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## *Edwin Arlington Robinson and Morris Raphael Cohen*

by DAVID H. BURTON

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON enjoyed a wide circle of friends, many of them distinguished. Theodore Roosevelt comes to mind immediately. Robinson's association with the President remained semi-formal at most, however, due probably to the bluster of T.R. and the reserve of E.A.R. This author once was told the story by Alice Roosevelt Longworth that she was present at the White House when Robinson was a guest and that "the poor man seemed quite frightened of Father." Robinson remarked to Hermann Hagedorn that he "never gave him [Roosevelt] an opportunity to make much of me—even assuming that there is much, or anything to be made."<sup>1</sup> In contrast the poet was at home and at ease with fellow artists, especially at the McDowell Colony, and made numerous friends. Morris Raphael Cohen, the well-known American philosopher, was among them.

Morris Cohen was born in Minsk, probably in the year 1880, the fifth or sixth child of hard-driven if not oppressed parents. At the age of twelve he left Russia with his mother and sister, following his father who earlier had emigrated to America. The family settled in New York City. The rise of Morris Cohen from the hard times of the Lower East Side by means of school, college and university is a variation on the classic American success story. He took his Ph.D. at Harvard in 1906 and for many years thereafter taught at City College of New York. Bertrand Russell judged him to be the most original American philosopher of his time.

The contrast between the background and upbringing of Robinson, the old stock Yankee, and Cohen is pronounced, but the poet took great delight in befriending all manner of men and women. He felt that talented or dedicated or knowledgeable or creative people could teach him things about life. Robinson was eager to learn for his own sake and for what an awareness of different perspectives might bring to his poetry. There were also occasions when the poet became the teacher. Cohen in his autobiography, *A Dreamer's Journey*, pays tribute to Robinson's help in enabling him to appreciate the peculiar genius and role of the artist. They met each other at McDowell in the early 1920s. As a younger

1. Robinson to Hagedorn, June 11, 1916, *Selected Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson* (New York, 1940), p. 95.

thinker Cohen held stubbornly to the view that aestheticism and democratic ideas were inherently hostile. Rare paintings and fine music, he thought, added nothing to one's understanding of human nature. A pluralist, he found enough anthropological evidence to support his view that "talk about superior taste may mean blindness to its natural diversity." As a result of his conversations with various residents at McDowell, and especially with Robinson, he relates how his judgment changed. Just as "only a few who are highly trained understand the meaning of scientific laws," he was led to conclude, "in the field of art too training may make clear what is otherwise vague and indistinct." Robinson played a vital part in enabling him to appreciate that "people see and hear what great artists have taught them to see and hear."<sup>2</sup>

Cohen greatly admired Robinson's poetry. He urged the Arthurian poems on his close friend, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, sending him a volume of Robinson's poems in 1927. It appears, from Holmes's acknowledgement, that Cohen had given Robinson emphatic approval. In a letter dated September 21, 1927, Holmes wrote to Cohen: "Robinson has a poetic gift and his words leave an echo—but it seems to me the echo of an echo—His music on the mystery of life does not quite enchant me—and I suspect, though this should be said with trembling, that he is a little too serious about man for an ultimate."<sup>3</sup> Holmes was perennially suspect of ultimates, once remarking to Cohen: "Truth may be cosmically ultimate for all I know. I merely surmise that our last word probably is not *the* last word, any more than that of horses or dogs."<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless Holmes was pleased that Cohen had brought Robinson to his attention, telling his friend that he was not "wholly unmoved" and that he would "read more."<sup>5</sup>

There is no record of Robinson's awareness of Holmes's reaction to his work. Holmes, to be sure, had read his man aright. Robinson was serious about man as an ultimate:

A moth between a window and a star,  
Not wholly lured by one or led by the other.<sup>6</sup>

lines more likely to appeal to Cohen who, having met and learned from Robinson, was better able to value the aperçus of his poetic thought.

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2. Morris R. Cohen, *A Dreamer's Journey* (Boston, 1949), p. 196. There are scattered references to the friendship of Cohen and Robinson in Lenora Cohen Rosenfield, *Portrait of a Philosopher, Morris R. Cohen in Life and Letters* (New York, 1962).

3. Holmes to Cohen, Sept. 21, 1927, "The Holmes-Cohen Correspondence," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, IX, 1 (January 1948), pp. 3-52, 46.

4. Holmes to Cohen, May 27, 1917, *ibid.*, p. 9.

5. Holmes to Cohen, Sept. 21, 1927, *ibid.*

6. Edwin Arlington Robinson, *Collected Poems* (New York, 1948), p. 415.