March 1969

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Richard Crowder

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Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, series 8, no.5, March 1969, p.220-238

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ROBINSON'S REPUTATION: SIX OBSERVATIONS

By Richard Crowder

In 1927, Tristram was his book that year. It was reviewed in at least 54 periodicals. After that, he was widely covered as each new volume appeared. Cavender's House received at least 45 notices; Nicodemus, Talifer, and Amaranth, more than 20 each.

The excruciating slowness with which acclaim had gathered is a matter of record. Those reviews of Tristram came months after the poet had passed his fifty-seventh birthday. Now, interest in Robinson is increasing, though the pace is slow in comparison with the progress of the current Thoreauvian bandwagon, say, or with the apotheosis of Emerson or Eliot.

The 1890s produced poems by S. Weir Mitchell, Edward Rowland Sill, Richard Watson Gilder, Louise Imogen Guiney, Joaquin Miller, Eugene Field, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Maurice Thompson, John Bannister Tabb, Madison Cawein, Josephine Preston Peabody. These poets, included in a widely used college anthology of 1929 (Quinn, Baugh, and Howe), show how out of step Robinson was. His determination to avoid the cliche, the sentimental tone, and the pretty language, as well as his reticence both in person and in writing, kept him from initial popularity.

Gradually attention came, however. During his life six books exclusively about him were published (generally brief, one of them a bibliography). Lillian Lippincott's Bibliography (1937) lists nearly 400 articles and reviews in periodicals through 1936. Somewhat more inclusive, Charles Beecher Hogan's Bibliography (1936) shows over 500 items from 1905 to 1936. One could estimate that in the forty years from the comment on the first pamphlet in 1896 to the reviews of the posthumous King Jasper and the eulogies in 1935-1936 not far from 600 items—criticism, reviews, biography, anecdotes—had reported the poet's career. They ranged from regretful ("his poor and pitiable unfaith") to the supremely laudatory ("E. A. R. is poetry"), from the cursory ("a very pleasant little
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The bibliographies (Hogan and PMLA)1 yield some figures for charting the poet’s critical popularity: 1921-1925, 19 articles; 1926-1930, 26; 1931-1935, 41 (28 in 1935, at the poet’s death); 1936-1940, 23; 1941-1945, 32; 1946-1950, 25; 1951-1955, 13; 1956-1960, 12 (only 1 each in 1958 and 1959); 1961-1965, 27; the biennium 1966-1967, 23 (an average of more than 11 a year as we approach the centennial of Robinson’s birth).

Not all these listed items are of top quality. Several of them are brief comments which that worthy pamphlet the Explicator has flourished on since 1942. Two passages from Tristram have been analyzed in the Explicator; otherwise, the Robinsonian subjects have been brief character studies and lyrics of 1925 or before. “For a Dead Lady” (1910) has accounted for 6 entries; “Luke Havergal” (1896), 4; “Lost Anchors” (1921), 3; and the rest 1 each: “Richard Cory” (1897); “The Whip” (1910); “The Field of Glory” (1915), “Veteran Sirens” and “Eros Turannos” (1916), “Firelight” (1920), “Mr. Flood’s Party” (1921), “The Sheaves,” “En Passant,” and “New England” (1925). These 18 poems treated in 32 comments demonstrate that in the past twenty-five years interest in Robinson among the professors has not died out, though several of the items have come from the same hand so that the number of contributors totals 25—not overwhelming, but enough for a fairly regular focus of attention.

II. A thin but rather steady stream of doctoral dissertations has been flowing from the universities. The first of record was written in 1936 not in America but in Vienna—EARs Langere Verserzahlungen, by Elizabeth Grohs. The first in America did not come from an English department, but from

1 The editor and I decided to dispense with cumbersome documentation for this essay. I must, however, bear witness to the bibliographical labors of Charles Beecher Hogan, Lillian Lippincott, William White, Lewis Leary, James Woodress, and the committees who dig for PMLA and American Literature. They have crafted unquestionably useful tools for any Robinsonian.
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the Department of Philosophy at Columbia—Estelle Kaplan’s *Philosophy in the Poetry of EAR*, published in 1940 by Columbia University Press. It was not until 1943 that a study was produced by an English graduate student, Seymour Betsky at Harvard, and even then the subject was philosophical: *Some Aspects of the Philosophy of EAR: Self-knowledge, Self-acceptance, and Conscience*.

The Forties saw 7 dissertations, the Fifties 10, and so far (through 1967) the Sixties have reported 7. This number cannot compete with studies of the more fashionable poets. Eliot has been examined with such picayune care that it would appear that little remains to be said for the present. On the other hand, some 25 dissertations on Robinson in 30 years is hardly exhaustive.

A cursory classification by titles will show what scholars and their graduate students have found worth considering. Beginning with the Vienna study, there has been an interest in the poet as a writer of fiction. John V. Foy’s title (Cornell, 1960) was somewhat more specific than Fraulein Grohs’s—*Character and Structure in EAR’s Major Narratives*. Also concerned with the fictional element were Alan A. Stephens, Jr. (Missouri, 1954), who wrote on *The Shorter Narrative Poems*, and Laurence Perrine (Yale, 1948), who concentrated on *The Arthurian Legend*.

Specifically concerned with the less-than-book-length poems was Edwin S. Fussell’s *The Early Poetry* (Harvard, 1949). Others were *Das Lyrische Werk*, by Alfred Baumgartner (Mainz, 1952), and E. Samuel Moon’s study of *Organic Form in the Shorter Poems* (Michigan, 1957). In 1966 at Louisiana State, Ronald W. Moran, Jr., submitted a thesis he called *A Critical Study of 26 Shorter Poems*.

When one mentions *The Shorter Poems of Thomas Hardy and EAR: A Study in Contrasts* (Paul Nathan Zietlow, Michigan, 1965), he brings up the subject of other writers. A. J. Dibden (Columbia, 1945?) presented a dissertation to the Department of Religion on *An Interpretation of Tragedy and the Promethean Spirit in Santayana, Moody, R, and Melville*. Charles T. Davis (New York, 1951) wrote on *The Poetic Drama of Moody, R, Torrence and MacKaye*. Also concerned with Robinson’s penchant for playwriting was Lucy D. Fryxell.
Miss Kaplan's study treated the poet's use of philosophy in general; Betsky narrowed his discussion to three philosophical aspects. David H. Burton (Georgetown, 1953) focused on Christian Conservatism in the Poetry. William Ronald Robinson (Ohio State, 1963) in A Poetry of the Act related the poet's work to twentieth-century thought, as, for example, to the concepts of Existentialism.

Tangentially related was Paul H. Morrill's Psychological Aspects of the Poetry (Northwestern, 1956). Using the Harvard psychologist Gordon Allport's classification of male types, I submitted as one of my essays at Iowa (1944) "'Here Are the Men...'". Louise Dauner (Iowa, 1944) submitted five essays. One was on "Avon and Cavender: Two Children of the Night." Another, "The Pernicious Rib," dealt with Robinson's fictional women.

Various elements of poetic style (in addition to some I have mentioned) drew attention. Robert Stevick wrote on The Effects of His Principles on the Technique and Structure of the Poems (Wisconsin, 1956), and Elise Isley (Arkansas, 1967) examined The Imagery in the Poetry. Miss Dauner outlined "R's Concepts of Poetry and the Poet" and deduced his "Main Aesthetic Principles" from an analysis of representative lyrics. Nancy C. Joyner's subtitle (North Carolina, 1967) was A Study of His Theory and His Technique in the Late Narratives.

Miss Dauner's fifth essay related the poet to his time: "Vox Clamantis: EAR as a Critic of American Democracy." Relating more specifically to his biography were my two other essays: "The Emergence" and his "Contemporaneous Reputation." There were other dissertations, but these indicate the trends.

III. I have attempted to find at what point in Robinson's career his fellow poets thought he had reached his peak. Richard Le Gallienne (1911) expressed fear that, in spite of Theodore Roosevelt's hearty endorsement of the early verse, Robinson's poems would never achieve popularity. The quality was too high for the average reader; the crypticism would re-
quire too much contribution from the casual follower of poetry.

A change of attitude toward his poetry occurred in 1916. Having occupied himself with unsuccessful playwriting and a revision of Captain Craig in the interim since 1910, Robinson now produced a volume of new poems which was to earn him a secure position among the chief writers of the decade. The Man Against the Sky brought its author the compliment of sympathetic judgment: top ranking was prophesied for the title poem; the book was said to show in its author a great deal of "high seriousness" (Amy Lowell). Such comment was far removed from the initial "pleasant little book" remarks of twenty years before.

Meanwhile, the poet was busy on Merlin, which appeared in 1917 and was now praised, now condemned. This was his sixth volume of verse (counting The Torrent and the Night Before of 1896 but not re-issues and revisions of later date), the first of the long narratives which were to come out in separate volumes. On the strength of this limited crop, the New York Times (December 21, 1919) celebrated his fiftieth birthday by carrying tributes from fourteen American poets. Expert craftsman, subtle and original thinker, faithful artist, "master etcher," profound and brilliant writer—these were the judgments of his peers. In the month following, Percy MacKaye paid additional tribute to his friend: "'E. A.'—an American of reality, who has wrought an untainted vision with unfaltering patience."

Somewhat apologetic for letting Robinson's "jubilee" pass without comment, Harriet Monroe in Poetry added her own encomium: for her he was "adequate, uncompromising, a big man, a thorough and keen-visioned artist." In the same year (1920), writing about Lancelot, Babette Deutsch voiced the opinion that Robinson alone of all contemporary poets was capable of the passion and the insight he displayed here (passion being a point of disagreement among his readers).

The following year, in reply to what he thought was an unjust assault on The Man Against the Sky, John Gould Fletcher, living in England, avowed that the poetry in this book had been surpassed only by Hardy and Doughty (!) in England, the implication being that it had not been surpassed at all in America. He singled out for specific laudation, besides the
title poem, “The Gift of God,” “Cassandra,” and “Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford.” Superlatives were not too good for at least these four works.

By 1922 Robinson had published four books (they were coming faster now) and a Collected Poems. His place was so well established that Yale acknowledged his accomplishment by conferring on him the degree of Doctor of Literature. His Collected Poems went to four printings in twelve months. It won him the Pulitzer Prize, the Poetry Society’s Prize, and the acclaim of the New York Authors’ Club as the most significant publication of the year. Surely Robinson had “arrived.”

The poet-critics were enthusiastic about the Collected Poems—and cautious. Theodore Maynard assigned the highest place among American poets to Robinson, who was, he said, thoroughly honest, but seemed unable to abandon himself (a different judgment from Miss Deutsch’s)—a great misfortune, for, if he had not been so repressed, “he might have become ... one of the half-dozen of the world’s greatest poets.” Miss Lowell, too, was wary: she feared that popularity might have made Robinson less self-critical than he had been: the earlier poetry had shown few failures, but she could see no “marked advance” since 1916. (He had published as many new books in the five years after as in the twenty years up to 1916.) But he was nevertheless “the most finished and settled of the poets alive in America today.” She foretold immortality for him and felt that, notwithstanding recent lapses, he was now at the zenith of his power. Conrad Aiken, too, considered the Collected Poems a distinguished work. He praised the poet: “To challenge him is ridiculous, to scale him difficult. No contemporary English poet has his insight into character, his intellectual beauty, his exquisite sense of form.” He went beyond Fletcher: “Mr. Hardy’s lyrics ... do not match [his] in subtlety and finish.” He reflected that it was disgraceful for Robinson to be unknown in England.

Despite the American success of the Collected Poems and his own earlier fighting stance in support of The Man Against the Sky, Fletcher was still echoing Le Gallienne’s statement of a dozen years before that Robinson could never achieve wide readership, though his reason was different from Le Gal-
lienne's: it was not that Robinson was too good, but rather that he lacked the necessary drama and emotion to gain a large audience. However, "for those whose interest will always center on the appalling causes of man's . . . antics, . . . who wish to pursue the phantom of truth grimly to the end, I do not know of any poet that I could better recommend for prolonged meditation and study."

The second half of the 1920s saw Robinson's position maintaining a high level among his colleagues. He was called variously "the ripest and most philosophic of our poets," "Leviathan among our poets," a "most profound psychological novelist." Robert Hillyer admitted to "great failures" in the poet's work, but even these, "though in themselves frustrate, impart to every sonnet and character sketch the sense of powers held in reserve."

In the five years preceding his death, poet reviewers were finding more and more fault with his long narratives, which were appearing annually. Among them were Allen Tate and R. P. Blackmur, who were severe with Talifer (1933). Louise Bogan thought Robinson had "told the truth, told it early, with intelligence and in form," but found his work slipping in these latter years.

Just seven months before Vachel Lindsay died, he paid high tribute to his contemporary in a review of Charles Cestre's Introduction. Robinson, he said, was "the most distinguished writer of poetry in the American language"—not the "United States language," which was more colloquial. He drew attention to Robinson's "long slow conquest of the imagination of American readers." He himself found refuge in Robinson from "the awful din" of current verse, calling him "readable, vital, passionate, and popular," in spite of his "over-advertised nuances." (By this time Tristram had had extraordinarily wide sales.)

After Robinson's death on April 6, 1935, there were many testimonials to his eminence. He was called "the most distinguished [and] also the only American poet of his generation—because he wrote poetry and did nothing else" (Malcolm Cowley); "the oldest and solidest name from a long list of contemporary poets" (Mark Van Doren); "a great poet, and therefore a great man" (Maynard).
To approximate the period during which poets felt Robinson was at his peak, it is important to recognize that the shorter poems were in general considered the best work. At the publication of *Merlin* there began to develop a restless feeling that the earlier lyrics had been better. Miss Lowell, who thought of *Merlin* as a series of episodes possessing some “charming lyrical figures,” praised the short works in her review of the *Collected Poems*, stating baldly that the poet simply had not mastered the long form. Miss Monroe hoped to see more poems like “Miniver Cheevy,” “Richard Cory,” and “Ben Jonson.” Aiken said that the habitual simplification and “hint and gleam” technique were unsuited to the extensity of the long-poem genre (though he, too, excepted the romantic lyricism of *Merlin*).

A few critics favored some of the long poems. Defining a major poet as “one who can write long poems well,” Van Doren said that in the decade between 1917 and 1927 Robinson had grown from a minor to a major poet and implied that *Tristram* might well be a candidate for his masterpiece to date. (The Literary Guild had invited Van Doren to write a short biographical and critical book as a companion offering with *Tristram* to their subscribers.) While admitting that some of the later narratives were not so good as the poet’s former work, William Rose Benét had nothing but praise for *Amaranth*—and, in retrospect, for *Tristram*. (He was writing in 1935.)

The weight of the testimony, however, is on the side of the short poems. Alfred Kreymborg called Robinson “a major-minor poet in narratives” and “a major lyrist in the short poems.” He cited specifically the verse in *Captain Craig* as being not suggestive enough and at the same time too verbose. Hillyer thought that the shorter poems would last longer because they provided no opportunity for disconcerting digression; and, since Robinson’s poems were chiefly unmusical, the longer poems lacked “lyric feeling” that the short works compensated for in intensity. “If the major works be not of great beauty, at least the minor works bear the impact of a major poet.”

Miss Bogan expressed the opinion that some of Robinson’s earlier poems were worthy of any poet, young or old, but
agreed with Miss Monroe that the Arthurian romances and the later narratives were not their equal. Morton Dauwen Zabel’s list of poems of “greatest strength” included only one of book length—*The Man Who Died Twice* (1924). In reviewing *Nicodemus* in England, Padraic Colum wished for a return to the lyrics (even though the poems in this book were not “long”). Tate, likewise, preferred the lyrics, some of the finest written in modern times. The long poems, on the other hand, constituted for him “a single complete poem that the poet had not succeeded in writing.” It was difficult to distinguish among them after reading them all. Cowley, too, showed a preference for the early work; the later poems lacked richness and “intellectual horizons.” Blackmur’s praise of the later verse consisted of the faint epithet “competent.”

These contemporaneous judgments against the long narratives would seem to point to 1925 and before as the locale of the high point in the poet’s career. It may be more particularly fixed by an examination of the nominations for best poem.

The field is actually quite small. Aiken came out definitely in support of the title poem of *The Man Against the Sky* as the finest of all Robinson’s work, but few critics concurred. Miss Lowell saw significance in placing the poems of this volume first in the 1921 *Collected Poems*: she took this as evidence that Robinson himself agreed with those critics who thought it the best of his books, but she did not essay to pick any one poem as superior. Kreymborg and Van Doren cast their ballots for “Ben Jonson.”

Miss Monroe agreed that it was a masterpiece, but she committed herself to *The Man Who Died Twice* on several occasions. Dissatisfied with the Camelot poems, she said that *The Man Who Died Twice* was the best of the modern poems (she was writing in 1927), which was the same as saying that it was the best of Robinson. In 1935 she praised “Ben Jonson” and “The Master,” but felt that perhaps the emotional peak of *The Man Who Died Twice* had been Robinson’s own summit. When it first appeared, she had called it “Robinson’s masterpiece” in soul-biography and had praised his mature and disciplined art. Van Doren’s review of this poem had said, “Mr. Robinson has never written better than here. Few American poems are more beautiful.” (In the end, however, as we have
seen, Van Doren came out for "Ben Jonson.") Louis Untermeyer had called the poem "one of Robinson's triumphs. . . a cross between a grotesque narrative and inspired metaphysics." Having ascribed "few faults" to Tristram, Benét had then turned to this poem to say it was "in some ways a more remarkable poem than Tristram." Zabel had not made specific nomination for "best poem," but he had listed this poem among the greatest. (He did not include "Ben Jonson" or "The Man Against the Sky." Did he consider these marked by traits of the less important works, which were characterized by "temporization, unwarranted detail of argument, feeble rhyme, . . . nondescript statement")?

There is not much evidence, but, such as it is, it points to The Man Who Died Twice as a favorite. In length this poem could be called either major or minor, for it is not so long as to become tedious and not so short as to be as cryptic as Robinson sometimes was. If the poet-critics favored the shorter poems because of their intensity and because the lyric seemed to have been Robinson's greatest achievement, they had in this poem comparative brevity, intensity, and language awareness in a narrative in which the mood is sustained and the verse itself is undeviatingly good. They would appear to have felt, as fellow-poets, that Robinson's most powerful period came between 1916 and 1927 (respectively the years of "Ben Jonson" and of Tristram, a period of eight books and the Collected Poems) and to agree, at least in the spirit if not in the letter, with Miss Monroe that "the climax of [The Man Who Died Twice] was perhaps also the climax of the poet's career."

IV. Most of these critics were writing in America, but Robinson received recognition abroad, too. Six editions of his books were published in England during his life. Captain Craig appeared in 1902. Twenty years later came the Collected Poems, with a supporting introduction by John Drinkwater. The other books published in London were Roman Bartholow, his second and third Pulitzer Prize winners The Man Who Died Twice and Tristram, and Cavender's House.

In spite of the availability of his work, Robinson failed to catch on in England, though he had a few staunch allies. As early as September, 1906, having met Robinson and his friends Moody and Ridgely Torrence in New York, the British novel-
ist May Sinclair had written an article, “Three American Poets of Today,” which appeared simultaneously in the Atlantic Monthly and the Fortnightly Review (London). One must bear in mind that at this time he had published commercially only The Children of the Night and Captain Craig, on the basis of which Miss Sinclair found in the poet a “great gift of spiritual imagination, and an unerring skill in disentangling the slender threads of thought and motive and emotion.” His predominant theme was the necessity of facing the truth squarely: “at any cost, be true.”

She attempted to analyze his manner in calling it “vital” and “sober.” Though she was a little critical of his device of “repetition, as he fondly practices the new-made sequence, the new-found cadence,” she generously conceded that “all style-makers” succumbed to this technique “in their crystallizing stage.” She forecast that he would be able to “break up these sequences and cadences into other combinations and more living forms.”

With all Miss Sinclair’s enthusiasm and the publicity she had given Robinson, he did not accumulate readers in Great Britain. In 1920 Fletcher reviewed “Some Contemporary American Poets” and praised Robinson. The next year, as we have noted, he rose to the defense of The Man Against the Sky.

Then in 1922 came Drinkwater’s introduction to the Collected Poems. The essay had fairly wide circulation among the thoughtful public—in the Fortnightly Review in London and the Yale Review here, and three years later in his collected essays, The Muse in Council. Drinkwater regretted the lack of Robinson readers in England. He could find no consolation in the poet’s being scarcely more widely known in his own country, in spite of his indisputable position above all his contemporaries. (He named Miss Lowell, Masters, Lindsay, Frost, and Sandburg.) “Mr. Robinson is in the true Greek tradition in this, that, whereas most of his fellow countrymen who are poets see man as beset by society, which is circumstance, he sees man beset by his own character, which is fate.” Rather than being a poet of “suggestion” like Coleridge, Poe, de la Mare, Robinson possessed the “magic . . . of precision,” like Milton, Arnold, Wordsworth. Hence, his music was
always perfectly clear in its modulation, simple in its accent, and yet as full always of delightful surprise as that of the most delicate weavers of suggestion. His is a rather tragic world, generally a deeply tragic world [which] he celebrates . . . with the clear melodic ease of a well-voiced countryman at the inn.

As for didacticism, “Mr. Robinson wants to instruct no one; but moral purpose and pity burn passionately, though with a quiet flame, throughout his work.”

Still the British could not be induced to read this leader of American poets. On his one short visit to England, in the spring of 1923, he was not really surprised that not many people could identify him, though his few supporters and some new friends were generous and hospitable: Drinkwater, Fletcher, Miss Sinclair, Edmund Gosse, J. C. Squire, Laurence Binyon, Alfred Noyes, Arnold Bennett, Mrs. St. John Irvine. Influential as they were, these people could not, however, make the diffident Robinson a literary lion.

Indeed, the next year, reviewing The Man Who Died Twice (which American poets had acclaimed as inspired), E. B. C. Jones in the Nation and Athenaeum complained: “related in lines alternately grandiose and pedestrian, it seems a poor, flat, unconvincing little story. There is a great deal of mud stirred up; but the puddle remains shallow.” A. Williams-Ellis, in the Spectator, was in total concurrence: “It is not good enough . . . . in Mr. Robinson’s poem we are defrauded.”

Squire leaped into the breach with an essay on Robinson in the London Mercury in 1926, still noting how “very little known” the American was in England. Seeking a reason, Le cited “lack of surface appeal,” and the uniform quietness which at first glance gives a flat appearance to his work. . . . In an age of lyrists he writes long poems. In an age which likes labels he is a watch of life who cannot be labelled. In an age which concentrates attention upon Society he is concerned with the fine shades of character and the fortunes of individuals . . . . He is better in the stanza than in the line; better in the poem than in the stanza; better in the long poem than in the short one. He is not easily quotable because his thought is continuous and because his observation of human character and its operations is closer, more constant, more the special material of his art than his observation of any leaf or sky in nature.

Squire hit some of the nails on the head, but he missed oth-
ers. By 1926 Robinson had written only four book-length poems (to which add "Captain Craig"); the rest of the volumes had consisted of the short poems Squire was denying him. It is hard to agree that he was "better in the long poem than in the short one." Nevertheless, except for these two rhetoric-influenced misjudgments, Squire succeeded here in presenting both sides of the question—why Robinson did not appeal to readers on a popular level and at the same time what he did have to offer the reader willing to become familiar with his work.

It was not that the books were not being reviewed. From the 1922 Collected Poems to the 1937 edition, most of the volumes received notice in England (exceptions: Dionysus in Doubt, The Glory of the Nightingales, and Talifer). Possibly Lawrence H. Conrad summed it up in the Landmark in 1933 when he entitled his article "The Critics' Poet—A Study of EAR." The New Englandly quality, the cerebral tone, the general absence of roses and nightingales—these could have put off any potential British audience.

Robinson had a champion in France, though the poems were not translated into French. Charles Cestre, professor at the Sorbonne, wrote the first of a long series of articles in 1924 in the Revue Anglo-Américaine, then in its first year. "L'Oeuvre d'EAR" was followed by reviews of nearly every one of the books subsequent to that date. In 1929 Cestre was invited to lecture at Bryn Mawr. The subject was Robinson. Macmillan published the lectures in book form in 1930. With Gallic logic Cestre emphasized the psychological development of character, the influence of the subconscious, the modernity of the poet's approach. The mystery of the poetry was related to the expression of what lay below the surface. The French sense of order and propriety found agreeable Robinson's own precision, his chastity of style, his elegance, his stripped candor.

Though Cestre held the center of the stage, other French scholars gave the American their attention—Régis Michaud, Maurice Halperin, Georges Roth. There were also essays in other countries of the world—Germany, Italy, India, Korea, Norway. These studies, however, were for the consumption of specialists and did not result in a big boost to Robinson readership.
V. With the exception of Cestre's published lectures, the books devoted entirely to Robinson before 1936 were brief. The first appeared in 1923. Lloyd Morris had found in the poet's work "humiliation... a casualty to which the human spirit is never subject." He thought he saw a noticeable influence of Josiah Royce, who had been professor of philosophy at Harvard during Robinson's two years there. Despite his own protest that he could not respond to Royce's lectures in psychology, Robinson probably did pick up some ideas from the professor about transcendental idealism. Morris's book carried the subtitle An Essay in Appreciation and was studded with overblown prose: the poet's intuitive and mystic philosophy led him to ask "the eternal question which the spirit sends rocketing into the far, uncharted corners of the universe." Fancy phrases or no, the little book was a beginning, and scholars still quote from it. By the time it appeared, though, the poet was nearly fifty-four, and had published half his twenty books.

Other little volumes followed in a brief annual cluster—Ben Ray Redman's in 1926, Van Doren's in 1927, Lucius Beebe's in 1928. Then came Cestre's 1930 Introduction. Beebe collaborated with Robert J. Bulkley, Jr., in the first Bibliography (1931). And that was all until after Robinson's death.

In 1936 appeared an inventory of Robinson's works in Bacon Collamore's library. Mrs. Laura E. Richards contributed the first of the books of reminiscence—brief, uncritical. Writing of E. A.'s youth and young manhood in Gardiner, Maine, she was emotionally involved, for she and Robinson had developed a very warm friendship, which led her into a redundant conclusion: "Yes, my Friend, ours imperishably, for all time. And so, goodbye!"

In somewhat the same vein, recalling experiences with Robinson at the MacDowell Colony, Rollo Walter Brown closed his Next Door to a Poet (1937) on a determined and self-conscious upbeat, carefully inserting an ambiguous adverb in sketching his summertime neighbor striding away for the last time "as I should be glad always to remember him. His head was a little high as if he were concerned with exceptional possibilities." During World War II, Esther Bates, his long-time friend and typist, added her own memories of the poet in her
Meanwhile, three years after the poet's death, Hermann Hagedorn published the authorized biography. He had the customary problems that confront a biographer so soon after his subject's death, including the inaccessibility of the hundreds and hundreds of letters that are now gradually becoming available. Hagedorn did write sensitively, however, and provided indispensable facts and interpretations on which all future biographers must depend.

After World War II Yvor Winters, Emery Neff, Ellsworth Barnard, and Edwin Fussell brought out studies all entitled by the poet's long name. With customary cantankerousness Winters burst out with such comments as "This is merely balderdash." Without so much as a diplomatic introduction, he called Talifer "unbelievably dull." As a young critic, Winters had reviewed the 1921 Collected Poems, calling his essay "A Cool Master," in which he praised "the perfect balance, the infallible precision." Now in 1946 he was unable to find anything beyond that 1921 edition that surpassed Lancelot among the book-length poems, "Rembrandt to Rembrandt" and "John Brown" among the poems of medium length, "The Wandering Jew" for rimed stanza, and "Many Are Called" from the sonnets. It should be remarked that all these poems were in books published in 1920 and 1921. Winters seems not to have agreed with many other poet-critics that possibly Robinson hit his peak some time after Lancelot—about 1924. He discounted some splendid sonnets in Dionysus in Doubt (1925) and of course all the book-length poems that began to characterize Robinson from Roman Bartholow (1923) to the end. Robinson, said Winters, put his best ideas (that is, about society and religion) into his poorest work. "Had he been a better thinker, he would have been a greater poet." (David Brown, several years before, had developed a case for the poems after Tristram, saying that careful critical analysis would show them to hold mature development of earlier ideas, a thesis presented at greater length in William R. Robinson's dissertation, published as a book in 1967.)

Neff was on the whole more partisan than Winters had been. In fact, he spent a good many pages proving to his own satisfaction that "The Man Against the Sky" was "Robinson's
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Eroica, with its scherzo following a funeral march.” Given the subject matter, the form was inevitable, Neff said, failing to block his metaphor: “There was no avoiding the... singing robes of the ode.”

Barnard’s work was the most detailed analysis yet. From his reading of Robinson, he distilled certain “values.” The last chapter of his book (1952) dwelt on the assurance made to Luke Havergal: “The dark will end the dark, if anything.” The world of time will not yield total knowledge, but the Word and the Light can bring power to understand and the will to go forward.

Fussell, in 1954, surveyed the relation of Robinson’s early reading to his poetry. The author found the poet to be “one kind of a traditional poet,” in contrast with Eliot. After his book, there were a few paperback pamphlets, including a longish reprint from Tulane Studies in English by Richard P. Adams, detailing The Failure (his inability “to affirm, demonstrate, and embody in concrete symbolic emotional terms the value of life and the reality of immediate personal experience... often enough throughout the body of his work.”

Hard-cover Robinson analysis had come to a halt with Fussell’s book. At last a dry spell of eleven years was broken by Chard Powers Smith’s Where the Light Falls: A Portrait of EAR. The author went the limit in seeing Emma Shepherd, Herman Robinson’s wife, as the source of many female characters in Robinson’s verse. One hesitates to follow Smith the whole way: the transmogrification of a small-town housewife and mother of three daughters into Queen Guinevere, to whom all the Knights of the Round Table owed allegiance, would require the alchemy of Merlin himself. Nonetheless, for all its flaws and failures, this book told us much that we did not know and patently gave us new materials and ideas for explanation of the poems. Wallace L. Anderson’s A Critical Introduction (1967) is the most recent of what now promises to be a helpful procession of books on Robinson.

VI. In the journals of the last thirty years there has not been an oversupply of Robinson essays. Studies of sources and influences have interested some scholars. A long article on Alfred H. Louis as “The Original of R’s Captain Craig” came
from Denham Sutcliffe. The mass of details was impressive, but one wonders how important they are to a full reading of the poem, since much of what Sutcliffe unearthed was unknown to Robinson. Robert Stevick's "R and William James" looked at "The Man Against the Sky" as "religious assertion... more primordial than reason and of equal authority." More recently (1966) William J. Free has seen Emerson's law of Compensation at work in many of the shorter poems.

The poet's theories, techniques, and systems have occupied the attention of a number of writers. Abstracting data chiefly from the letters, Lewis E. Weeks, Jr., (1965) outlined Robinson's ideas (banal in paraphrase): A poet writes because he must; he writes well only through discipline and sacrifice. Poetry is the effort to express the inexpressible; its ultimate function is to provide epiphanies of the truth in flashes of insight.

What impressed Zabel in 1937 was the poet's capacity for delivering the "impact of complete reserves, of verbal intensity, of stored and loaded emphasis." He was grateful to Robinson for correcting the overindulgence in symbolism that had characterized much of our poetry since The Waste Land. Robinson had showed that the intellect can play an important role in poetry. This was not to say that Robinson did not make use of images.

Charles T. Davis pointed out (1961) that he organized his references into systems, used images in depth. With Yeats he shared "concern for the flexible figure." In 1965 James G. Hepburn was considering another kind of system—the system of opposites. For Hepburn the chief conflict in Robinson's poetry was between two visions—idealism on the one hand and despair on the other. "Robinson's poetry... is always at its best when it is despairing." Scott Donaldson (1966) saw Robinson placing the emphasis on the gulf between illusion and truth, possibly not far from Hepburn's thesis.

Louis O. Coxe developed the idea that Robinson's poems could be submitted to the "heresy of paraphrase," that is, are about something. (He named "Eros Turannos," "The Clerks," and "The Gift of God.") This quality is an element of what Coxe called "the lost tradition," especially in opposing current emphasis on poems as possessing more being than meaning.
(Another phase of Robinson's traditionalism had been developed in Fussell's closing chapter: "Most important, perhaps, was his refusal to admit that nature, and not man, was the proper study of mankind.")

Scholars have also been interested in the themes of time and eschatology. Floyd Stovall (1938) found a transcendental note of hope ("optimism") informing most of the poems, even the tragedies. The same year, Frederic I. Carpenter pointed out how Tristram, by going beyond time, through passion, became a wiser man "without sacrificing the fullness of life in this world."

Hyatt H. Waggoner (1940) saw Robinson's life as one long struggle for belief. "He lost his religion but he kept his faith." Winters (1945) found a "few and vague" ideas about religion and society, but for him they were Emersonian in their lack of definiteness. Free (1966) was to find Emersonianism something of a virtue: this lack of systematic philosophy or theology parallels Robinson with the now-current existential view. My own essay of 1961 concluded that "for Robinson and for many of his characters... as for the Existentialists, the question of meaning approaches its answer only through probing honesty, fundamental virtue, unflinching courage, and rich creative action."

These, then, are some of the interests that critical readers have been finding in Robinson's poems. The explorations have just begun to disclose his wealth. As we near his hundredth birthday, we hear of several new books of criticism as well as further collections of letters; and, to gauge by the recent flowering of scholarly articles, we can count on an increased number of short studies.

My poet friends assure me that, whether or not Robinson has been neglected in Academe, verse-writers have been reading him all along. James Dickey, one of our best-known current poets, has said (1965), taking issue with readers who have been finding him dull and out of fashion:

2 Published books of letters so far include the following: Selected Letters of EAR, Ridgely Torrence, ed. (New York, 1940); Letters of EAR to Howard George Schmitz (Waterville, Maine, 1943); Untriangulated Stars: Letters of EAR to Harry De Forest Smith, 1890-1905, Denham Sutcliffe, ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1947); EAR's Letters to Edith Brower, Richard Cary, ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1968).
Far from indulging, as his detractors have maintained, in a kind of poetical know-nothingness, he actually brought to poetry a new kind of approach, making of a refusal to pronounce definitively on his subjects a virtue and of speculation upon possibilities an instrument that allows an unparallelled fullness to his presentations, as well as endowing them with some of the mysteriousness, futility, and proneness to multiple interpretation that incidents and lives possess in the actual world.

I believe that Robinson's turn has come. At last, Apollo's light is beginning to "Fall golden on the patience of the dead."

ROBINSON'S IMPULSE FOR NARRATIVE

By J. Vail Foy

Robinson's single-minded devotion to a career as poet is so obvious a circumstance of his biography that one may overlook in the poet's apprenticeship two major experiments—the prose short story, or sketch as Robinson preferred to call it, and the play—that suggest why his major mature efforts in poetry, particularly after 1916, were in the form of extended blank-verse narratives: his chief concern in the later, long poems, as it had been in the earlier experiments, was with the dramatic as opposed to lyric presentation of the complexities he marveled at in the enigma of human character. Indeed, as one reads Robinson's early letters, one wonders what might have happened to the poet had his sketches and plays been commercially successful or had he received even significant critical praise for them. His lament to Harry DeForest Smith in 1895 is revealing:

I have so much material in my head, and good material too, that the weight of it makes me dizzy at times; and then there is that fear that I may not do anything after all. My worst and most persistent enemy, though, is a constant inclination to write poetry. Sometimes I am half afraid the damned stuff will kill what little ability I have.

His failures in prose fiction and drama, however, are significant only as they indicate the problems that Robinson had

1 Untriangulated Stars, Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson to Harry DeForest Smith, 1890-1905, editor, Denham Sutcliffe (Cambridge, 1947), 202. All subsequent page references are to this edition.