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Robinson's Notes to His Nieces

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Unless a man is lucky in his biographers, his actual personality tends to blur as decades pass and to take on attributes suitable to particular theses. Twenty-five years after his death, Edwin Arlington Robinson has acquired an image, variously compounded, of atheist, pessimist and misanthrope. One must hasten to add that this inclement impression is due as much to misreadings of his poetry as to the fault of biographers. Of the three, one attempted no extensive inquiry into Robinson as man, one was perhaps too maternally uncritical, and one motivated by what seems to be unconscious envy. In the long run, it is Robinson who has given us the best portrait of himself—and this not deliberately—through the medium of letters written during the hurly-burly of a life devoted to producing over two thousand pages of poetry and drama. Into these often hasty notes he poured his unpremeditated self, for he was sincere in hating the letters of an anonymous colleague which “read as though he had written them for posterity.”

In the manuscript files of Colby College Library are sixty-five notes which Robinson wrote to his three nieces over the span of twenty-four years, 1912-1935. His brother Herman’s three daughters (Ruth, Marie, Barbara) were all the family Robinson had. Hagedorn states that “the family was his base, the tie that bound him to the human race, giving him, above all, spiritual support.” Laura E. Richards, friend and neighbor for years, attests that “he loved the nieces, I think, more than anything in life.” And the frolicsome atmosphere of their sporadic meetings in Gardiner was there for all to see.

Few of these notes run over a page in length; all are plainly phrased and deal with the unextraordinary commerce and intermittent turbulence that mark the cycle of normal family his-

1 To Ruth, later Mrs. William Nivison, fifty notes (one a typed transcript); to Marie, later Mrs. Arthur T. Legg, now deceased, thirteen notes (one an exact copy, one a typed transcript); to Marie and Barbara, later Mrs. Harold Holt, two notes.
2 Hermann Hagedorn, Edwin Arlington Robinson: A Biography (New York, 1938), 125. One wonders why he saw fit to contradict this later by opining that “at bottom” the poet was detached from his family.
tory. But for all that, there emerge from these brief, unstudied messages—to greater degree and acuity than in the biographies—at least five integral qualities of Robinson’s character.

1. His instinctive, unobtrusive generosity to his own family.

The annals of art, music and literature are pocked with instances of abuse, extortion and abandonment of nearest kin by gifted egocentrics. Whether the ultimate results justified this unlovely behavior is a socio-esthetic argument beyond the scope of this paper. The fact is that Robinson was no such self-intoxicated savage. The affairs of his family, though often distasteful to him, touched him always to the marrow. Of uncertain financial sinew throughout his early years of poetizing, he nevertheless did not miss a Christmas gift of apposite books or a check to each of his little favorites and to their mother (who persistently refused to cash a single one).

He was aware of shoddy shoes, and psychoanalysts can be endlessly ingenious about his penchant for expensive footwear when finally he could afford it. After Ruth’s departure for her first reunion at Bradford Junior College in a pair of patched oxfords, he wrote her:

I worried a good deal over your going to Bradford with those shoes, but as it was too late then for me to do anything, I had to let you go as you were and trust to your personality and general excellence to overcome your temporary pedal defects. I am sending five dollars with this, trusting that you may discover some use for it. (July 25, 1913).

When Ruth volunteered to help raise a fund of $1000 to establish a laboratory in Gardiner Hospital as a memorial to his hapless brother Dean (see pages 180-182), Robinson insisted on two points: (1) that he contribute the entire sum; (2) that his name be kept in the background. And in the parlous days of the Depression, despite his having “recently received a rather bad financial jolt” himself, he offered Mrs. Nivison a far larger amount to float her over current shoals. (July, August, September 1933).

Of his two grandnephews, William and David Nivison, he was equally solicitous. During the fall and winter of 1930 he continually tried to ease the burden of doctors’ bills (“I am sending the enclosed in the hope that it will make at least a
dent in them.”), and to underwrite the costs of a private school in Augusta for David (“... if you will let me know the price of tuition. I should like to do something—either that or some of your hospital bills.”). He sent the boys stamps out of his own collection and did all in his power to encourage their progress in music—“I can remember how hard a small boy can want things.” “So please use this for their musical instruction and let me know when it has run out.” He sought their preferences in piano music—“maybe Beethoven’s sonatas or something”—and sent along “a lot of dusty music” which he turned up in old bookshops. Once, piquantly, he asked if he could “send any music (not four-hand or second-hand) that they happen to want.”

Impulsive in his liberality, he felt a frequent need to disavow it. “For heaven’s sake don’t talk about returning that money, or I shall swear so loud that you will hear me without any radio. I was very glad to be of a little use [April 2, 1931].” And again on January 4, 1933: “My only idea was to give the boys a small bust. They couldn’t go to hell with what I sent them—or very far with their music with what I sent to you.”

2. His fundamental modesty and self-effacement.

“Win was always in the background,” said Emma Robinson, his brother’s wife. He was slow to assert his opinion, quick to retract if it seemed discordant, and tremulous about imposing himself upon anyone. He was distressed when one of his intimates, Josephine Preston Peabody, used her professional influence in behalf of his oft-rejected Captain Craig. He spurned the kind of publicity that might advance his fortunes with the general reader. In 1913 he chilled a reporter from the Boston Post with: “I have nothing to say about myself. My poems speak for themselves.”

Robinson could not, in his own eyes, erect himself to a sufficient stature. “I don’t think of anything new to say as to myself except that I’m a little older and not much wiser—so far as I can see,” he wrote retrospectively to Ruth on the last day of 1927. And two years later he confessed to Marie: “I was going to ask you and Barbara to have dinner with me in town before I left, but I kept telling myself that it would be only a
bore and a big nuisance for both of you. . . . You may tell me
that I was wrong, but I suspect that I'm right."

He belittled himself consciously but without drama. On
June 3, 1920, he entreated Marie: "I hope that sometime when
you have nothing better to do you will write me another let­
ter;" the same day he was deploring his small vanity to Ruth:
"[Your present] was very welcome, though it humiliates me
somewhat to learn that you are still so lenient toward my many
shortcomings as to work my initials into two handkerchiefs.
I am really very grateful—whether you believe it or not."

He sidestepped the limelight on the occasion of Dean's me­
morial. "You are surely tactful enough to do this without put­
ting me forward in any important way," he advised Ruth. He
congratulated himself wryly during the "wicked times" of 1933
that "there are still invisible people who read blank verse."
And when Ruth invited him to come and live in her Gardiner
home on Dresden Avenue—she had prepared a room exclu­
sively for his use—he could not bring himself to discompose
that household. "So please don't consider me at all, but do
as you would if I were dead or had never been born, and be
sure at the same time that I am very grateful to you for hav­
ing me in your mind." (January 1, 1930).

In connection with this house, however, he did request one
small favor the next month, meanwhile reducing his own sub­
stantial rank to a cipher. "If there is an attic in it (as there
should be) you may use it as a place to keep the set of my
books described in Mr. Latham's letter." He is referring to
the five-volume Dunster House edition of his poems published
by Macmillan in 1927, a gigantic stride forward in public pres­
tige by any calculation—except his own. What ninety-nine
others would conspicuously display, he relegates to the lumber
room.

Perhaps the slightest but most indicative clue to his organic
reticence is the postscript he scribbled in the right margin of
his letter to Marie on May 2, 1929: "This giant paper isn't
mine." Although larger than he customarily used, this sta­
tionery is less than 6 x 8 by a quarter-inch all around—not by
any ordinary standard "giant." Robinson's feeling of gross­
ness, of extrusiveness, was compatible, however, with his
psychic world. He was at home with the contained, the un-
flamboyant. His minuscule handwriting suited a smaller sheet; 5 x 6 or less was his choice. He experienced acute discomfort in the grandiose, as John Hays Gardiner learned when he suggested trying to secure him a teaching post at Harvard. Kneading his brow reflectively, the poet disclaimed qualifications for so exalted a position but declared that he could rake the college yard.

3. *His sober wit and moderated pessimism.*

One of Robinson's grade-school teachers remarked that he was “quick to observe the humor in everything,” but even as a boy he was not given to robust laughter. Through the years he displayed a deep-grained and self-deprecatory sense of the comic, which he announced to the valiant few who ventured to open his first book: “This book is dedicated to any man, woman or critic who will cut the edges of it—I have done the top.”

He could make pungent fun of his amateur musicianship. “The nearest I ever came to making music was an awful noise that I used to draw out [of] a clarinet or a fiddle. I learned when it was all over that the clarinet could never have been played by anybody. You may remember that the old black cat used to make a dive out of the room before I could open the drawer that held the instrument.” To his added mortification he discovered later that, craftily, the cat had gone deaf.

Usually he qualified his Christmas gifts to the girls with some astringent aside: “Here is a microscopic remembrance for you. You can't buy a motor car with it, but you may be able to get something nourishing for the cat.” Or: “Anyhow you can give her the check and tell her to spend it in riotous living.” Or: “Here is another Christmas card with which you may buy rum and jewels.”

He could apply tongue to cheek with the precision of a Mark Twain and the innocence of a born Down-Easter. “I haven't had any lumbago since taking Dr Legg's spine straightening exercises and wearing a Jaeger belt. I knew of a man who bought a Jaeger belt and never had any more lumbago. So I bought one.” (May 8, 1934).

*This note to Ruth is undated.*
And he could swerve as agilely as a squirrel streaking up a tree. “The whole business [Collected Poems, 1929] is coming out in the fall in one volume of about a thousand pages, which will prove that I must have done some work at one time or another.”

But, more often, Robinson’s humor was grimmer, of the sort that earned him the undeserved toga of pessimist. He relished the paradox of his existence, which he described to Laura E. Richards. “By nature I am jovial and sunny but I can’t continue so unless there is crime in the world to cheer me up and give me something to do.”

William Vaughn Moody was undoubtedly right in alleging that “he likes a touch of the mortuary about,” but Robinson—who could spot a Job’s comforter when he saw him—twitted “Von Moody, the pessimist man-child.”

Robinson could be glum about the world’s business, but he did listen for a mellifluous Voice, he did grope toward an apocalyptic Light. These culls from the notes to his nieces reflect both extremes of his spectrum:

1. After all there isn’t anything in life much better than making life better for others—though maybe I ought to be shot for saying anything so easy and so commonplace. . . (6/3/20)

2. [I] wish all joy to the new arrival. Sometimes I am sorry to see them arrive, but not in this instance. You seem to be happy, and I believe you are. (6/2/24)

3. I hope you will both have a happy new year, or as happy a one as may reasonably be expected in an imperfect world. (12/21/26)

4. I haven’t yet decided as to just what happiness is. It may be not being run over by a taxicab. (12/31/27)

5. I am sorry to learn that David’s tonsils are coming out, though he will be better off without them. Sometimes I wonder if we shouldn’t all be better off with our hearts and brains removed, but that is mostly when I’m having lumbago. (10/20/30)

6. [The apples] took me back into the past—where as a rule I don’t go—though there are a few pleasant spots in it. (11/25/30)

7. I was glad . . . to learn that you have all been singing. Perhaps you had better train your voices for the coming year—though will hope it won’t be so bad as many seem to think. (1/10/33)

By no stretch of the word's meaning could Robinson be called a happy man. He confided to Amy Lowell that in his boyhood he wondered hours on end why he had ever been born. To Barbara's query, "What is a skinic?" Uncle Win responded gravely, "A cynic is one who laughs at life." Life was funny, of course, but only fools laughed outright.

4. His absolute dedication to the writing of poetry.

In the Colophon of December 1930, Robinson revealed that he "was dooned, or elected, or sentenced for life, to the writing of poetry," but he seemed remarkably unruffled by this dour manifest. "If I thought I could write something that would go on living after I'm gone," he said to his sister-in-law Emma, "I'd be satisfied with an attic and a crust all my life." His closest mentor, Dr. A. T. Schumann, recognized the affliction at an early stage. "I guess you will have to write or starve," he told young Robinson when he was irresolutely casting about for a way to earn a living.

Typically, he adopted an oblique attitude toward his furor scribendi. "My best wishes to you on the arrival of David," he wrote to Ruth (January 20, 1923). "I am glad you have him, and have no particular advice to offer—except, of course, to drown him if he shows any inclination to write poetry." Nine years later he intoned imploringly, "I hope he isn't going to write poetry." And on April 24, 1932: "I suppose David is now a little too large to drown, but if he writes poetry, you can point to his uncle as a horrible example."  

But in the gloomier mood which led Robinson to proclaim "a poet's trade is a martyr's trade," he made this deposition on some poems of a friend of Marie's:

I am sorry always to see anyone starting on that long, dark road that generally don't lead anywhere. I cannot think of anything to suggest except abstinence or surrender. If your friend cannot keep herself from writing poetry, she will have to write it. There is nothing to do so far as I know but to send things out—ad infinitum—as I did, in vain, for

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a David Nivison denies ever inditing a metrical line, but his mother maintains that he once wrote an ode to the interior of a drainpipe. "The first and last then!" says David, emphatically. (He is the author of the first article in this issue.)

On the birth of Hagedorn's son Oakley, Robinson expostulated in similar vein, "May he live long... and not have to write."
more than twelve years. If your friend tries it for say three years, she may have better luck, or possibly better judgment. (October 23, 1931).

One of Robinson’s proudest statements on his deathbed was, “I’ve never scamped my work.”

Although he discounted himself as “a draggle-tailed poet,” Robinson was not averse to laudations of his work, just so long as they were not effervescent or spoken to his face. In June 1920 he recorded his reaction to a New York Times reporter. “I liked young What’s-his-name and enjoyed talking with him. He didn’t call me any such names as his sister reports, but I appreciate his high opinion.” And in October 1930 he thanked Ruth for a critique she had sent him. “I wish the writer hadn’t laid my greatness on quite so thick, but don’t tell him that I said so.” He considered himself “cursed with the poetical microbe,” but all was not virulence. Now and again the unavoidable medicine had a pleasant tang.

5. His consistent solicitude for others.

Beneath the impregnable faint smile that Robinson wore as a mask to the world lay an immense sensitivity too easily wounded to wear on his sleeve. He was soft to a fault and suffered with uncommon earnestness the arrows leveled at those he loved. He deplored the general disesteem of his brother in Gardiner, assuring Ruth “it is barely possible that there are some who may not quite realize that Dean’s unfortunate infirmities had no relation whatever to the fineness of his character. If he hadn’t been so fine, he might be alive now and thriving [September 4, 1930].”

Fairly incommunicative and given to long lapses between letters, he was reduced to unendurable anxiety when Ruth failed to write. “I hope your silence doesn’t mean that you are having any more trouble. Please let me know.” His concern was not for himself but for her.

It perturbed him to learn that other people underwent moments of uneasiness in his behalf. There were so many legitimate candidates for compassion in the world, why worry about him? When in 1931 Ruth expressed her desire to see him over a rough spot, he told her to stop troubling her head: “There are people concealed somewhere who are still reading
blank verse.” Again, in 1935, he protested her efforts to relieve him. “My losses are not so very great and do not affect me for the present. Please don’t mind my returning your check—with full appreciation of your motive, which just happens to be a mistaken one.”

Twice he admonished her not to be scared, the second time (January 6, 1935) finding him in New York Hospital. “I am here only for a general examination for what I thought was colitis. I shall not know until after the real party—which begins tomorrow.” Then he blandly changed the subject. “This new building is palatial and has a corner room on the 17th floor with the whole town to look at. I can smoke and read some detective stories—so it isn’t so bad. I’ll let you know as soon as there is anything to tell.” Through the next three weeks he passed from ignorance of his true condition to courageous confrontation of a dread possibility. If at any instant during this period he suspected the real nature of his illness, he dismissed it with wilful lightness, so desirous was he to spare his family’s feelings. He forbade Ruth, a registered nurse, to attend him; she was needed more in her own home, he decreed. His last letter to her from the hospital, dated simply “Friday evening,” tried desperately to take the sting out of the matter. “I don’t dread the operation Monday morning half so much as I do the lying still afterwards.” Not three months later, Edwin Arlington Robinson died from cancer of the pancreas.

“Give me the Truth,
And let the system go.”

E. A. Robinson