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On Rereading Robinson

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For the Centennial
of
Edwin Arlington Robinson

MAINE'S MOST ILLUSTRIOUS POET

Born: Head Tide, Maine, Dec. 22, 1869

Died: New York, N. Y., April 6, 1935

* *

*"I go —
By the short road that mystery makes long
.....
I shall have more to say when I am dead."*

* *

ROBINSON'S WORKS

- 1896 THE TORRENT AND THE NIGHT BEFORE
1897 THE CHILDREN OF THE NIGHT
1902 CAPTAIN CRAIG
1910 THE TOWN DOWN THE RIVER
1914 VAN ZORN
1915 THE PORCUPINE
1916 THE MAN AGAINST THE SKY
1917 MERLIN
1920 LANCELOT
1920 THE THREE TAVERNS
1921 AVON'S HARVEST
1921 COLLECTED POEMS
1923 ROMAN BARTHLOW
1924 THE MAN WHO DIED TWICE
1925 DIONYSUS IN DOUBT
1927 TRISTRAM
1927 COLLECTED POEMS
1928 SONNETS 1889-1927
1929 CAVENDER'S HOUSE
1929 COLLECTED POEMS
1930 THE GLORY OF THE NIGHTINGALES
1931 SELECTED POEMS
1931 MATTHIAS AT THE DOOR
1932 NICODEMUS
1933 TALIFER
1934 AMARANTH
1935 KING JASPER

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ON REREADING ROBINSON

By ARCHIBALD MACLEISH

REREADING Robinson it occurs to you that something came into American poetry—American literature—with E.A.R.: something not easy to define. It wasn't his characteristic form, the dialogue or monologue or dramatic scene, the narrative condensed to its essential crystal. Browning had already polished that device and Browning had been read in the United States. Neither was it Robinson's peculiar attitude toward style, his mastery of syntax—the taut, deliberate purposefulness of the sense of the words riding the sound of them like a skillful surfer on his changing wave. Others had practised the syntactical arts also: that long, intricate sentence at the start of *Avon's Harvest* tastes, if you break the meter, like Henry James.

What is it then that strikes you as new, as first seen, in Robinson's work—new, I mean, as of the time when it was written? Not a new world, certainly: Robinson was no explorer of the undiscovered, though he had a curiosity about the dark. Not a new music: Robinson's tunes are simple and familiar—often too familiar. Not a new way of seeing. There are fewer visible images in Robinson than in most: Dante's eternal squinting tailors never got to Tilbury Town. No, what strikes you as you read Robinson now—what catches your ear first and then your half attention and after that your speculating mind is not so much the shape or sound or even substance of what is being said as the manner of the saying.

What is new is the speaker. And I mean the *speaker*, not what is meant or implied by such terms of the contemporary critical vocabulary as "Mask" or "Persona." Robinson's mask was his face, his own for all purposes—business-like glasses, trim moustache—but his way of speaking in his poems was his way of speaking in his poems, for otherwise he rarely spoke.

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He had—he developed in his work—a Voice in the sense in which Villon had a Voice which gave humanness a different timbre, and Sappho had a Voice which sharpened the taste of life, and Li Po had a Voice which made a place for laughter—a place which all the sententious solemnity of Chairman Mao and all the ranting of his mechanized adolescents have not been able quite to drown.

I am not comparing E.A.R. with Villon and Sappho and Li Po: I respect his integrity too much. I am saying only that he made for himself a Voice in the same sense they did. His poems were new poems under the sun not because form or theme or style was new but because the speaker was: new as a man and new too as a man of his time and country. We say, when we do not think that we are saying, that Whitman's was the American voice, but clearly it wasn't. Whitman celebrated America—what it was and what it might have been—but the voice in which his America was celebrated was no more American than the rhythms. Delete the place names and the geographical evocations and you are out at large on the timeless, placeless tone of the lyric self. Or we say, more carefully, that Thoreau's voice was American, as indeed in many ways it was, but not in the essential way. Thoreau's was the voice of the American idea, alive and talking back to the universe, but it did not *sound* in the native tone: it sounded of Thoreau.

With Robinson it was the other way around by both measures. He did not speak for the American idea. When he mentioned America there was a glint in his voice like the glint of his glasses.

You laugh and answer, 'We are young;
O leave us now and let us grow'—
Not asking how much more of this
Will Time endure or Fate bestow.

And certainly he never celebrated the blond young continent and its innocent dream. But when it comes to the Voice itself, to the speaker spoken in the Voice, Robinson was more American than either and therefore—the world having moved in the direction it has—more modern, for if Crèvecoeur were to ask his famous question now he would have to reply that his American is well on his way to becoming modern man. (Perhaps he would add, *Hélas!*)

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Fifty years ago readers took that tone of Robinson's for "downeast" and thought of Head Tide and Gardiner when they heard his voice. Fifty years ago Richard Cory who "was always human when he talked" and persuaded us that he "was everything / To make us wish that we were in his place" but who, one summer night, "Went home and put a bullet through his head" was an introverted Yankee. But those fifty years have passed and few would make the provincial application now. The irony is applicable on too broad a stage.

And of course it is the irony that makes Robinson so particularly our own. He speaks for us in our inexplicably aborted time as no one else, even among the very great, quite does. His tone knows truths about us we don't know ourselves—but recognize. We don't despair — not quite — and neither does Robinson. But we don't hope either as we use to and Robinson, with no bitterness, has put hope by as well. His is the after voice, the evening voice, and we neither accept it nor reject it but we know the thing it means.

It is all in that extraordinary poem he put into the mouth of Ben Jonson entertaining a Stratford Alderman and explaining Shakespeare's "old age"—his forties.

The coming on of his old monster Time
 Has made him a still man; and he has dreams
 Were fair to think on once and all found hollow.
 He knows how much of what men paint themselves
 Would blister in the light of what they are;
 He sees how much of what was great now shares
 An eminence transformed and ordinary;
 He knows too much of what the world has hushed
 In others, to be loud now for himself. . . .
 But what not even such as he may know
 Bedevils him the worst: his lark may sing
 At heaven's gate how he will, and for as long
 As joy may listen but *he* sees no gate
 Save one whereat the spent clay waits a little
 Before the churchyard has it and the worm.

