

Colby



Colby Quarterly

Volume 7
Issue 12 *December*

Article 4

December 1967

E.A. Robinson and the Garden of Eden

Richard Crowder

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

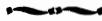
Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 7, no.12, December 1967, p.527-535

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.

Colby Library Quarterly 527

Sheaves." The following passage, evoking a Dantean fantasy of retribution, is probably the one he would elect as his last pronouncement on the subject: "I am naturally a well-wishing person, and not in the least vindictive; yet sometimes I have wished that all surviving editors and publishers who pointed a cold nose at those early poems might find themselves afflicted with a collector's frenzy for the possession of a copy of that first book of mine published in 1896. My constructive imagination would be mean enough to enjoy the sight of them signing cheques for it."³⁶



E. A. ROBINSON AND THE GARDEN OF EDEN

By RICHARD CROWDER

Robinson was basically a romantic poet, though with important reservations. One of his pervading themes is mutability, colored by intuitional idealism. In communicating this concept, he used the Eden myth, whether directly from the Bible or through Milton. Edwin S. Fussell's chapter on the Bible¹ permits him space to point out only four examples of Edenic symbolism, and his study of *Paradise Lost* focuses on style rather than on matter. Nicholas Ayo's recent dissertation on *Robinson and the Bible* (Duke, 1965) lists thirteen passages echoing the pertinent verses from *Genesis*. Much can be done to show this myth at work. I only suggest a program: (1) Miltonic influence; (2) use of characters, symbols, and situations of the Bible story; and (3) the poet's additions and final position.

(1) First, Milton's version. In 1931 Robinson wrote to Mrs. Laura E. Richards that he had not read *Paradise Lost* in its entirety since high-school days, but that he was still fond of certain lines, particularly "where Adam tells Mrs. Adam what he thinks of her and of women in general." Then he added at once: "Not that I agree with him entirely, for some women are rather nice."

³⁶ *The Colophon*, op. cit.

¹ *Edwin Arlington Robinson: The Literary Background of a Traditional Poet* (Berkeley, 1954), 155-170.

528 Colby Library Quarterly

At the end of Book IX Milton shows Eve trying to evade responsibility:

"Hadst thou been firm and fixed in thy dissent,
Neither had I transgressed, nor thou with me."
To whom, then first incensed, Adam replied:
"Is this the love, is this the recompense
Of mine to thee, ingrateful Eve, expressed
Immutable when thou were lost, not I—
Who might have lived, and joyed immortal bliss,
Yet willingly chose rather death with thee?
And am I now upbraided as the cause
Of thy transgressing? not enough severe,
It seems, in thy restraint! What could I more?
I warned thee, I admonished thee, foretold
The danger, and the lurking Enemy
That lay in wait; beyond this had been force,
And force upon free will hath here no place."

Whether or not this is the exact passage Robinson had in mind, such a pattern of argumentation between the sexes can often be found in his poetry. Sometimes the man is the more sympathetic character, as in Milton, but sometimes it is the woman for whom the poet feels the greater warmth. Laramie has the upper hand over Cavender; in "The March of the Cameron Men" the woman wins the moral struggle; Althea is a much more congenial character than her somewhat stuffy husband, Talifer. Whether or not Robinson started by backing Milton's Adam, in his poems the Eves are often the winners. Whatever the situation, however, the tortuous path of dialogue is Miltonic in its thoroughness.

In "Mortmain" Avenel and her long-time suitor, Seneca, develop a conversation as complicated as Prufrock's streets. Here Robinson is on the side of the male. Avenel's excuse all these years has been the memory of her brother. The two fifty-year-olds are in Avenel's garden, ironically suggestive of an Eden before an explosive departure. Like Robinson's Pamela, Avenel prefers her garden to any other world:

"You see me living always in one place,
And all alone."
"No, you are not alone,"
Seneca said: "I wish to God you were!
And I wish more that you had been always,
That you might be so now. Your brother is here,

Colby Library Quarterly 529

And yet he has not been here for ten years.
Though you've a skill to crowd your paradigms
Into a cage like that, and keep them there,
You may not yet be asking quite so much
Of others, for whom the present is not the past.
We are not all magicians; and Time himself,
Who is already beckoning me away,
Would surely have been cut with his own scythe
And long ago, if he had followed you
In all your caprioles and divagations.”²

If Robinson did not pattern himself consciously after Milton—and this would appear to be the tenor of his letter to Mrs. Richards—he at least found in him a fellow feeling for iambic-pentameter castigation.

Like Eve in self-defense in the Milton passage, Guinevere says to Lancelot in their temporary seclusion at Joyous Gard:

“A woman,
As men have known since Adam heard the first
Of Eve's interpreting of how it was
In Paradise, may see but one side only—
Where maybe there are two, to say no more.” (CP: 409)

(2) But Robinson drew more from the Bible story itself than from Milton. In language, for example, one finds the phrase “the breath of life” in many places in the Old Testament; but, if one considers Robinson's interest in the first three chapters of *Genesis*, he is justified in thinking its use there had impact on the poet: “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (*Gen.* 2: 7).

Bartholow suggests that insult is “the breath of life” for his odd savior, Penn-Raven (CP: 815). As Malory begins to forget his hatred of Nightingale, he promises to remain at the rich man's house over night

with a willingness unknown
For so long that he was loth to recognize it
As a wish to breathe again the breath of life. (CP: 1061)

These two instances out of many show the poet's capacity for employing the identical phrase with quite varying tone, the first as an exasperated, the second as a reluctant discovery.

² *Collected Poems*, (New York, 1937), 895-896.

530 Colby Library Quarterly

Adam, Eve, and the serpent often enter Robinson's thinking. The characters in the poems take differing views about Eve. Rahel tells her young suitor, Varnhagen, that Eve was a schemer and Adam a *naif*, not unlike many men since. Recalling an earlier sweetheart, she says:

"Every night
I tried to dream of him, but never could,
More than I might have seen in Adam's eyes
Their fond uncertainty when Eve began
The play that all her tireless progeny
Are not yet weary of." (CP: 515)

And a few pages below, she is still talking in the same vein:

"You are the young and invincible
Epitome of all blind men since Adam." (CP: 517)

After Jael has killed Sisera, Barak looks at her in bewildered astonishment as he muses:

"The Lord pondered
More than six days, I think, to make a woman." (CP: 1178)

Feeling sorry for herself at having to return to Camelot, Guinevere exclaims:

"He must have been a lonely God who made
Man in his image, and then made only a woman!
Poor fool she was!" (CP: 424)

On the other hand, Jasper, king of industry, admits to a mysterious and formidable power in woman, somewhat like, inversely, the magnetism of the medieval Virgin as Henry Adams interpreted her:

"Why must you women, you pernicious ribs,
Make havoc always of awakening man?
I've not forgotten what you made of me,
After one sight of you." (CP: 1403)

This is Adamic man bestirred by the Eve of awakened consciousness accompanied soon enough by a sense of guilt.

Now and then, Robinson's men happily yield to Eve as temptress. Alexandra, trying to explain to her sister, Genevieve, why Genevieve's husband, as she says, "Looks now and then the other way," remarks with more polish than Lil's adviser in *The Waste Land*, that he "Likes a woman with a dash

Colby Library Quarterly 531

of Eve/To liven her insensible perfection" (CP: 878). This is where the cold Karen falls short in holding Dr. Quick and Talifer.

Serpent references in Robinson are numerous—words like *snake* and *worm* and once even the elegant locution "your late ophidian visitor" (CP: 1459). The meaning is always pejorative, though sometimes the tone is light. In *King Jasper* the queenly Honoria's manners are described as "immaculate/Majestical, and somewhat serpentine" (CP: 1409). In *Roman Bartholow* Eden influences the phrasing of "glowering at me/As if I were a serpent in a garden" (CP: 775). These ironic suggestions do not produce what Emily Dickinson calls "zero at the bone," but elsewhere the reference is more menacing or disgusting.

Worm as doubt or dissatisfaction occurs three times in *Amaranth*. It appears in "Bewick Finzer" as "the worm of what-was-not" (CP: 55). The image cluster of snake and forbidden fruit occurs in "Dionysus in Doubt":

"There are so many stories about snakes
In the perilous book of truth as it is written,
That all who will not read
Or in appearance will not heed—
Though dimly and unwillingly they must—
An inward venom of a slow mistrust,
May never tell you by a word or look
By what less pleasant serpent they are bitten
Than any in the book.
Happy as children eating worm-ripe fruit,
Praising the obvious for the absolute,
They see an end of that which has no end
Of their devising." (CP: 868)

The poem "Nicodemus," instead of picturing willful childishness, shows a way to redemption, though unattainable by the rulers of Jerusalem. The myth of the Fall is here fused with the mystery of regeneration (which Professor Ayo puts in the Garden of the Resurrection). Nicodemus tells Caiaphas:

"The pity and waste of it is our not living,
With life so near us, and to take as ours,
Like shining fruit from an undying tree.
The fruit may fall, and we may crush the pulp
And blood of it, but it will not be dead.
It will replenish and increase itself
Immortally, because it is alive—" (CP: 1165)

532 Colby Library Quarterly

The fruit of the tree of knowledge is here transmuted into a means of securing eternal life, as if it were the fruit of that other forbidden tree, the tree of life, this time through faith in Christ, the second Adam.

In *Tristram* the white Isolt's garden and the lovely forest at Joyous Gard are Edenic. For good measure this volume has two snakes. The seductress Morgan

Fondled him like a snake with two warm arms
And a warm mouth (CP: 641)

in what *Tristram* described to Gouvernail as "that snake's nest behind me" (CP: 643). This first snake is temptation and induces capitulation to lust. The other snake is death itself. On *Tristram's* fatal night, Andred, "Like evil dressed as man," is

A shape that crept and crawled along to *Tristram*
And leapt upon him with a shining knife
That ceased to shine. (CP: 718)

Having succumbed to temptation, Adam is reminded that he will now return to dust. For Robinson the symbolism of dust as the final reduction of mortal man is a pervading device, whether in direct statement or euphemistic circumlocution, whether to express sardonic humor or existential absurdity. In Fargo's Sunday-morning dream, Elaine Amelia Watchman stares in fear as Evensong takes down a book of her poems in handsome binding.

He opened it, and found between the covers,
Where leaves had been, only gray flakes of dust
That fluttered like thick snow and on the floor
Lay silent. A thin scream came out of her,
And there was nothing more. She was not there.
Where she had been there was a little mound
Of lighter dust, and that was all there was. (CP: 1347)

So much for Watchman's deathless verse. So much, indeed, for Watchman herself. In "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford," the host quotes to his visitor the disillusioned comment of his friend Shakespeare:

"It's all a world where bugs and emperors
Go singularly back to the same dust,
Each in his time." (CP: 29)

Colby Library Quarterly 533

Lisette tells her sister Eileen:

"I'll soon be changing as all do,
To something we have always been." (CP: 50)

Part of what gives Robinson a half-mistaken somber reputation is that for him every day had outward, superficial semblance to Ash Wednesday. But some of his readers forget Cliff Klingenhagen's wormwood happiness.

In using the transitional episode of the expulsion, the poet sometimes shifted the temper from passive to active or reflexive, as when Merlin muses on

"the man
Who saw too much, and was to drive himself
From paradise." (CP: 295)

After the painter puts the devil into the eyes of Nimmo's portrait, the subject's wife, in fear, flees "from paradise" (CP: 522). No longer can she feel security and comfort in the companionship of her husband.

At the expulsion, the God of *Genesis* set "Cherubims, and a flaming sword" to guard the gate of Eden. Robinson reduced the number of beings to a single angel, possibly under the influence of Milton, but he kept the sword, though no longer "flaming." In "The Revealer" the poet says there is no chance of returning to the days before the reforms of Theodore Roosevelt. If America should attempt it, "There is the Angel with a Sword" (CP: 360).

Twenty years later, Robinson was still finding the image useful. In *Matthias at the Door* the sword has become an instrument of potential alienation between husband and wife. Garth, friend of the family, has killed himself in despair. Natalie begs Timberlake not to leave her and Matthias, her husband, alone,

"Or Garth may come between us, like a sword;
Which would be awful, and unnecessary." (CP: 1097)

She wants to avoid expulsion from this Eden, *ersatz* though it be. But it was in the earlier *Merlin* (1917) that Robinson defined the angel and the sword as symbols. In Part VI, Merlin is with Vivian in her romantic Broceliande, where he has become a man, an Adam, in the shaving of his beard, emblem of his worldly powers. But there is foreboding.

534 Colby Library Quarterly

For now to Merlin, in his paradise,
Had come an unseen angel with a sword
Unseen, the touch of which was a long fear
For longer sorrow that had never come,
Yet might if he compelled it. (CP: 286)

And a few minutes later, at a light laugh from Vivian, "at his heart he felt again the sword/Whose touch was a long fear for a longer sorrow" (CP: 288). At last he is able to analyze his feeling: "now he knew that his cold angel's name/Was Change" (CP: 291).

Vivian senses the threat:

"Tell me, if you find it,
Some fitter name than Eden. We have had
A man and woman in it for some time,
And now, it seems, we have a Tree of Knowledge." (CP: 294)

Before his final return to Camelot, Merlin feels several times that the moment of truth is imminent.

He felt the sword of his cold angel thrust
And twisted in his heart, as if the end
Were coming next, but the cold angel passed. (CP: 294)

Duty does win out, however, and Merlin leaves the paradise of love and delight to return to the collapsing kingdom he has created.

Finally, following his custom with Biblical materials, Robinson added a coda to the myth, especially recollection of the idyllic past. In the sonnet "Firelight" (ten years after "The Revealer") Robinson pictured a couple contented because they are silent about their respective pasts. Their sensible self-containment has brought them happiness, though bittersweet, perhaps. This couple have known other, separate Edens, but

Serenely and perennially endowed
And bowered as few may be, their joy recalls
No snake, no sword. (CP: 510-511)

Lancelot opens "in the King's garden" (CP: 365), where Guinevere and her lover meet. Later, at Joyous Gard, they think of that first meeting place as an Eden, but Lancelot advises accepting their present world, which actually is inescapable since the angel of change is in control. Says Lancelot to the Queen:

“Could we go back
To the old garden, we should not stay long;
The fruit that we should find would all be fallen
And have the taste of earth.” (CP: 425-6)

On several occasions later in the book, Guinevere recalls these words of Lancelot. At the end, Lancelot has traced Guinevere to the convent at Almesbury, where she will live out her days. He it is who now expresses a longing to return to the lovely summer of the garden. It is Guinevere who now has seen the wisdom of accepting the fact of mutability. When such times, such summers are gone, she says: “We do not bring them back, or buy them back,/Even with our souls” (CP: 446). Though in the closing lines Lancelot joins the party of hope, he is not an Adamic *naif* facing a pristine world. He is searching for the Light ineffable, symbol of idealistic revelation.

For Robinson, as for Faulkner, to try to gain re-entry into paradise was impracticable and frankly futile. If man has a compulsion to look homeward to Eden, the place of delight long lost, his incommunicable gleams tell him that the Light lies ahead. Like Luke Havergal, Lancelot, Flammonde, and the man against the sky, he must climb his own sunset hill to where at last “The dark will end the dark, if anything” (CP: 74).



ROBINSON'S "FOR A DEAD LADY":
AN EXERCISE IN EVALUATION

By CLYDE L. GRIMM

Over a decade ago, Louis O. Coxe challenged admirers of E. A. Robinson's work to tell *why* they consider praiseworthy the poems they praise and to define “the kind of excellence readers who come to Robinson these days should expect.”¹ Of course, the deficiency Coxe alleges is not peculiar to commentaries on Robinson's work alone: evaluation, as opposed to explication and other genres of criticism and scholarship, is the most troublesome and therefore least often attempted

¹ “E. A. Robinson: The Lost Tradition,” *Sewanee Review*, LXII (Spring 1954), 247. Further citations are treated parenthetically in the text.