enclosed a review of the book from the New York *Evening Post* with the remarks that it "will not be altogether satisfactory to Saben," and "I wish I could feel differently, but his later 'line of talk' gets on my nerves." Dated December 5, 1914; in Colby College Library.

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its contributions by Jack London, Ambrose Bierce, and Gertrude Atherton. After a spirited quarrel with the publisher in 1947 Saben quit, briefly "engaged in publicity work for a large firm," then returned to *The Argonaut* as associate editor. "I read not long since," he said, "an editorial, one page long, in which I was accused of having made the weekly infamous. Well, it is possible. But I have never apologized for anything I have ever said or done, and . . . probably I am too old to begin" (*HCC*, 549). He died from a combination of heart, liver, and kidney ailments on October 7, 1950, outliving ascetic Robinson by fifteen and a half years.

*Saben and Robinson*

Robinson first encountered Saben in a restaurant on Harvard Square during the fall semester of 1891. Hagedorn's depiction of Saben at this time, "tall, heavy, pallid," conjures up an apparition of Oscar Wilde not incompatible with Saben's intellectual and behavioral prodigalities. Taken by the force of Saben's "eloquent and dogmatic" discourse, Robinson accompanied him to his room, where they "smoked and talked far into the night" (pp. 63-64). Then and there the introspective poet and the ebullient rebel established a rapport which was at once staunch, gingerly, and lifelong. Two more variant personalities could scarcely have converged.

Saben was a golden boy. He spent and laid waste with a flourish, leading expeditions to Boston for theatre parties, beer bouts, and other nocturnal diversions dear to undergraduates. He expatiated effusively and persuasively on any and all topics, usually steering a radical course, delighted to rattle and shock. He borrowed money from his classmates nonchalantly, charged purchases to his father, bestowed numerous and generous gifts. These cosmopolitan qualities fascinated Robinson, indrawn, frugal, puritanic, smalltown Mainer, wholly incapable of such luxuriance. He repaired almost daily to Saben's room, prizing above his glib oracularity the substantial mentality and subsurface humanity of his odd friend (who was in the process of shedding *his* puritanic repressions). Far better read than his colleagues in philosophy, science, and literature, Saben introduced or re-emphasized certain authors and works he deemed essential to Robinson. During their two-year tenure at Harvard, Saben inscribed and presented to Robinson: Dante's *The Di-*

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*vine Comedy*, two-volume editions of Samuel Johnson's *Select Essays* and Oliver Goldsmith's *The Citizen of the World*, a four-volume set of Whittier's *Poetical Works*, and an array of *Gems from Walt Whitman*,<sup>6</sup> whose esthetic they explored in depth one long and ardent evening.

Robinson gravitated into a loose league of reflective students, the Corncob Club, which convened informally at their various rooms to dispute the merits of professorial dicta or to air their own discoveries in life and learning.<sup>7</sup> As might be expected, Saben reigned, oftentimes to the utter boredom of the rest. One memorable evening he overshot even his own extravagant norm. Robinson recounted the escapade to Harry Smith with fastidious irony: "Saben got drunk, as I expected, and made a learned ass of himself. He read Bob Ingersoll, Coppée, Omar Khayyam, and the 'Elegy in a Country Church Yard' as only a drunken man can. The audience seemed well amused, but there is something rather degrading in it after all. Perhaps I would have enjoyed it more if I had drunk something" (*US*, 83-84). On another occasion Robinson wound up "feeling pretty rocky on account of the siege I went through last evening. Saben and Crapo<sup>8</sup> struck an argument at 7:00 P.M. and kept it up until 12:00. I began to get crazy about that time and drove them both out. I do not know that I ever passed through the mental suffering in my life that I did during those five hours" (*US*, 96).<sup>9</sup>

Robinson reacted to Saben with mingled high respect, shrewd apprehension, and amused tolerance. When "a jovial time at Saben's room" activated a call by the police and an investigation by the faculty, Saben, under peril of suspension, gave "strict orders" that his guests keep their mouths shut about having been present. "He would not peach if they put him on

6 These volumes—and Albert Mordell's *Notorious Literary Attacks*, which Saben sent Robinson in 1926 knowing his interest in Whitman, Hardy, Dickens, and Swinburne—are now in the Robinson collection, Colby College Library. In later years Saben made Whitman the subject of a recurrent lecture; Robinson had made him the subject of an early poem which he did not include in his *Collected Poems*.

7 Others in the group were James L. Tryon, George Burnham, Frank Q. Peters, Shirley E. Johnson, George W. Latham, Chauncey G. Hubbell, and William E. Butler.

8 Philip Crapo, a schoolmate of Saben at Phillips Exeter Academy, took up the profession of law. He died in his home town of Burlington, Iowa, in 1898.

9 Three years later Robinson said of Saben: "He is posted on almost everything, but has to be 'shut off' about midnight or he will go on till sunrise" (*US*, 259).

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the rock," said Robinson with something like awe for such valorous character (*US*, 55-56). Two other remarks demonstrate his ability to see beyond Saben's dazzling facade: "he is unquestionably gifted with a fine intellect. He is not very well balanced, but that is not to be laid at his door. He is as he was made, and sometimes I think a little more so" (*US*, 114); and regarding his poem "Supremacy," recently in the *Harvard Advocate*: "Saben's over-friendly statement that the thing is a 'great poem' doesn't affect my opinions much, as his enthusiasm is liable to run away from him when it has a chance—especially in matters where his friends are concerned. He is a magnificent fellow with all his peculiarities, but not just the one I should go to for an impartial criticism" (*US*, 108).

The farce factor in Saben never ceased to rouse Robinson's risibility, or his compassion. He recognized the abysmal loneliness that sought relief in violence. "Saben once told half the first balcony of the Hollis St. Theatre he would be without his books—in hell. S. has a way of yelling in public which is characteristic" (*US*, 150). Robinson also espied the suicidal drive in Saben which found expression in a fervor to live at zenith point.

He is in Heidelberg now, but has been all over Germany to get there, and has done, according to his narrative, a bewildering amount of boozing on the way. It seems that he had letters of introduction to some of the leading wine men and they filled him up, regardless of expense, on the best they had. If any man but Saben had told me the yarn, I might have doubted, but if he told me that he had put the Emperor to bed, I should believe him. I know him, and I recognize his personality and the impression it makes upon his elders. . . . After he has smiled on you once you will think you have always known him (*US*, 258-259).

Like Richard Cory, Saben was schooled in every grace, fluttered pulses when he talked, and carried a darkness in his core.

Robinson heard frequently and at length from Saben while he was abroad, once a twenty-page letter. Robinson responded in kind. In 1902 he portrayed Saben as fulsome, loquacious, and assured of himself as ever. On his part, Saben detected many changes in Robinson's thinking, and berated him for inconsistency. They met fitfully thereafter but kept in touch by post up to the year of Robinson's death.

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*Saben About Robinson*

Saben cherished Robinson dualistically, as a man and as a poet, with perhaps sharper reservations about the former than the latter. He gauged Robinson's intellectual and emotional shortcomings astutely and balanced his appraisals accordingly. Early in the game Saben endorsed Robinson's prospect as poet: "He is a genius, slowly groping his way, and sooner or later he will justify himself." Still, he did not blink the fact that "His general attitude at this time toward sensuality was not unlike that of Origen, Tertullian and other fathers of the Church. I have seen him shudder at the sight of thick lips, which he regarded as a symbol of sensuality. His attitude toward sex had the veritable *horror feminae* in it." When Robinson seemed particularly depressed, Saben seriously prescribed increased doses of calomel to allay the malaise.<sup>10</sup>

Saben's first public opportunity to divulge unencumbered opinions came in the obituary notice he wrote for *The Argonaut*, CXIII (April 12, 1935), 4-5. His epithets on Robinson the poet were all superlative: America's "greatest poet in recent years"; "father of the poetic renaissance in America"; "one of the masters of literature." Robinson the man received equivalent bays.

And no man ever possessed a more generous nature towards other writers less fortunate than himself. To that professional jealousy which is the bane of the writer's, as of some other professions, he was wholly immune. If he knew that another writer, or any other fellow creature for that matter, was in dire distress, his pursestrings were immediately loosened. One writer who never spoke well of him was the recipient of his bounty to the extent of hundreds of dollars. Robinson knew that this man's tongue, inflamed by failure, was full of abuse; but he only smiled and went on giving him money to pay rent and buy food. Indeed, in an intimate acquaintance of more than forty years, we never heard Robinson speak an unkind word of any fellow mortal. It seemed impossible for him to do so. . . . But great as he was as a writer, he was even greater as a man. Though a member of no church, and a believer in none of the historical creeds, he was at bottom intensely religious, convinced that this pebble of a planet conceals more than it reveals of human potentialities and truth. One who knew him feels that the poet was the best man he has ever known.

Reviewing Robinson's last book in *The Argonaut*, CXIV (January 10, 1936), 4, Saben was more guardedly complimen-

<sup>10</sup> Hagedorn, 75, 74, 81.



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tary. "We are not of the number who profess to see in *King Jasper*, the posthumous poem of Edwin Arlington Robinson, the finest production of his genius, though we regard it as a work of no ordinary merit." He deduced that Robinson had been moved to write this poem after reading John Strachey's *The Coming Struggle for Power*, adding: "Robinson was by nature an individualist, but he had come to feel that all the vital currents of our time were carrying us far from the type of society in which our forefathers believed, or professed to believe, and that we were drifting rapidly in the direction of collectivism." He declared the poem "a direful portent of the future" and advised all his readers to "buy it, read it, and then do some hard thinking."

Saben's last personal words about Robinson in *The Argonaut* (CXIX, March 29, 1940; 21-22) appeared in the course of a review of Ridgely Torrence's *Selected Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1940). Robinson "was one of the big uniques," he announced unequivocally, then went on to defend his undeniable "foibles and weaknesses." Hagedorn's recent biographical portrait of Robinson as "a man gifted and lovable" had a visible "wart or two," but "what portrait, faithfully drawn," did not? "His frailties, such as they were, did not really disfigure him; indeed they were of such a nature that one loved him, not in spite of his faults, but faults and all." Saben reiterated his dictum that Robinson was the best man he had ever known, "and nothing has transpired since, or is likely to transpire, to modify the opinion then expressed." As if to prove his contention, Saben proceeded to demolish Robinson's disavowal of influence from Robert Browning, an imputation that had nagged Robinson repeatedly during his lifetime.

But I recall distinctly that, in letters to me written between forty and fifty years ago, he was revealed as a Browning enthusiast. He was almost obsessed at this time by "Waring," and he urged me to read *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society* with all the fervor of the true disciple. I do not know how long the fervor lasted, and am inclined to think that it was Browning's optimism that finally made the English poet indigestible, for there was nothing truly optimistic in Robinson's credo. . .

In preparation for a talk he was to give to the Colby chapter of Phi Beta Kappa in April 1940, James L. Tryon, erstwhile fellow member of the Corncob Club, solicited Saben for some

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memories. The portion of Saben's letter which Tryon quotes in *Harvard Days With Edwin Arlington Robinson* (Waterville, Me., 1940) is remarkably perceptive and consistent, another amalgam of warts and worship.

It was Robinson's desire that we should spend our time at club meetings reading aloud from the greater writers, while my idea was that we should read the writers at home and discuss them at club meetings. Robinson thought also that we should confine ourselves to literature whereas I was all for discussing every kind of subject that had ever been debated among men. Robinson was always afflicted with a kind of intellectual timidity, and, in his Harvard days, he had a horror of argument such as I have never witnessed in any other man, although Emerson appears to have been somewhat similarly afflicted. The strength of Robinson was in his convictions, never in his opinions, which were veering as the wind. What he thought today he would unthink tomorrow, and this was true throughout his life. What he knew he knew intuitively, and not through any process of ratiocination. His convictions, however, were lasting and life-long. I have always said since his death that, of all men whom I ever knew well, he was the best man I ever knew. He has written pieces that the world should not willingly let die, but in his character he was even greater than in his literary works (p. 15).

Amplifying the statements he made to Tryon, Saben for yet another time in public print confirmed that "all things considered, Robinson was the best man I have ever known intimately." His "Memories of Edwin Arlington Robinson" in the *Colby Mercury*, VII (January 1941), 13-14, is a truly mixed bag of robust extolment, cold iconoclasm, and prankish exposé. Robinson "was not a plaster saint, nor any other kind of saint," said Saben, reveling in the fact that it was he who told Hagedorn that Robinson "brought to Harvard a large collection of risqué stories, and he retailed them with becoming, or unbecoming, generosity. . . . I do not think we do him a kindness by attempting to conceal the truth about him." He ridiculed Robinson's penchant for droning, "There's something in it," whenever faced with an unfamiliar idea ("as a philosopher I could not take him very seriously"). Once more he raised the ghost of Browning, convinced that Robinson had drawn from him "the idea of writing those long psychological sketches. . . . Robinson did not like to think that he derived from anybody." He also chided Robinson for altering his attitudes toward Thomas Hardy and George Meredith from time to time. "I have seldom known a person whose capacity for self-deception was

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greater than Robinson's, and I could give many illustrations of it." Perennially the egomane, Saben needed to see his hero bleed in order to affirm his own stature.

A new source of private revelations by Saben on Robinson—five letters written to Denham Sutcliffe in 1947—provides a typical heady blend of Saben sidelights and sideswipes. While Sutcliffe was preparing his edition of Robinson letters for publication, he thought it expedient to clear with Saben passages in the letters of February 21, March 1, 1892, and February 3, 1893 which might be offensive to him. The first pair had to do with the ruckus in Saben's room at Harvard which had perturbed the police and the faculty; the third with Saben's alcoholic recital (alluded to above). Saben answered on June 3 that he remembered the first meeting vividly, though not the second, but that neither incident, reinvoked, would distress him in the slightest. For the greater part, he shrewishly denigrated a professor he disliked, reverting in his conclusion to the central theme with sly good humor.

In the last year or two of his life Robinson grew very thin, and had a somewhat emaciated appearance. For years he had urged me to try reducing my weight which (with my clothes on) was around 235 or 245 pounds. He had never known, he said, one as heavy-set as myself to reach an advanced age. Nevertheless, I have already survived Robinson by twelve years, and only a little over a month ago, after a thorough medical examination, I was informed that physically I was a man of 50 rather than 77. My blood pressure was only 140, in spite of my age and bulk. I miss Robinson, and wish that he were still here to counsel me to reduce.

A week later Sutcliffe promised to send Saben a copy of his essay on Alfred H. Louis as prototype of Robinson's Captain Craig,<sup>11</sup> eager for Saben's comments on it. Come September 13, with no copy yet in hand but primed by the urge to ruminate about Robinson and himself, Saben composed this note at the Hotel Washington in San Francisco.

Dear Dr. Sutcliffe:

I fear that I neglected to answer your last letter, though I had fully intended to do so. There is a tendency to forgetfulness as one grows older, and when we have several things to consider, one of them is likely to be forgotten.

<sup>11</sup> "The Original of Robinson's 'Captain Craig,'" *New England Quarterly*, XVI (September 1943), 407-431.

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I recall that you stated in your last letter that you had written an article on Alfred Louis, the original of Robinson's Captain Craig, and that you would be glad to send me a copy of it, if you could find one. I should be pleased to receive it. I used to hear Robinson speak of him, and I have read what Algernon Blackwood wrote of him in his book of reminiscences, which I believe he entitled *Episodes Under Thirty*. [*Episodes Before Thirty*, London, 1923; New York, 1924.]

I think that I forgot to mention, in either of my two previous letters, that I have written a book of probably sixty-one or -two thousand words on Robinson, entitled *Edwin Arlington Robinson: An Appraisal*. I have sent it to only one publisher, Rinehart and Company, who returned it, though not without a very flattering letter, on the ground that the firm could hardly hope to make any money out of it, not enough indeed to pay for the cost of publication. I think that I shall add a little more to the book, and send it to another New York publishing firm. An acquaintance of mine here, a son of Nathan Haskell Dole, wrote to a Harvard friend of his, now the head of the John Day Company, asking him if he would care to read the manuscript; but he, too, thought there would be nothing in it for him. He suggested the sending of it to Macmillan, but the firm of Macmillan is the very last place to which I would think of sending it, for while the book is highly appreciative of the man, it is also highly critical of his philosophy (so far as he could be said to have had one), and also of the character of the greater part of his later work. The Robinson I admire (apart from the man himself) is found in his first four books: *The Children of the Night*, *Captain Craig*, *The Town Down the River*, and *The Man Against the Sky*. His work began to deteriorate, it seems to me, with the publication of *Three Taverns*. There are splendid lines in all his poems, but, with the exception of *The Man Who Died Twice*, his long poems do not quite come off. No New Englander of his antecedents and instincts was fitted to deal with the Arthurian legends; and when he attempts to create a character, like Roman Bartholow, say, the figure is unreal. In his earlier work he dealt with such characters as he had personally known, and here he is often superb. He knew his New England, and he knew something of certain New York types. His "Isaac and Archibald" and "Aunt Imogen" are perfect, and his "Captain Craig" is at least unforgettable. In my letters to him I always praised whatsoever seemed to me admirable; and I wrote frankly of what did not seem to me admirable.

Our respective philosophies of life were very different. He was a New England Puritan who hated Puritanism, but could never quite break away from it; while I was frankly Epicurean both in taste and habit. He used to accuse me of being a Materialist, which, philosophically speaking, I never was. The strength of Bishop Berkeley's Empirical Idealism was always clear to my mind, and there was a time when my way of thinking was quite Hegelian. I used to tell Robinson that we were all materialists in a sense, and that the only difference between him and me was that while he did not feel free to do what he wanted to do, I always did.

Yours sincerely,  
Mowry Saben

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If Saben actually wrote and sent a second letter before this one, Sutcliffe did not file it along with the others. The manuscript Saben refers to here has not been published. His list of Robinson's books displays ignorance concerning the existence of *The Torrent* and *The Night Before*, the first in fact of Robinson's output. Saben's commentary on Robinson's work is singularly in accord with most recent critical reevaluations. As always, Saben consciously dissociates the man and the poet in Robinson, and compulsively compares Robinson's philosophy, unfavorably, with his own.

Sutcliffe next confessed with chagrin that he could not locate a copy of the Louis article around the house, obligingly suggested other possible publishers for Saben's study, agreed in essence with Saben's critique of Robinson's poems, and pledged a presentation copy of the Robinson-Smith letters in a few weeks. Sutcliffe's long letter elicited an equally long one from Saben.

5 October, 1947

Dear Dr. Sutcliffe:

I shall be more than pleased to receive a copy of Robinson's letters to Professor Smith when the volume appears. You did not mention, in your first letter to me, the name of William Edward Butler among the names of those appearing in the volume. If it does appear, I am a bit curious to know what is said of him.

I am curious because I suspect that I am the only person alive who knows of a somewhat peculiar incident that occurred in Robinson's second year at Harvard. It consists of a strange dream experienced by Butler and its aftermath, in which Robinson was concerned. The story was told me by Robinson the night after its occurrence, and by Butler not long afterwards. It did not mean much to me at the time, and but for a certain tenacity of memory, it would doubtless have been forgotten, as ten thousand other things have been. But, somehow, that dream and its aftermath always stuck, and, in the course of time, I became an ardent reader of Sigmund Freud, and, later, of other psychoanalytical writers, and then the dream and aftermath, which had formerly been but a ghost of the memory, suddenly materialized, coming to life clothed in flesh and blood. I felt then, and I feel now, that the event threw a flood of illuminating light on Robinson's unconscious, and thereby explained many things in his life which have puzzled so many of his friends and acquaintances. More than a quarter of a century later, after becoming steeped in Freud, I asked Robinson if he remembered the dream and what happened afterwards. He said that he recalled well the circumstances. I gave him then what I regarded as a Freudian explanation of the affair, and though he did not accept my explanation (and I didn't suppose he would), it evidently impressed him. He had his own tentative explanation, but I endeavored to show him that his explanation had its own Freudian tinge.

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I have not time to go into the details of this affair now, but I have told the whole story in my book, and given my reasons for the conclusions at which I have arrived. I am aware that I shall be bitterly criticised for doing this, but I am following the advice of St. Beuve in regard to biographical works and criticism. Fiction has its proper place, its own truth and value; but its place is not in a biographical or critical production. There are no saints in this world, and probably there are no absolute devils. We should try to see people as they actually are; not more and not less than they are.

I agree with all that you have said of Robinson's later work, except *Amaranth*. I do not like that work either, for reasons that I gave in a long letter to Robinson at the time of its appearance. He gives within it too much credence to the idea of an Absolute (which he probably got from Burnham's Hinduism), and I find a streak of sadism as well which was not quite native to the man.

Getting back to Butler's dream and its aftermath, I suspect that I am the only person, with the exception of the principals in the case, who ever heard of it; and now that the principals are both dead, the story is a secret of mine, though fully told in my book on Robinson.

I think that I shall add a few details and comments to the book before sending it out again. But thanks very much for your offer of any assistance you can give, and for the list of names you have supplied. . . .

With sincere regards,

Mowry Saben

I have eight books in manuscript, apart from the volume on Robinson, only two of which have ever seen a publisher. Robinson tried two of them with Macmillan, and I received a glowing letter from the firm in connexion with one of them, but neither was published. I think the firm communicated its reason for not publishing to R., but he never communicated the secret to me.

William Edward Butler, a Harvard friend whose father owned a Boston department store, often aided Robinson financially afterward: sent him occasional checks, got a job for him writing advertisements for the store, helped subsidize his second book, *The Children of the Night*. George Burnham, Harvard law student whose feet froze and were amputated in Montana, was a zealous member of the Cornclub, practiced corporation law briefly in New York, and became keeper of Robinson's birthplace at Head Tide, Maine, after the poet died. Robinson dedicated *The Man Against the Sky* to Butler; *Merlin* to Burnham.

Receipt of Sutcliffe's *Untriangulated Stars* did manage to unsettle Saben, despite his airy disclaimer. Now again he felt compelled to document Robinson's shifting judgment on Hardy. A paradoxical rebel, Saben. Dead set against change of this sort as vacillation, not growth.

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9 November, 1947

Dear Mr. Sutcliffe:

Thanks very much for the precious gift of Robinson's letters to Professor Smith of Amherst. I recognized the authentic Robinsonian note in them all, and I have read the volume, notes and all, from cover to cover. I recall all the incidents in which I am connected, with one exception, though my version of certain events would modify somewhat the Robinsonian version of them. Still, his version may be more truthful than mine would be, for he wrote soon after the events, and I am now an old man, lacking but a little over four months of being 78, and I know only too well that the memory of an old man at times is guilty of treachery, especially if his own personal experiences are involved. Even at this late day, with Robinson more than twelve years in his grave, I felt some compunction when I read how my argument with Crapo had affected my old friend. But there is a sequel which I must reveal to you. No doubt there have been times when I could say, with Ovid:

*Video et probo meliora,  
Sequor deteriora,*

and I knew only too well that Robinson hated all argument; but when I next met Robinson, it was not the argument that he berated me for. What he actually said was: "What did you bring that fellow Crapo around for? He doesn't know anything." That hurt me, for I knew better, as I had been acquainted with Crapo at Exeter. About all I said in reply was: "Well, Robinson, I shall never offend in the same way again; for I shall never bring another person to cross your threshold, and never again, in the more than forty years that I was acquainted with him, did I violate my word save once, and that could not possibly have been helped. A few days after the unfortunate argument occurred (though it was really a friendly argument on politics between Crapo and myself) I met Robinson, and he said: "Crapo has been around to see me again, and I see that I was all wrong about him. He does know something." In after years, Robinson, Burnham, and Crapo, lived together, either in New York or Yonkers. I never saw Crapo after the Harvard days. He had become a lawyer, but he died of typhoid fever in the Spanish-American War. I was sorry that you had not got in touch with me before your work of editing was done, for poor Crapo deserved a place in your notes, and he received none. I gathered from a remark that Sir Charles Dilke made to me, when I was in England, that he thought curiosity in regard to personalities was one of our leading American characteristics, and it was evident that he shared it. Crapo wrote a pamphlet on the silver question, but I was not fortunate enough to obtain one. I should doubtless have disagreed with his conclusions, but I believe that I am never unpleasantly dogmatic; and I should not want to live in a world where we all thought alike. I incline to pluralism, not to monism; and think it more likely that we live in a multiverse than in a universe, which will doubtless seem to you an echo of William James—which, of course, it is. . . . Robinson was very largely a creature of moods, and what he cursed on one occasion he might bless later; and what he blessed on another occasion he might ultimately curse. He thought that there was a continuity in his thought

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which will not be found in the record. It was he who introduced me to Thomas Hardy, but I had a letter from him, after he left Harvard, in which he maintained that Hardy, because of his pessimism, would not live. Many years later I reminded Robinson of this letter, and my reminder made him angry on the only occasion that I saw him manifest anger. A week later I met him again, and asked him to read the letter. After he had finished reading it, he said that he had no remembrance of writing it, and hoped that nobody would ever learn that he had written such nonsense. He begged me to give him the letter which, to my regret, I did; and I saw him destroy it.

Thanking you once more for your gift, I remain,

Most sincerely yours,  
Mowry Saben

Sutcliffe at long last acquired a copy of the Louis essay and mailed it to Saben, who was then suffering "a kind of paralysis agitans" in the right hand and so confined his terminal remarks to a flanking paragraph on Thomas Carlyle and this on Louis, by way of supplementing Sutcliffe's findings:

I was surprised to learn that so much was known of Alfred Louis as you have revealed. I did not learn much of him from either Robinson or Betts, though they spoke of him often. But I recall that one of them told me, and I think that it must have been Robinson, anent of his claim to have been the editor (the managing editor, I believe it was) of the London *Spectator*, that the *Spectator* once asked for information of his whereabouts, if these were known, and, having learned, provided the means for his return to England, and pensioned him on his return. Perhaps the information vouchsafed was wrong. I never met the man myself, and know nothing about the real circumstances.

Craven Langstroth Betts, well-read Nova Scotian bookdealer, author of thousands of romantic poems and at least five books, met Robinson at the outset of his career, shared an apartment with him in Harlem in the early years, and was the dedicatee of *Dionysus in Doubt*.

### *Saben*

The graph of Saben's psychological and physical pathology marks a sequence of drastic crests and troughs. He enjoyed, as has been seen, a good brag about surmounting ostensibly insurmountable afflictions of the flesh. Thus it comes as a climactic irony that he died in circumstances under which he should perhaps not have died. The New York *Times* reported death due to "complications of the heart, liver and kidney ailments," appending calmly, "The jury weighed the question whether Mr.



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Saben's death was caused by the transfusion of the wrong type of blood." Not so the west coast papers. WRONG BLOOD INJECTED; WRONG BLOOD DEATH PROBED; JURY SILENT ON 'BLOOD DEATH' read the several headlines, buttressed by ominous details of an accidental, fatal ministration. The coroner's jury uncovered no corroborating evidence. Nevertheless, Saben went out with an imperial flash. Flamboyant he lived. Flamboyant he died.



**Robinson Memorabilia:** Many items of marked association interest have recently been added to our Robinson collection by the kindness of the directors of his birthplace in Head Tide. These include inscribed books, letters, photographs, plaques, a small clay image, numerous newsclippings, and other invaluable personal records. Four of the outstanding artifacts we have room to describe here:

1. The graceful, armed wicker rocking chair that EAR cites in "Captain Craig":

The Captain had one chair;  
And on the bottom of it, like a king,  
For longer time than I dare chronicle,  
Sat with an ancient ease and eulogized  
His opportunity.

2. The slant-front bureau desk whose locker door, when let down, provides a writing surface; with pigeonholes and the inevitable secret drawer. At this desk in Gardiner, EAR wrote the poems that went into *The Torrent and The Night Before*, *The Children of the Night*, and the beginnings of *Captain Craig*.

3 & 4. Two oil paintings, each approximately 2½' by 3'. One is a portrait of Captain Israel Jordan, whose house was diagonally across from the Robinsons' on Lincoln Street; EAR memorialized his loss at sea in "Pasa Thalassa Thalassa." The other painting is Franklin L. Schenck's somber conception of EAR's "The Dark Hills"; Schenck, a minor landscapist, lived briefly with EAR and Seth Ellis Pope in Brooklyn.

## Edwin Arlington Robinson

Manuscript

### The Wife of Polix

Yes, you have it; I can see.  
Beautiful? ... Dear, look at me!  
Look and let my shining tresses  
Triumph o'er your ashen ones.  
Beautiful? Ah, yes.

High is where the sunbeams are bright;  
Held is where the western light,  
Shining in above my bed  
Lingers in glory on your head.  
Now it is all said:

All mine was for me to sing  
From the first morn'g to-day,  
Long desired and long delayed,  
Now I sing it in the morn-  
ing; and you have heard.

High would have it sung with us,  
And I've called it glorious:  
For I leave the glory now  
And I send it on your brow.  
You have shown me how.

Ed

I can find your checks all well,  
But your letters will not forget:  
In his garden you should find  
A new world where fish and birds  
are <sup>not</sup> incompatible.

But the word was, we should live:  
Two should suffer - as they live:  
By the steep and wrong way,  
For the glory of the day,  
Two should have their day.

We have tried and we have wept  
for the gift the gods have kept:  
Clothing and unmerciful  
when we might as well have said,  
we have played the child.

But the clothing is all paid,  
and the gift is yours at 100.  
Life is - told in light again!...  
Did I doubt you now and then?  
Well, we are not men.

their mind; we turn the wing, -  
 and I do not need it any.  
 Let us turn it now, compare:  
 you to triumph, & to rest...  
 that will be the best.

E. C. P.

*First published, Captain Craig, 1902*