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Robinson's Use of the Bible

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Whatever else the Bible might be, Robinson through the years appreciated it as great literature. Each of his Biblical poems ("The Three Taverns," "Lazarus," "Nicodemus," "The Prodigal Son," "Sisera," and "Young Gideon") capitalizes on dramatic elements in its source story. With a keen eye for a situation amenable to successful poetic treatment, he picked out of the Bible stories the crucial moment, the turning point—such as Paul's initial entry into Rome, or Lazarus' first words after his resurrection from the dead, or Nicodemus' painful moment of truth when he must choose whether or not to profess Jesus openly and break with the institutional religion and politics he was committed to. The dramatic effectiveness of the Biblical poems is naturally heightened by the reader's awareness, more or less conscious, of the jeopardy of the protagonist and the critical decisions that hang in the balance. Part of this emotional tension stems from the serious nature of the Biblical narratives, which Robinson, like any sensitive artist, tended to exploit. As one student of the Bible in literature reminds us, most Biblical stories "involve us as readers at a moral or moral-existentialist level which is quite different from the way in which, say, the farewell of Hector involves our common human nature."¹

The predicaments of the protagonists in "Lazarus," "Nicodemus," and "Sisera" can hardly be overlooked; the dramatic situation of Paul in the more didactic "The Three Taverns," however, can easily be lost sight of. More than any other one person it is Paul who prepared the ground for the shifting of the center of Christianity from Jerusalem to Rome. As the Apostle of the Gentiles, he is the indefatigable champion of the universalism of Christianity already foreshadowed in the all-embracing colonization by the Roman Empire. On the vigil of his planned trail-blazing journey to Rome, he is arrested in Jerusalem. Many weeks later he comes as a prisoner into

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¹ Amos Wilder, Theology and Modern Literature (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), 68.
Rome, not as its prophet. Paul’s reception there assumes a crucial importance for his career. Approaching the center of a civilization, he carries a message to initiate a world revolution in the spiritual order. Upon the outcome of the events in the capital city depends the entire future of that mission which is the electrifying purpose of his whole life. A moment of vital importance for mankind approaches. All is to be lost, or the world won, on the turn of the morrow’s fate. For the habitual reader of the Bible, Robinson captures something of this momentous drama, and many of the lines of “The Three Taverns” take on an added dimension in the light of Paul’s predicament.

In his non-Biblical poems Robinson borrows widely from the Bible various quotations, paraphrases, and allusions that he thought would support or illustrate his meaning. Few of these borrowings, however, which can be found in the earliest poems as well as the latest, play a structural part. Most of the references to the context of the Scriptures function as decorative embellishment.

Among the books of the Old Testament employed, the largest number of references is to Genesis (about thirty), and there can be no doubt that the Garden of Eden was particularly meaningful for Robinson. Considering its short length, however, the book most alluded to is Daniel, where Robinson found a number of his favorite interests combined, viz., a mystery, a prophet, and a kingdom.

In the New Testament, on the other hand, the passages most frequently referred to concern various ethical dicta of the Gospels. By actual count, it is the exemplum in St. Matthew concerning houses built on sand compared to those on rock, and their respective fate when the rains come, that Robinson refers to more than any other single passage. The poet made more extensive use of the third chapter of St. John, however, than any other single episode. Besides being the basis for “Nicodemus,” it appears in several other poems. The Prologue to St. John is also cited frequently, and the parable of the sower is another favorite account. Many allusions to being a child again in order to find the Kingdom of God also stand out. As one would expect, both the Nativity story and the Passion story appear repeatedly.
Robinson’s Biblical characters include more men than women. All of them would be considered reputable persons. There are no villains. Even Sisera, as the underdog, elicits the sympathy of the reader. Among the major Biblical characters, however, the figure of the “prophet,” taken in its most general meaning, stands out. All of the protagonists in the Biblical poems are isolated figures, whose vision of the truth must necessarily remain only partially understood by those to whom they must reveal it. The prophetic figure in Robinson moves alone, just as in “The Man Against the Sky,” trusting in his light to discriminate between the true and the false—and that in spite of misleading clues. Paul is the prototype of the “prophet” in the Biblical poems; Lazarus, Nicodemus, Jael, and Gideon resemble him in various aspects. Lazarus, for example, receives a prophet’s initiation in the experience of the miracle of resurrection, but because he cannot articulate his experience, he remains a dumb prophet. Nicodemus, knowing the truth but like Jonah fearing its consequences, represents the hesitant prophetic character. Although Jael receives Robinson’s disapproval, at least implicitly, she is nonetheless the most enthusiastic “prophet” in the Biblical poems. The elder son in “The Prodigal Son” appeals to the future for the meaning of present events as a prophet would. Finally, Gideon may be considered the Old Testament equivalent of Nicodemus; both “prophets” seek to guarantee the presence of God and fail to find in themselves the resourcefulness to believe unflinchingly, even when given the help of external signs.

Part of the dramatic interest in Robinson’s prophetic characters arises from the question uppermost in the reader’s mind—how does a “prophet” know he is right? How can such a man assume, as he almost always must, that everyone else is wrong but himself? How the searching mind evaluates the sufficiency of the evidence to claim that this and not that is the truth, and how it resolves the hazardous ambiguities of taking one’s conscience as the ultimate criterion of the validity of religious experience, must be considered a lifelong preoccupation with Robinson. It pervades not only the Biblical poems, but others as well, in which figures such as John Brown, Rembrandt, and Toussaint L’Ouverture endure similar difficulties and enjoy the same success in their roles as “prophets,” wheth-
er political, social, or artistic. Moreover, with the secular “prophets,” as with the religious, truth emerges only from the individual’s faith in his own ability to see clearly.

In the character of the “prophet” Robinson enjoyed a privileged vantage point for contemplating some of the paradoxes that constitute much of the mystery of life. The prophet can explore the border between what is subjective and objective, between the rights of the individual and obligations to society, and between conscience and law. His struggle to preserve spiritual integrity through suffering and doubt readily leads to character revelation.

Robinson not only borrowed stories from the Bible, but he also capitalized on myths which the authors of the Bible had adapted to their purposes. Most of the discussion in the Biblical poems focuses around one major theme—the myth or “mystery of rebirth.” Although the setting and the characters change, the dominant emphasis remains with the metamorphosis of soul, with the passage through some form of death to a higher form of life. Because such a passage can only be vaguely described, Robinson could harmonize it, not only with Biblical doctrine such as the fall and the grace-giving redemption, but also with broader accounts concerning a search for new life, such as the Grail legends and various myths of Eastern religions. Ramifications of the rebirth theme, therefore, readily extend outside the Biblical poems. For example, the Arthurian trilogy narrates in great detail the search for a passage from darkness to light, and from death to life of a higher spiritual order. Though the Grail legend serves Robinson well, the most profound rebirth stories—not necessarily the most poetic—come from the Bible, where the Grail legend itself had roots.

The “mystery of rebirth” that so appealed to Robinson receives its most forceful Biblical expression in the interview between Jesus and Nicodemus. “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). The poem devoted to Nicodemus, however, is not the only manifestation of the rebirth theme. In “The Three Taverns” Paul testifies to the passage from death to life in his conversion to the Gospel. Similarly, Lazarus descends into the tomb, which is transformed into a womb of birth issuing in a renewed life that
holds at least some glimmer of meaning for human existence. Only by dying, therefore, by going through the door of death as the several characters in *Matthias* approach the dark cave with the Egyptian door, can a man be reborn as Lazarus is, as Jesus is from the dead, or as Nicodemus is told he must be reborn. Each man must find the passage through death—whether physical, psychological, or spiritual—to a new life, and thus be reborn.

Quite logically Robinson links up the idea of rebirth with several Gospel passages that emphasize the need to become a child again in order to enter the kingdom of God. To become a child again is, of course, to be born again. The quest for spiritual childhood appears frequently, especially in the long poems. Its most characteristic expression, however, is found in the Biblical poems. Accordingly, Lazarus searches for the assurance that finding a "father" would give. The only outcome of his search—the only outcome Robinson admits—is the knowledge that he must be content to have faith in a "father" who transcends the apparent absurdity of this life. One cannot expect a miracle to give any guarantee.

Robinson does not speak explicitly of a "father" in his poems, but prefers to talk of becoming a child again. It is clear, however, that what characterizes childhood is dependence on an all-knowing, all-powerful, all loving parent who provides life and protects his child from death. "The Prodigal Son" portrays, of course, the classic account of a son's truly finding his father whose everlasting compassion could never be exhausted: "For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry" (Luke 15:24). Nicodemus, on the other hand, represents the theologian, the rational mind invited to go beyond reason. He speaks for the adult world—as does Caiaphas—the world with knowledge but no belief in a "father." If he is to be saved, Nicodemus must recognize the incomplete nature of his adult knowledge and return to the child's belief in an ultimate wisdom. His spiritual convictions must now spring from within himself, and not from the tradition and learning he acquired through his education and position. So a child grows from within. That it takes courage to be a child again, to believe that life has meaning in spite of faith-shattering experiences, is
an important contention of the Biblical poems. Perhaps "Nicodemus," the last of Robinson's searching Biblical poems, best reflects his own conviction that one cannot expect all men to have the courage to believe—even in themselves.

The search for a "father" extends beyond the Biblical poems. In Roman Bartholow, for example, the protagonist seeks a psychological "father." The search is for a quasi-religious "father" in Matthias at the Door. Even if religious faith were proved an illusion, these poems argue, faith in some form is indispensable. As Pascal expressed man's recurrent need for a "father," if there were no God, man would have to invent one.

In the non-Biblical poems that show the impact of the Bible the "mystery of rebirth" also appears, although its expression is naturally not so completely developed. Robinson's interest in the Garden of Eden centers upon the fall from the innocence of "childhood" to the condition of the adult. Whether or not the fall of the soul as presented in his poems is the result of conscious sin, or the simple outcome of the experience of maturity, cannot be discussed here. However that may be, Robinson's preoccupation with innocence and the fall merges with one of the main streams of American literary thought running through Hawthorne, Melville, Henry James, and Faulkner among its noteworthy exponents.

The imagery of Eden gives way to other garden images. "Unless the grain of wheat die," for example, together with the parable of the sower with its implications of a final harvest, underline the theme of rebirth and offer shadowy prefigurations of the Lazarus and Nicodemus stories. Perhaps Robinson's most poetic analysis of a casualty in encountering the "mystery of rebirth" is Fernando Nash in the Bible-orientated The Man Who Died Twice. In an attempt to avoid relinquishing his habit of self-indulgence, he loses the inspiration to write a great symphony. In repentance, however, Nash achieves a spiritual triumph after all. "Unless a man lose his life he shall not find it" represents a distillation of the "mystery of rebirth" that Robinson never tired of borrowing from the Bible. No other myth—and its significance to the poet may extend beyond myth—in the Scriptures played such an important part in his poems.
The truths in Scripture held a wisdom that Robinson recognized as something special, if not unique. He would not have argued whether or not the Bible was essentially different from any other religious literature of permanent value—such a question was far too theological. He contented himself to say that he read the Bible for a number of reasons. And although Robinson was not a learned student of the Bible, he made efforts to use it accurately. Similar care was not always shown with some of the other literary sources he employed. In the Arthurian legends, for example, he assumed more liberty with the story of Camelot than he did with the accounts in the Bible, although it should be noted that the Arthurian legends were handed down in variant versions that doubtless invited eclectic borrowing. Nor can evidence of a detailed knowledge of appropriate written sources be found in poems such as “John Brown,” “Rembrandt to Rembrandt,” or “Ponce de Leon,” that would compare with the Biblical poems.

“The Three Taverns” is the best example in Robinson of an elaborate Biblical mosaic. In the judicious combination of various elements of Pauline doctrine, Robinson highlights the substance of Paul’s Epistles and puts it in a form readily understandable for a modern reader with some familiarity with the Bible. “The Three Taverns” is a remarkable tribute to the Bible in the accuracy which Robinson took pains to preserve in creating a poem that reflects the extraordinary literary merits of the Epistles themselves. Although such fidelity to Biblical texts and such sensitivity to Biblical doctrine do not prove religious belief, they argue that the author treated the Bible with a care that he lavished on no other literary source.

Robinson’s niece Ruth recalled in an interview that the poet wanted to be remembered for two qualities he cherished in his life and work, namely reverence for other persons, and a continual search for the truth. To what extent the truth in the Bible was made more attractive by the needs of his personal life remains a question open to debate. For what it may be worth, however, the periods of significant Biblical efforts—the late 1890s, 1918-1920, and 1928-1929—correspond to periods of painful circumstances in his life.

Without doubt there were far better stories as stories in the Bible that Robinson overlooked. Moreover, we know that he
composed "Nicodemus" because he felt that he had not done enough in his lifetime to explore the religious dimensions of human existence. The autobiographical concern of this poem has been generally recognized by commentators, and it is noteworthy that the poet "liked his 'Nicodemus' and was greatly pleased to have it praised by certain friends whose judgment he trusted." On the other hand there is little doubt that Robinson's accurate use of the Bible was partly motivated by the desire to take refuge in the safety of impersonal historical statement. The open-endedness of "Nicodemus," consequently, which does not unequivocally take a stand, may fairly be judged a partial evasion of responsibility—although it must be remembered that it is a poem after all, and not a creed.

Since Robinson early rejected verbal formulation of religious beliefs, I think it is futile to attempt satisfactorily to assemble his religious tenets, either from his life and letters, or especially from his poems. Without doubt the Bible held an important, though probably not a decisive, place in his total religious view. It certainly held a pervasive place in his poems. As Edwin Fussell wisely concluded, the Bible certainly played a part in the formulation of the poet's unique vision, "But the most important results of Robinson's familiarity with the Bible were finally poetic." On the other hand, the open-ended quality of the Biblical poems reflected Robinson's personal search for genuine faith. Characteristically, his interest in these poems centered on the crisis of decision, rather than on a triumphant discovery or affirmation of belief that he never experienced himself. Since authentic religious faith, nevertheless, is known to have its own inexpressible dark nights, one ought to be careful not to pass over lightly Robinson's religious commitment. And since the individual of today often repeats in capsule form the religious experience of the group of yesterday, it may not be out of place to suggest that Robinson, as a spokesman for the contemporary soul in the process of searching the Christian tradition, represents a world that serious men must encounter at some time in their life.

Roy Harvey Pearce conveniently divides American poets in-
to two groups, those for whom the “Adamic” point of view dominates, or the “mythic.” In the Biblical poems, Robinson’s prophet-protagonists represent “Adamic” figures, but the poet’s attempt to place them in a Biblical frame of reference reaches out for the stability of the “mythic” community and religious tradition. Although Robinson fails in his affirmation, and he certainly does and though his work shows consequent poetic shortcomings, he nevertheless attempts a crucial synthesis. Furthermore, an author and his attitudes are revealed by the kind of subject he writes about, whether or not he succeeds with it, or is compelled to profess his subject as meaningful outside the references of the poem itself.

II

Robinson’s thorough development of the Scriptural stories in the Biblical poems and the fidelity he shows to the story outline in combining Scriptural texts, sometimes from different parts of the Bible, create the impression that these poems share in the “authoritative reality” of Biblical quotation itself. As a result, the historical milieu of the Bible functions as a constant background. Because Robinson’s Biblical allusions are so reminiscent to a reader familiar with the Bible, the echo of parallel texts reverberates in the poems. Consequently, many lines of “The Three Taverns,” to cite the best example, which is a carefully composed mosaic of over two hundred Biblical allusions, could substitute for an apocryphal Pauline Epistle, although the poem taken as a whole reveals its twentieth-century origin. According to James Sims, to whom I am indebted for the concept “authoritative reality,” Milton’s accurate and pervasive use of “Biblical echo, paraphrase, allusion, idiomatic structure, and tone” similarly creates a dense atmosphere of Biblical reality that makes the invented parts of his epic poems seem authentic and probable. Robinson creates such a credibility for “The Three Taverns,” and for the remaining Biblical poems to a lesser degree, by so immersing them in the events, attitudes, and even language of the Bible.

Since the New Testament accounts of Lazarus and NICODEMUS are less complete than its account of Paul, it is not surprising that the corresponding Biblical poems show more ex-

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pansion of details than “The Three Taverns.” Robinson, however, does not alter the Scriptures until his last two Biblical poems, “Sisera” and “Young Gideon.” And even in “Sisera,” where the poet invents a number of episodes to fill in the gaps, he does not distort the story outline. Robinson actually alters details of the Biblical story only in “Young Gideon,” and in some respects he rewrites the Gideon story. Fussell maintains that “Young Gideon” and “Lazarus,” which are based on meager Biblical details, illustrate Robinson’s characteristic treatment of the Bible. Although it is true that Robinson alters the Gideon story, he does not, strictly speaking, alter the Lazarus story. Because the Gospel details are sketchy, he necessarily expands the Lazarus account, and in places uses it as a point of departure. Robinson includes, however, virtually every Gospel reference to Lazarus, Martha, and Mary, and his own invention in no way changed the general outline of the Biblical story. Expansion, and not alteration, is Robinson’s characteristic way of handling a Biblical story.

Besides the six Biblical poems (seven poems if one includes “Calvary”) the influence of the Bible can be found in varying degrees in approximately one hundred of Robinson’s poems, or almost half of his total composition. Throughout the Collected Poems I have been able to discover about 250 references to the Bible, not counting the same number in the Biblical poems themselves. The bulk of these references are allusions to particular passages in the Bible; quotations and close paraphrases of the Scripture number only about thirty. The largest concentration of Biblical references is found in the volumes published during the years 1916-1924, a period which represents the middle years of his writing career.

In the non-Biblical poems Robinson did not contribute a great deal to his borrowings from the Bible. Among the earlier poems, such as “Captain Craig” and “The Revealer,” he began to employ what I call a “complex simile,” which made the Biblical allusion a structural part of the poem instead of merely an embellishment. Furthermore, some of the complex similes were used as foils; Robinson on occasion used the context of the Bible for an ironic contrast. “The Gift of God” is a good example, and “Cassandra,” “Llewellyn and the Tree,” and “An Island” would serve as well. Because many of the
short poems in Robinson adumbrate the longer poems of his later period—“Credo” prefigures “The Man Against the Sky,” for instance—there is reason to think that the complex similes foreshadow the Biblical poems themselves, which assume their function.

All of the Biblical poems show that the appropriate source stories were adapted to expand the psychological dimensions that are almost entirely lacking in the more objective narratives of the Bible. This psychological expansion is achieved through the focus of a limited point of view and through the development of the inner consciousness of the characters.

Turning now to the limited point of view, Robinson imposed a number of restrictions upon the information which the characters within the poem possess. What they know of the course of events is limited to what the historical characters could have known at the time of the action in the poem. Edwin Fussell noted the advantages of what he calls the “agnostic point of view” especially in “Lazarus” and “Nicodemus.” A particularly modern adaptation, this “limited point of view” enhances the dramatic qualities of the narrative by creating suspense, and often a certain amount of irony, since the reader enjoys more knowledge than the characters within the poem. In addition, Robinson is able to present an impersonal and objective interpretation of the Bible. Without committing himself, he can offer the reader an imaginative grasp of the central religious elements of the Bible story.

Because of the development of the inner consciousness of the characters, Robinson’s Biblical poems represent for the most part spiritual biographies. Since the Scriptures could provide him with only an historical framework, he invented most of the inner life of his characters. Robinson, like hosts of other writers, tended to intellectualize his own experiences, and it is not surprising that he does the same for his poetic characters. Rollo Brown reports telling Robinson he “believed there was something in Miguel de Unamuno’s theory that all fictional characters are somewhat autobiographical, since they are only the projections of cardinal qualities in the author magnified to the required proportions.” The poet apparently was disturbed “as if [Brown] had suggested that every tragic character in his poetry was only some representation of the
tragic in his own life." Although Robinson is by no means always and everywhere autobiographical, Hagedorn's observation that he was "inclined to universalize emotions peculiar to his own hypersensitive nature" is worthy of attention.6

III

In his longer poems Robinson needed the support of a story structure. The Arthurian poems enjoy their success largely because the "mythic" elements supported the psychological. Most of the poet's later verse novels, such as Cavender's House and The Glory of the Nightingales, lacked this support. They were too amorphous, too cerebral, and they created an overly private world of psychological drama reminiscent of Henry James's similar impasse. Robinson's Biblical poems, however, enjoyed ample support from Christian "myth," regardless of the incorporation of any doctrinal values. As it happened, the peak of Robinson's successful blend of the "mythic" and the psychological occurred about 1920 with the publication of two of his most esteemed volumes, Lancelot and The Three Taverns.

Though Robinson needed the support of the Bible, he circumscribed his borrowings from it. He preferred a narrow range of characters and emotions which he could treat exhaustively. Most of the Bible stories he chose were ideally suited. Episodic as they were, they limited the subject from necessity, and the poet made a virtue of remaining within those bounds. The objective atmosphere, moreover, created by the "authoritative reality" and the "limited point of view" of the poems tended to emphasize the overall meaning of the Biblical episode.

"The Three Taverns" best illustrates Robinson's detailed familiarity with the Bible, the functional accuracy of his borrowings, and his sensitive elaboration of only pivotal—and paradoxical—points in St. Paul's character and teaching, such as the law and freedom, faith and charity, the word and the Word. It is a superb religious poem from the point of view of its spiritual sensitivity. The blank verse style is austere and masterfully controlled as befits religious feeling at once ardent.

5 Next Door to a Poet (New York, 1937), 60.
and thoughtful. The poem has much of the virtue of Gregorian chant; the music is completely subordinated to the meaning of the words, and the total effect is one of simple unity rich in wisdom.

Yvor Winters, perhaps the most perceptive critic of the Biblical poems, maintained that the style and subject were perfectly matched in "The Three Taverns" to create "one of the greatest poems of its kind and length in English." Ellsworth Barnard considered the poem to be "a recreation of the Apostle Paul that perhaps comes as near to transplanting the essence of the Epistles into modern idiom as will ever be possible." And the consensus among Robinson's chief critics was unanimous when Edwin Fussell concluded that "The Three Taverns" was "probably the best as poem" among the Biblical poems (p. 162).

At the same time as Robinson was attracted by St. Paul, he was intrigued also with Lazarus, and wrote a poem that began where the Gospel account ended. In "Lazarus" the limits of word expression are approached, for neither the poet nor Lazarus, who is his creature, can describe the experience of death. No man has returned from beyond the grave except Lazarus in the Gospel, whose silent voice frequently tempts artists to put words in his mouth. As a poem of deep religious feeling and psychological truth, with profound touches of inter-personal sensitivity among the characters, "Lazarus" is an impressive achievement. Its method is to isolate the mystery of death by a series of negatives, often only implied, which, while never revealing the unknown, encircle it with conclusions about what death must not be. As a result the reader is left to contemplate what remains unknown, yet confined in the center of the poem's roundabout progression. Because Robinson pressed against the frontiers of the verbal world, his poem strains. Perhaps the Lazarus story cannot be told. However that may be, Robinson's effort remains a powerful religious poem, calculated to engender surprise and serious reflection in a sympathetic reader. Even with the inherent weakness of the subject, Winters thought the poem deserved the rank of "great," for it

7 Edwin Arlington Robinson (Norfolk, Conn., 1946), 136.
has "great power and the style is controlled in every line" (p. 138).

In my judgment, none of the Biblical poems except "The Three Taverns," can compare with "Nicodemus" for depth of religious understanding. As a didactic poem which presents a poignant understanding of the perennial struggle between reason and faith, it has no equal in Robinson. Yvor Winters thought that "Nicodemus" was a partial failure. Although "excellent in its plan" and "for the most part respectable in style, though a brief emotional outburst from Nicodemus near the end is very weak" the style was too "relaxed and a trifle flat as compared to the style of the greater poems" to place it among Robinson's "important works" (p. 140). While it may be argued whether "Nicodemus" is inferior to "The Three Taverns" or to "Lazarus," there is no doubt that it is quite different. Its sense of urgency, for example, is in contrast to the cerebral tone of its sister poem "Lazarus." Moreover, "Nicodemus" does not have the sparse economy and the muscle of the earlier Biblical poems, and if these characteristic traits of Robinson's best poetry are valued as indispensable, it suffers in the comparison. But depth of mind and feeling it has in abundance.

Only Edwin Fussell wrote at some length about "The Prodigal Son," and he concluded that it was a failure: "Some of the lines are both trite and trivial. Robinson was rarely so empty, except in such a situation, when his skeptical restriction of materials left him too little with which to work" (p. 166). I find no reason to qualify these remarks. The poem is decidedly inferior in imagination, although it does not seem to be carelessly written.

The Old Testament poems lack the power and seriousness of the earlier New Testament ones. They are largely neglected by the critics and generally assumed to be inferior. "Sisera" can be read as serious religious poetry, although it is open to the criticism of having a vague resolution. As sophisticated comedy, however, an approach which Robinson hinted but the critics have not pursued, it has many merits. Robinson's later verse novels, Talifer, Amaranth, and King Jasper, are definitely comic-serious works and must be read with their ambivalent nature in mind.
Robinson’s use of the Bible in the non-Biblical poems shows a lack of flexibility and daring in the imaginative manipulation of the Bible’s almost inexhaustible material. Most of the borrowings—often rare or bizarre references—are simply decorative embellishment. Because the “complex simile” he used at one time introduces a more symbolic usage, it is unfortunate that Robinson did not further exploit it.

Finally, as must be apparent to the reader, even the major Biblical poems were by no means an unqualified success. Even though the Biblical story outline gave Robinson’s psychological imagination a necessary support, it also confined the area open to exploration. Consequently, the Biblical poems easily became too analytical, and there was little attempt at a bold synthesis of ideas or images as, for example in William Vaughn Moody’s The Death of Eve or Robinson Jeffers’ Dear Judas. Furthermore, Robinson’s minimal affirmation missed completely the spirit of the “good news” that pervades the Gospel. The Biblical poems lacked color and vitality, and even their didactic success was often achieved at the cost of being overly abstract. Despite their shortcomings, as religious poems of a didactic nature, they deserve more acclaim than they have yet received.

More significantly, perhaps, Robinson’s Biblical poems represent an interest in religion not thought so characteristic of the poet or of the 1920s when he composed them. Robinson wrote about 1500 lines of poetry concerning explicitly Biblical situations and personages after 1920. Of his approximately 450 pages of short and medium-length poetry, the Biblical poems total one-tenth. Under the impact of scientific and other upheavals, religion did not disappear from the American literary scene, although it underwent important modifications, which have become more evident as our perspective improves with the passage of time. Religious concerns and spiritual values endure under many guises in the works of major writers, such as Dreiser, O’Neill and Robinson, despite first impressions often to the contrary. Generally overlooked in Robinson’s total poetical production, the Biblical poems hold a noteworthy place in the literary history of the period, and they may acquire a higher aesthetic reputation as qualified critics give them more attention. The course of American poetry and the role of re-
Religious themes in it during the first half of the twentieth century have not yet been adequately studied. Robinson, of course, must be considered one of the most important poets in such an account; in my judgment, no thoughtful and carefully executed religious poetry of didactic nature comparable to “The Three Taverns,” “Lazarus,” and “Nicodemus” may be found in all of American literature.

“Mr. Flood’s Party”

Donn Byrne