June 1963

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Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, series 6, no.6, June 1963, p.219-233
EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON:
A MUSICAL MEMOIR

By MABEL DANIELS

Prelude

Edwin Arlington Robinson sat with Webster's Unabridged open across his knees. His long, slender frame in the inevitable gray suit was bent almost double as he peered down nearsightedly through his spectacles. He was supposedly searching for the derivation of passacaglia, but from the length of time it took him to do so, I surmised he had forgotten that detail and was browsing happily through the contiguous pages. Suddenly he looked up and said, "If I could have only one book, do you know what I'd choose?" I hesitated; then, "The Bible," I replied, "or Shakespeare?"—knowing that he often began his working day by reading one of the plays. "No," he said, "the dictionary! You've no idea how interesting it is to read just as one reads a book. It would last for years."

This was one of Robinson's charms—his unexpected and wholly individual way of putting things. I felt this almost from the first moment I met him in 1914 at a Festival of Music at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire. After the concert, the colonists and a group of invited guests had gathered, as was customary, at Hillcrest, Mrs. MacDowell's home. I was taking tea on the porch off the music room when I saw in the farthest corner a tall thin man of undeniable distinction standing by himself smoking a cigarette and looking as though he would like to escape. He wore a well-pressed gray suit in marked contrast to the informal dress of the colonists. While he had a certain aloof dignity and aristocratic bearing, it was his extremely sensitive face with its high forehead and deep-set eyes of arresting beauty which made me sense at once that this must be Robinson. (I confess he is the only poet I ever met who really looked like one.) A colonist took me by
the arm and led me towards him. He came slowly forward and bowed shyly. After a quick, kindly appraising glance, he looked down and said, “I liked that piece of yours they gave today.” A slight pause; then, looking at me quickly and as quickly looking down again, he added, “It had a lot in it.” He bowed and turned back to his corner before I could say a word, yet I immediately felt that he meant what he said.

Obviously, it was something of an effort for him to say even that much. But from Edwin Arlington Robinson (so they told me) this was nothing less than a tremendous tribute. “That piece” was *The Desolate City* for baritone and orchestra. It had a melancholy text, for I was at that youthful age when only words of abysmal sadness made an appeal. I always felt that its mournfulness had something to do with Robinson's liking it. It was natural, therefore, that our friendship, which began in music, should flourish on music; years afterwards, with unpredictable abruptness, it ended in music.

**Variations**

A year or so after this first meeting, I began going to Peterborough regularly for the month of June. In those days, a colonist usually occupied a studio for a month or six weeks. Not so E.A., as those who knew him best called him. Mrs. MacDowell with her customary astuteness realized from the beginning that any interruption would be fatal to this strange genius who worked so slowly and was so easily disturbed by any change of routine. Each year the Veltin studio, its terra cotta roof half concealed by pine trees, was his for the entire season.

The distance between the studios is often great; they are scattered in all directions, even a mile or more apart. This makes it rather nice if you have an idea you want to mull over — you don't have to talk to anybody on the way. June is especially enchanting in these hills, and the first walk to one's studio is an unforgettable experience. Across the open meadow rises Monadnock, which to the faithful colonists is as Fujiyama to the Japanese. The mountain looms “above ancestral evergreens” as Robinson describes it in his poem “Monadnock through the Trees.” In the misty distance the White Mountains are faintly discernible, and nearer at hand are
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Pack Monadnock and the lesser peaks. All this, combined with the thought that twenty-five “cre-ay-tors,” as the cook used to call us, are setting out to dazzle the world with their masterpieces, is stimulating enough to quicken the most sluggish imagination.

In running counterpoint to the main theme of my friendship with Robinson was a continuous succession of minor incidents interwoven with the daily life at Peterborough. Slight themselves, I found them most illuminating, for this laconic poet was not one to make friends quickly. The most significant of these occurred at a colony breakfast table.

How lighthearted those breakfasts invariably were! Always there was an atmosphere of gaiety and unexpectedness. And why not? Here was the threshold of an unspoiled day, with a secluded studio waiting, tucked away in the woods — who could tell? No one was assigned a permanent seat in the dining room, but sat anywhere he chose — that is, no one except Robinson. He always had the same seat, with the fireplace on his right and his back to the door, which provided him with a sort of bastion against the enthusiastic newcomers who were apt to make straight for him. It would have completely upset his whole day not to have the same place. “You know,” he often said, “I have to get used to things.” I soon noticed that in an unobtrusive way he always discovered when a colonist was missing at dinner. “Has anyone seen Jones? He hasn’t been feeling too well lately. His studio is a long way off. I wonder if one of you young fellows would look him up.”

One morning I happened to be sitting alone at what we called “Robinson’s table.” I could clearly hear the words of a telegram that was being taken over the telephone by the “help” in the kitchen — a telegram from Bowdoin College inviting Robinson to come there to receive an honorary degree. When, shortly afterwards, he came in with a “Good morning” and opened the sealed message which had been laid at his plate, not a flicker of an eyelash betrayed that it was anything of consequence. He merely sat very still and silent for some time, looking down at his coffee, which he did not touch, and oblivious of the smoldering cigarette in his hand. By this time I was familiar with his unfailing sense of humor, and after a while I murmured gently, to draw him back to the present:
He looked up quickly and his eyes twinkled. He forgot to ask how I knew about it in his eagerness to tell me that it really didn’t mean that he was especially important. It was the custom of all colleges to give honorary degrees once in so often. “They have to do it,” he said. “It’s an honored tradition.” But in spite of his words he was smiling; I knew he was both touched and pleased.

“Of course you’re going,” I said. After a pause: “It’s a long trip and I’m afraid I’m not very good at moving around,” he replied. Then, with a sigh, “I’d have to be away from this place a whole week.” He glanced furtively out of the window in the direction of his studio. In the end, however, he went, and returned after six days, looking noticeably refreshed. He said he had had a “fine time” — which evidently surprised him. Then, looking down rather shamefacedly, he added, “They made quite a fuss over me.”

*Etudes*

Shortly after this visit to Maine a memorable motor ride occurred which Rollo Walter Brown described in his book *Next Door to a Poet*. We sped along one June evening — Mr. and Mrs. Brown, E.A. and I — through Windy Row, swung sharply up a hill to the right and at the top suddenly came upon a magnificent sunset. All conversation ceased. The magical splendor of the black mountain against the crimson sky was startling. What Mr. Brown omitted in his narrative was the fact that I had the temerity to break this silence with the poem that leaped instantly to my mind. After a few tense moments I could no longer refrain from quoting,

Dark hills at evening in the west,
[I saw a quick gleam in Robinson’s eyes]
Where sunset hovers like the sound
Of golden horns . . .

I paused, quite pleased with myself to have remembered. “Not ‘the sound,’” he said with the utmost mildness, lest he hurt me, “‘a sound.’ There’s a difference.”
Rollo Brown’s studio that summer was next to Robinson’s, and he told me that in E.A.’s eyes everything about the Colony was perfect. I had already sensed this and felt that he loved each pebble and stone, each bush and pine tree, and I know he delighted in all the little beetles crawling around the Veltin. He once showed me a beetle that had made its way into a small glass bottle. He held it up to the light for several minutes as he watched the little creature’s aimless wanderings. “What on earth do you suppose he is thinking about?” he said.

It is true that Robinson rebelled at Daylight Saving Time. This gave us our evening meal at six o’clock when the dining room was generally flooded with sunshine. “I don’t like eating in the middle of the afternoon,” he muttered softly. “Daylight Saving doesn’t fool anybody.” But for the place itself, I never heard him express the slightest criticism. The nearest approach to it occurred one night at dinner. While the rest of us at his table were chatting, he looked down silently at the untouched plate before him. When a pause came, he said in a plaintive voice, without raising his eyes, “Who ever decreed that carrots were edible?”

Divertimento

The longer I knew Robinson, the more apparent it became that he had a passionate love for music second only to his love for poetry. He confessed in his shy way that he had played the clarinet in his youth “more or less badly,” but aside from this he must have had an inherent love of the art. Whenever good music was to be performed he was the first to take his seat among the listeners, the last to leave. At that time his constant pilgrimages across the river from Cambridge to Boston to hear every form of good music quickened his natural taste for the best. Undoubtedly the foundation of his love for symphonies and operas was laid during those all too few years at Harvard. He had no chance to hear great music when he went back to his home in Gardiner, Maine, so how else account for his “choral horns,” his “golden choral fire of sound,” his “tumultuous and elusive melodies”? He heard music in everything, and fire, flame and light were always “singing.” And who but Robinson would ever think of an “arbitrary intermezzo,” and, most delightful of all, of that man in “Sainte-Nitouche” who had “five staccatos in his laugh”??
The poet usually stopped some weeks in Boston on his way to and from Peterborough. During one of these visits I invited him to a musical evening at my home when Heinrich Gebhard was to play. I had hoped for a small group of six at dinner, but E.A. very politely but firmly begged off with the words, "You know I haven't any small talk"—passing his hand over a troubled forehead—"but if I might come in afterwards to hear the music?"

Promptly at eight he appeared. He took the large wing chair by the fireplace. (Robinson had a penchant for wing chairs. Protectively enveloped on three sides, he achieved, I suppose, some illusion of privacy.) He shaded his eyes with his long thin fingers, and remained, save for an occasional flick of his cigarette ash, absolutely still, absorbed in the music. This was the immortal Italian Concerto of Bach, which gave us all keen delight. Then Mr. Gebhard, with his usual amiability, asked if there was any special piece we would like to hear. We waited for E.A. After a pause, as no one else made a suggestion, he said hesitatingly that if it was entirely convenient he would very much like to hear the Waldstein Sonata of Beethoven—only, of course, if Mr. Gebhard was in the vein for it. (I must confess that I had telephoned him before breakfast that I thought Robinson would ask for this.) Mr. Gebhard thereupon assured E.A. that nothing would suit him better as the piece was right under his fingers, so we had the sonata and then more and more Beethoven with a sparkling bit of Scarlatti at the end. Somehow it gave us all a peculiar feeling of satisfaction to see the pleasure the music gave this strange, detached genius.

There was a similar evening in the year following. Again we met at my home, and this time Robinson came to Sunday night supper and lost some of his diffidence. Under the mellowing influence of his favorite dessert—that masterpiece of New England, deep-dish apple pie—he became what might for him be termed loquacious. We had been having a lively discussion over a certain suite by Bach. When one of my friends turned to E.A., he refused to express an opinion. With his usual downright honesty, he said, "I'm sorry but you really must excuse me. Bach is all right for you musicians and I know he is great. I just don't get much out of him."
Talking recently with Thornton Wilder, who has an astonishing knowledge of music when one considers his multiplicity of interests, I quoted E.A.’s remark. Wilder’s approach to music is more intellectual, and this roused him instantly. “There, you see,” he said in his emphatic way, “Robinson could never have written that line in one of his Pulitzer Prize poems had he heard the St. Matthew Passion or the Bach B Minor Mass. Armed with it you can cope with the most determined of biographers who insist that Robinson was a devotee of Bach.”

“That line,” of course, refers to the “competent, plain face of Bach” looking down from the wall, “not unkindly,” on the machinations of a frustrated composer in The Man Who Died Twice. Fernando Nash had planned “a last debauch” in that room where

... all there was of music
About the place was in a dusty box
Of orchestrations for the janitor...

This final orgy was to be “a prelude... for a fugue / Of raving miseries.” Under its spell the composer imagines he sees a rat through the keyhole, “equipped with evening dress... and a conductor’s wand,” followed by a long procession of other orchestral rats each “accoutred with his chosen instrument.” Well schooled in contrapuntal technique, with all its polyphonic ingenuities, they proceed to play a symphony. Then, dancing “madly to the long cacophony / They made,” the orchestral rats vanish through the keyhole. Following this, the composer has a second vision. In sharp contrast he hears the mocking counterpart of the symphony he might have written. At this point Robinson has actually given us the outline of four symphonic movements. Frankly, I believe this escapes most readers or at least eludes them at a first reading. It certainly had not occurred to me until the poet numbered in my copy the passages where each movement began. He seemed surprised and greatly puzzled that I had not immediately grasped this, “But there’s the scherzo and there’s the finale,” he explained, pencil in hand, as near annoyance as his inherent politeness permitted. “You see it is all perfectly clear!”

There was still another evening of music before E.A. left for New York, and this time we had Chopin, some nocturnes and
preludes, and a mazurka or two. After that, Robinson, who had been silently smoking, asked apologetically if Mr. Gebhard ever played anything from the operas. Of course he realized they were not generally in a pianist’s repertoire, but possibly . . .? Mr. Gebhard was obviously elated. He could play anything he’d ever heard, and loved to. So from *Die Meistersinger* he went on to *Tannhauser*, from *Otello* to *Traviata* and even to bits of *Trovatore* until late in the evening. When Robinson rose to go, the brevity of his thanks was redeemed by its evident sincerity. Save for this, he did not say a word.

**Episode**

I don’t think I ever realized how crushing this taciturnity of his could be, accustomed as I was by this time to his silences, until we went together to a matinee performance of *Tristan and Isolde* at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York. He had invited me one autumn after his customary visit to Boston and had bought the tickets months ahead. “They are really very good seats,” he said shyly, peering at me over his spectacles. His eyes were shining. To pay six dollars and sixty cents for an orchestra seat (as the stub of my ticket for March 27, 1927, shows) was an adventure quite unprecedented for one who was in the habit of listening from the top balcony. This opera in Robinson’s estimation marked the pinnacle of Wagner’s genius, and its subject, one in which he had been absorbed for many months, still lived vividly in his imagination. In any event, this would be an occasion. It proved, however, to be far more, for his own *Tristram*, at last finished, was published that very month. The occasion, therefore, assumed the character of a celebration.

As the magnificent music swept over us, I realized that however deeply it moved me, his response to it must be infinitely more poignant. When the curtain fell on the first act I was burning to ask a dozen questions. The words were fairly tumbling over themselves in my excitement, but after a few eager attempts I saw he was loath to talk, so my enthusiasm subsided *poco a poco* in slow diminuendo. The opening of the second act, which E.A. especially liked, was conducted by Bodanzky in unusually exhilarating tempo. Somewhat breathless at its close, I turned to ask E.A. how he thought the great duet was
sung and what of Isolde and was not the interpretation of Brangaene superb, but he was already standing and begged me to excuse him while he went out for a cigarette. I saw that to converse at such a moment was for him inconceivable, and I blamed myself for being so stupid. The curtain was rising on the third act before he reappeared.

It was a long performance, for Bodanzky conducted without cuts. The return to reality after the intensity of that closing scene was no easy achievement, nor could the haunting motif in the oboe, piercing those final measures of the orchestra, be easily ignored. The applause, tempestuous and prolonged, gave me time to recover. Then the house lights came on and we were in the world again. With detached selfconsciousness, as though the eyes of the entire opera house were upon him, E.A. silently helped me on with my coat. We walked the short distance to my hotel, not saying a word. At the door I ventured one question: Had the performance fulfilled his expectations? His dark eyes suddenly lighted with a warm glow and he smiled broadly as he replied with an emphatic monosyllable, “Yes!” He prolonged the “s” with a hissing sound between closed teeth, his habit when especially delighted. Surely by this time, I said to myself, I should have learned that when one most wanted E.A. to talk, he was most uncommunicative. Yet as I watched him slowly disappear in the March twilight, I knew that there had been no one in the vast audience to whom Tristan and Isolde had meant so much.

Scherzo

While the top gallery of the opera house was Robinson’s habitat, occasionally a wealthy friend would invite him to sit in a box. Here, hidden far back in its dim recesses, he could give himself over completely to the music. These I believe were his happiest moments. “You don’t really need to see the stage,” he said. “Just to hear the orchestra is enough.” It was doubtless during these moments that he acquired an almost uncanny knowledge of the individual characteristics of orchestral instruments. Wherever they sound in his pages it is always with exactly the right timbre. He had a special fondness for flutes and bassoons. As for strings, which sometimes “stretch from
heaven," he writes that on leaving a friend who is critically ill it seemed
As if the strings in me had all at once
Gone down a tone or two.

Alas, poor Robinson, whose life was for the most part out of tune and for whom "Fame's imperious music" came so late. After Thornton Wilder's sudden phenomenal success following the publication of _The Bridge of San Luis Rey_ E.A. said to me, simply, without a touch of envy in his voice, "I'm glad recognition has come to him while he is young enough to enjoy it."

Not only Wagner aroused Robinson's enthusiasm. A Brahms symphony would entice him away from anything, while Verdi stood hardly less high in his estimation. When one of the young composers at Peterborough had been damning the Italian as "old hat," E.A. turned to one of us and said quietly with a twinkle, "I'm not ashamed of liking a good tune. His music will live long after a lot of the stuff these new fellows are turning out has been forgotten."

True to his catholicity of taste he embraced the Gilbert and Sullivan operas with equal ardor. As I wrote in a letter printed in the New York _Times_ on April 6, 1952, I have known him to remain for hours when a group of us around the piano in the Regina Watson studio would sing more or less badly, but with unbounded enthusiasm, fragments of _Iolanthe, The Mikado_, and his especial favorite, _The Yeomen of the Guard_. If there came a pause and it seemed as though we were about to stop, Robinson would look up and ask in his inimitably gentle way, "Oh, would you mind singing that place in _The Pirates of Penzance_ where the policemen come in?" Then, humming self-consciously, for his shyness was unbelievable, "I mean the 'tarantara, tarantara' part." Another time, after I had been singing from _Patience_, he said mildly, "I may be wrong, but I have the impression that the 'Hey willow' part goes a little slower." He knew every note, the correct tempi, and all the words.

The old Scotch songs and ballads were his constant delight, and he was particularly happy listening to the sad strains of "Loch Lomond." How he despised jazz and the cheap trend of most of the so-called popular songs! As for "blues" and the
curious contortions of the classics which were just then coming into vogue, he merely looked distressed. He would pass his thin fingers over a puzzled brow and remark, "It is incredible the sounds we hear over the radio."

While Robinson's musical taste was undeniably of high order, he had one strong bond with the man in the street — a naive delight in brass bands. "They have a real zip to them!" he would say enthusiastically, his eyes glowing. He loved the stirring cornets and vigorous drumbeats. He was especially fond of drums, but, true to form, in his pages they invariably sound with a menacing beat: "those intolerable drums of time." However, for sheer musical excitement one of his longer poems, "Captain Craig," supplies all necessary elements, for it has everything from bagpipes to trombones, gaily interspersed with philosophic ramblings. Craig himself announced he might "squeak . . . the tunes of yesterday" on his old fiddle — "or what's left of it." The "consummate Morgan" made "acrobatic runs" on his violin, while the dissolute Count Pretzel at the piano

Played half of everything and improvised  
The rest . . . the Count  
Played indiscriminately — with an f,  
And with incurable presto — cradle-songs  
And carnivals, spring-songs and funeral marches,  
The Marseillaise and Schubert's Serenade . . .

The Captain rambles on, touching every conceivable subject. Finally realizing that he has not long to live, he remarks with subtle irony that after he is dead some citizen will no doubt watch his funeral procession pass by headed by a brass band, which is decreed "indispensable" to the dignity of the occasion. This fellow will ask his neighbor:

... And who, good man,  
Was Captain Craig?  
... What has he done to be  
Blown through like this by cornets and trombones?

He was an humorist; [the friend will reply]

The story goes that on the day before  
He died . . .
He said, with a subdued facetiousness, 
"Play Handel, not Chopin; assuredly not Chopin."

And so it actually was when his end came; leading the funeral cortege of the poor derelict, the Tilbury brass band "Blared indiscreetly the Dead March in Saul."

A particularly noisy Salvation Army band brought Robinson back to reality one afternoon as he was walking home, deep in thought, after lunching at a nearby restaurant. He stood on the street corner for some time listening, and later told me with considerable relish of the bass drum player. Not only did he thump with tremendous gusto, but on the off beats shouted vigorously "Hallelujah!" with all the enthusiasm of a new convert. Then, as E.A. started on, he looked down and realized that the overcoat he was wearing did not belong to him. It was of heavy material cut in the latest mode, while his own, though neatly pressed, was old and leaning towards the shabby. He quickly made his way back to the restaurant, where several irate people, chattering harshly, were gathered about a hat tree on which hung one limp, attenuated garment. They glared at him as he entered. Greatly embarrassed, he stammered his fervent apologies and eagerly explained how it happened: he was thinking very deeply about a matter of grave importance and took the wrong coat absent-mindedly — by mistake. The suspicious coterie continued to glare, raising their eyebrows scornfully and smiling at him sarcastically as he hung up the expensive coat and took down his old one. "Outrageous!" I bristled, but E.A. only said, smiling calmly, "You see, no amount of explaining could ever have made them understand, so I just got away as fast as I could."

Elegy

It was in the fall of 1934 that the idea came to me of setting to music some portions of "Sisera." I had always wanted to use something written by E.A., but his poems for the most part do not lend themselves readily to musical setting. There were many lines in "Sisera" which struck me as unsingable, yet the dramatic intensity and vivid color of certain sections challenged and haunted me. I kept hearing them as a cantata for soli, chorus and orchestra, but at first I was uncertain and I wondered how he would take it. I might not have had the courage
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to venture at all had he not attended a concert in Symphony Hall when a short work of mine for chorus and orchestra was conducted by Koussevitzky. It won his instant approval. I was amused to learn afterward that he had said to Mrs. MacDowell with that elaborate indifference with which he invariably camouflaged any reference to his women friends, “I didn’t think she had it in her.”

To my delight he seemed much pleased at my “Sisera” proposal. Nervously I explained that I felt from a musical standpoint only a certain part of the poem would be suitable and that some additional material should be added as an introduction. At this he became very serious and obviously disturbed. For some time he looked down at the floor, and then anxiously, for fear he might hurt me, “I’m afraid I wouldn’t like to have you use the words of another poet with mine.” “Oh no!” I cried, horrified that he would for a moment think me so insensitive. “I never considered such a thing. I merely thought that those words from the Bible, ‘Blessed above women shall Jael be,’” softly chanted by women’s voices, would recall the story, which many have no doubt forgotten. And then that part where Sisera’s mother looks out at a window and cries, ‘Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why tarry the wheels of his chariot?’” His face lightened and he broke in, “Oh, I wouldn’t object to the Bible if you really think it necessary.” He seemed relieved but not entirely satisfied. “You see, E.A.,” I burst forth excitedly, “my heart is set on beginning the piece after the chant with the full orchestra leading up to that frenzied cry of Jael as she stands over the body of Sisera, ‘See him, Barak. Tell Deborah what you saw!’ Don’t you see what a dramatic opening this would be?” And with that I won him over completely.

For some months Robinson had occasionally mentioned in the most casual way that he had not been feeling too well. He always made light of any physical discomfort for fear of alarming his friends, but the last time he came down from Peter-

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1 Exultate Deo. Composed for the fiftieth anniversary of Radcliffe College; first performed by the Harvard-Radcliffe Chorus and Boston Symphony Orchestra under G. Wallace Woodworth, Symphony Hall, May 1929.
2 The Song of Jael. First performed at the Worcester Festival by the Festival chorus and orchestra under Albert Stoesset, with Rose Brampton soloist, October 3, 1940.
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borough he was obviously thinner and had lost that spring to
his step with which he used to cross the meadows on his way
to his studio, swinging his cane as he walked. When I, with
simulated unconcern, questioned him, he merely said his in-
somnia had been a little worse than usual, but that it was "noth-
ing to worry about." Our talk on "Sisera" had set fire to a
dozen exciting ideas, but there was no opportunity to talk again.
Suddenly he told me that he must return home earlier than
usual and that maybe my idea of his seeing his doctor was a
good one, but again insisted there was "not a thing to worry
about." Thus our friendship, which began in music and which
flourished on music, now abruptly ended on an unresolved
note. The tempo had changed and the carefree allegro con
brio had become an adagio. In a few days Robinson left for
New York. This time he did not return.

Postlude

I like to remember Robinson by certain poems — "The
March of the Cameron Men," in which the drums make a can-
tus firmus to the martial tread of his words; Merlin, in whose
innumerable flashes of melody he for a time forsakes his philo-
sophical musings and gives full rein to his luxuriant imagination.
But most of all I like to remember him by those closing lines
of Tristram. Isolt of Brittany, Isolt of the white hands, looks
towards the Cornwall shore where the other Isolt dwells, dark
Isolt of Ireland, whom Tristram so passionately loves. Here
the subdued accompaniment is that of waves beating against
the cliffs in measured rhythm. Intermittently the cry of gulls
pierces through with sharp sforzando. It would be an imperti-
nence to set such verse to actual music, for if this is not music
in verse, where can it be found?

. . . . Yet there she gazed
Across the water, over the white waves,
Upon a castle that she had never seen,
And would not see, save as a phantom shape
Against a phantom sky. . . . He had been all,
And would be always all there was for her,
And he had not come back to her alive,
Not even to go again. It was like that
For women, sometimes, and might be so too often
For women like her. She hoped there were not many
Of them, or many of them to be, not knowing
More about that than about waves and foam,
And white birds everywhere, flying and flying;
Alone, with her white face and her gray eyes,
She watched them there till even her thoughts were white,
And there was nothing alive but white birds flying,
Flying, and always flying, and still flying,
And the white sunlight flashing on the sea.³

³ This article is reprinted from the Radcliffe Quarterly, XLVI, November 1962, by permission of its editor, Anna E. Holman.

E. A. ROBINSON AS SOOTHSAYER

By Richard Cary

In common with most time-bound earthlings, Edwin Arlington Robinson often yearned to cut through the veils of the future and preview the “mintage of Eternity.” There is no record, however, that he subscribed to astrology, phrenology, or palmistry. He is not known to have consulted gypsies, crystal balls, tea leaves, conches, Ouija boards, animal entrails, or footprints in ashes. Nor did he practice automatic writing or sortes virgilianae.

While he never pretended to Delphic wisdom, there was a touch of the mystical in his early claims to divination. “I have presentiments, and have always had them,” he confided to his former high school mate, Arthur R. Gledhill, on August 20, 1895.¹ These intuitive flashes accord with his sympathy for Emerson’s concept of the poet as seer, which Robinson poignantly expressed in his 1894 sonnet—a cry for a poet who would “rift this changeless glimmer of dead gray.” Robinson’s

¹ Ridgely Torrence (ed.), Selected Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York, 1940), 11.