March 1969

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Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, series 8, no.5, March 1969, p.238-249

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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.1

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 De Forest Smith, 1890-1905, editor, Denham Sutcliffe (Cambridge, 1947), 202. All subsequent page references are to this edition.
to overcome as he developed a narrative structure and technique of characterization to complement his indirect and allusive style of poetic expression.

As one considers the time and effort that Robinson spent for twenty years in writing sketches, plays, and even a novel (he tried to turn one of the plays into a novel but that effort has not survived), it seems inevitable that his poetry thereafter should reflect more than a little of his strong attraction toward dramatic presentation of his ideas as well as his attitude that character and its related problems were properly the center of the artist's deepest and most considered thought. Similarly, one might expect to find the blank verse of the later narratives the medium for an artist whose first extended poetic effort had been a blank-verse adaptation of *Antigone* (pp. 125, 172). And even a cursory listing of titles of the early poems shows characterizations predominant among them (“Richard Cory,” “Aaron Stark,” “Cliff Klingenhagen,” “Reuben Bright,” “Isaac and Archibald,” “Aunt Imogen”), whether in sonnet form, in blank verse, or in the rhymed tetrameter of which Robinson was always fond. His later, major narratives, exclusively in blank verse after 1920, were merely end points of his natural lines of drift.

In the beginning, however, poetry had not seemed to Robinson the medium in which he could best cast his developing and expanding ideas. In his letters to Smith during the four years (1893-1897) of his prose experiments in Gardiner, one finds in the young artist a curious pride in his facility with the kind of poetry he was then writing; yet one also feels in that pride a kind of scorn for such productions, particularly because they were so fascinating and easy to do. Most of all, however, one notes the complaint that they were time-consuming and were interfering with his prose sketches. In fact, except for the adaptation of *Antigone*, which seemed to him significant, Robinson displays almost a resentment toward the sonnets and ballades, rondeaus, and villanelles, because they required—in deed, demanded—so much time. Yet, and significantly, he represented to Smith the urge to write verse as persistent and continuously compelling. As early as 1893 he was saying:

I suppose I shall have to write a "Ballade of Dead Mariners." The idea, with three or four others, has been chasing me for some time,
and I know of but one way to get rid of them—write them out. . . . The things may not be worth the trouble of the making, but there is a fascination about them that I cannot get over (pp. 111-112).

A few months later he was again “complaining” of this fascination, enclosing for Smith’s opinion a copy of what was to become, after revisions, the most famous of his villanelles, “The House on the Hill”:

These old French forms always had a fascination for me which I never expect to outgrow. I don’t know that I care to outgrow it, but still it interferes with my more serious work [prose sketches then in progress] to an unpleasant extent. When one of these things begin [sic] to run in my mind there is little rest for me until it is out. Fortunately, this one was made very quickly (in about twenty minutes) so did not steal much of my time (p. 133).

But of the poems in his first published volume, The Torrent and the Night Before (1896), which was composed chiefly of such short rhymed pieces that together with his sonnets formed the bulk of his poetic output to that time, he was more enthusiastic about one of the three unrhymed efforts in the volume than about its companion pieces. His enthusiasm for “The Night Before” was probably heightened by the fact that the poem was his first extended narrative, originally “a tragic monologue written in unrhymed tetrameters.” He had described it to Smith as “like Evangeline, with two feet left out (p. 238),” that is, dactyllic tetrameter. One is puzzled to know whether Robinson considered the published version as that meter, however, for he wrote to Smith a year after his initial description that he “had been rewriting that story of mine . . . in blank verse.” Because the published version has the same opening line that he had quoted in each of the letters and because the rhythm of the lines in the poem is so obviously in the triple meters, it is difficult to believe that he considered the poem to be blank verse, despite the number of ten- and eleven-syllable lines it contains. Like his ten-syllable opening line, which is dactyllic tetrameter with opening and closing trochaic substitute feet (/u|/uu|/uu|/u), the other imperfect dactyllic lines do not conform to the basic iambic rhythm of blank verse.

Despite the pressures of his prose sketches, he had felt that this long monologue, like his other poems, had to be done:
I have been too much occupied of late to do any writing except two sonnets and some ninety lines of a queer poem called "The Night Before." . . . the thing demands work—wasted work, most likely, but still work that I cannot seem to help doing. You will be glad, or sorry, to know that I have three prose tales well in my head and shall have them out as soon as I can settle myself down to such labor once more (pp. 158-159).

Then when reviews of the volume began to come in, he seemed concerned that reviewers had either ignored or were generally unimpressed with "The Night Before." Quoting to Smith excerpts from an otherwise gratifying review in the Denver Times (one of the best notices his first volume received), Robinson remarked on his disappointment with the general reception of his longest poem in the volume. The reviewer had written:

"There are a few commonplace verses in the volume, such as 'Max Nordau,' 'The Night Before' (ach!) and 'For Calderon,' but it is unjust to judge a man by his worst traits or a writer by his poorest work" (p. 276).

Robinson observed wistfully to Smith:

Of course "The Night Before" is purely objective, and may be called anything from pessimism to rot. I must confess that I haven't the slightest idea whether it is good for anything or not. I printed it to find out; but the opinions I have received are so conflicting that I am not much better off than I was before. The fact that you and Hubbell speak so well of it convinces me that it is nothing to be sorry for, but I am afraid it is one of those unfortunate narrative pieces which requires a second reading before it amounts to anything at all (pp. 273-274).

This effort, his last major dramatic monologue for nearly twenty years, was also the end of long unrhymed narratives for six years, and nearly the end of unrhymed verses for as long. Except for twenty-five octaves in blank verse and the reprinted "Walt Whitman," "The Wilderness," and "The Night Before" in his second volume, The Children of the Night in 1897 (thereafter, "The Night Before" was never again collected), Robinson published only rhymed verse until 1902; and not until 1915 did he publish another long dramatic monologue in blank verse, the justifiably famous "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford," which, after some revisions, was reprinted in his best single volume, The Man Against the Sky (1916).

But as his first major effort, "The Night Before" illustrates
Robinson’s inability to devise an effective structure to express his conception of the character he was contriving. Writing to Smith during the construction of the poem, he seemed aware of the problems his inexperience in characterization was posing for him: “I don’t know what it all amounts to, but there are some pretty good passsages in it and they may lug it through” (p. 238). In the same letter he cited, but did not elaborate upon—unfortunately—a system of “opposites” on which he based the poem: “that is, creating a fictitious life in direct opposition to a real life [in general, presumably] which I know.” Later, in one sentence, he related the stimulus for the poem, revealing, perhaps unconsciously, the major fault of the completed poem, a fault attributable not to his system, whatever it was, but to his inability at that time to handle effectively situations with which he had had no direct experience: “[The poem] reflects, in a measure, my present mood in the narration of things of which I know nothing except by instinctive fancy” (p. 161).

Unfortunately, the combined operations of his mood (which during that summer was a disturbed one) and his instinctive fancy on the dramatic situation in the poem produced mostly melodrama. Even if one grants the influence of the brandy that the good Dominie had brought to cheer the last hours of the murderer whose confession he was hearing, the erratic reactions of the condemned man appear not only extreme but so curiously compromised by certain of his statements that even an admiring reader might pause to wonder what the poet was up to. Though a careful examination of these reactions will demonstrate how wide of the mark Robinson went, his statements to Smith show clearly what effect he had intended:

I think you may enjoy [the poem], but I must ask you not to expect too much and to make a strong effort not to laugh at the attempted intensity of the murderer’s confession. The success of the poem will depend wholly upon the success of this intensity, which ought to increase from the start and end with a great smash (pp. 161-162).

Here Robinson singled out his problem but failed to see that the erratic nature of the murderer’s intensity is what makes it appear ridiculous, not the intensity or “attempted intensity” itself. Although the poet tried to vary the emotional level of the murderer’s statement so that he might build to his
“grand smash,” he made the elementary dramatic mistake of
opening his scene at too high a pitch, which he then dropped
slightly and in a very curious fashion, finally raising it again
to a point where the murderer undergoes a brief but almost
complete collapse at the thought of his impending execution.
While the rapidity and abruptness of these changes make the
action dramatically ineffective, the climax of emotional inten-
sity in the first strophe is nowhere duplicated in the rest of the
poem. The grand smash that Robinson envisioned as the cli-
max of the action is not the climax of the condemned man’s
emotional intensity but rather a subdued return to the kind of
terrified and questioning despair under which he had collapsed
so ineffectively in the opening strophe.

As the poem begins, the condemned man has talked long
enough with the priest and has drunk enough brandy to have
worked himself into a mood of intense and rhetorical self-
searching:

Look you, Dominie, look you, and listen!
Look in my face, first; search every line there!
Mark every feature,—chin, lip, and forehead!
Look in my eyes, and tell me the lesson
You read there; measure my nose, and tell me
Where I am wanting! A man’s nose, Dominie
Is often the cast of his inward spirit;
So mark mine well. But why do you smile so?
Pity or what? Is it written all over
This face of mine, with a brute’s confession?
Nothing but sin there? nothing but hell-scar's?
Or is it because there is something better—
A glimmer of good, maybe—or a shadow
Of something that’s followed me down from childhood—
Followed me all these years and kept me,
Spite of my slips and sins and follies,
Just out of hell? Yes? something of that kind?
And you smile for that? You’re a good man, Dominie,
The one good man in the world who knows me,—
My one good friend in a world that mocks me,
Here in this hard stone cage. But I leave it
To-morrow. To-morrow! My God! Am I crying?
Are these things tears? Tears! What! Am I frightened?
I who swore I should go to the scaffold
With big strong steps and—No more. I thank you,
But no—I am all right now! No!—listen!  

2 Edwin Arlington Robinson, *The Children of the Night* (New York, 1905),
71-72. All subsequent page references are to this edition, in which “The
Night Before” is reprinted.
Two interpretations of this character immediately suggest themselves, even before the strophe continues: either he is a somewhat self-assured, slightly drunken, slightly cynical man, resigned to his own death, wishing merely to explain, perhaps even to justify, his sin, with the priest as a receptive but essentially passive audience; or he is a man in the middle stages of despair, frightened, not quite capable of accepting emotionally what is to happen to him and how he has come to be in this predicament, seeking the solace of talking to one who will listen sympathetically. In the first instance, his rather sudden collapse into tears is so unexpected, his appreciation of the priest’s belief that some good remains of him is so pathetic, that the interpretation seems untenable; in the alternative interpretation, the intensity of his opening despair becomes ridiculous when he inserts the inconsistently whimsical remark about noses, with its pontifical conclusion, “So mark mine well.”

Nor do the concluding lines of the strophe, with the strange, unmotivated shifts in person and mode, and a consequent shift in tone, serve to resolve this confusion:

I am here to be hanged; to be hanged to-morrow
At six o'clock, when the sun is rising.
And why am I here? Not a soul can tell you
But this poor shivering thing before you,
This fluttering wreck of the man God made him,
For God knows what wild reason. Hear me,
And learn from my lips the truth of my story.
There's nothing strange in what I shall tell you,
Nothing mysterious, nothing unearthly,—
But damnably human,—and you shall hear it.
Not one of those little black lawyers guessed it;
The judge, with his big bald head, never knew it;
And the jury (God rest their poor souls!) never dreamed it.
Once there were three in the world who could tell it;
Now there are two. There'll be two to-morrow,—
You, my friend, and—But there's the story:— (p. 72)

Quite aside from the speaker's self-commiseration in referring to himself as “this poor shivering thing, this fluttering wreck,” here is a man, six lines from hysteria, referring to himself in the third person as coherently and forcefully as if he were completely recovered; yet the image he presents of himself is one of near collapse. Even taken figuratively, the
description would be overstated, particularly since the shift to declamatory tone in the next two lines only serves to emphasize the incongruity of the characterization. Even if Robinson intended this shift from the first person to indicate the prisoner's objectification of his condition, it is improbable that a man in that state of mind could or would make such a shift; again, even if the murderer had regained complete control of his faculties, as he apparently had, the contrast between the strength and control with which he describes himself and the image which his description creates is too broad for effective characterization.

A third interpretation, suggested by Robinson's phrase “apparent intensity” in the letter to Smith, goes far to reconcile these contradictions, though it requires the closest reading of the text and an act of faith in the dramatic potential of the poem. Even then, the resulting characterization is not effective, but it does demonstrate at least certain of the complexities that a maturer Robinson was to exploit in the development of his later, great characters. The murderer is a man who, facing death which he fears desperately, has nevertheless decided to feign courage as he tells the priest the reasons for his actions. He sees shortly, however, from the man's smile that the priest understands enough about the nature of man to have penetrated his meaningless remark about noses for the bravado that it is (perhaps a pun on the notorious effect of liquor on the nose—he's been drinking brandy—or a reference to his actions—the murder of his wife's lover—as having cut off his nose to spite his face, though neither interpretation explains his following question to the priest as to why he smiles, a question inconsistent with a conscious pun or allusion) or to believe that even a murderer is not beyond salvation. In the face of this sympathy, the poseur breaks down and the essentially child-like nature of his feigned courage becomes apparent. His description of himself as having sworn to “go to the scaffold with big strong steps” is much like an adult's adjuration to a child to pluck up his courage and enter a darkened room “like a little man.” The murderer's recovery after his breakdown differs from a child's in that the murderer can objectify himself as the weak, pathetic figure he is, although, again like a child, he is not in his fear ashamed of the figure
he presents—he is just frightened and confused. Having de-
cided to put aside the futile guise of courage, he determines
to tell "the truth of my story." But whatever courage and
relief he is able to muster by the accounting waver again and
again during the recital.

The events of his life, presented in the extremes of illusion
and disillusion, are expressed in diction and figures equally
extreme and usually reflecting the romantic enthusiasm or
despair normally ascribed to a sensitive and sheltered ado-
lescent personality: acute instinctive perception without much
emotional stability or intellectual understanding, yet with curi-
ous flashes of insight to show that he is learning, however
slowly and painfully. Used to drop the pitch of intensity so
that it may build again, these intervals of insight do much to
temper the over-intensity of the whole poem, though not
even enough to temper the extremes. Still, Robinson's treatmen-
t of this type of character differs here from the conventional treat-
ment of individuals suffering from romantic despair—Hous-
man's are prototypical, for example—in that Robinson does not
endow his murderer with romantic fatalism. Recognizing his
guilt, Robinson's murderer does not curse God and die, but re-
 mains naturally fearful and somewhat cowardly, very desper-
ate, and manifests a questioning uncertainty that he is entirely
to blame for the events leading to his plight. At the same
time, he realizes the implications of his feeling that he is "the
man God made him":

You think me,
I know, in this maundering way designing
To lighten the load of my guilt and cast it
Half on the shoulders of God. But hear me!
I'm partly a man,—for all my weakness,—
If weakness it were to stand and murder
Before men's eyes the man who had murdered
Me, and driven my burning forehead
With horns for the world to laugh at. Trust me!
And try to believe my words but a portion
Of what God's purpose made me! The coward
Within me cries for this; and I beg you
Now, as I come to the end, to remember
That women and men are on earth to travel
All on a different road. Hereafter
The roads may meet... I trust in something—
I know not what... (p. 81)
The confusion that is the core of this character, as in many of Robinson’s characters, lies deeper than the murderer’s fears and doubts, even those about the nature and intention of a God that made him what he is, although it is derived essentially from his doubts. Terrified at the physical consequences of his deed (“Christ! did I say to-morrow? Is your brandy good for death?”), he is not particularly concerned about its moral consequences, primarily because he cannot reconcile his indifference to the fate of his victim and his understanding of the passions that drove him to kill. The conflict between passion and conscience is so unequal that he doubts the effectiveness of conscience—a “whisper” amid the shouts of passion—as a moral agent for most men. Although he talks about “the triumph of hate” as hell-inspired, he believes that those who hate live in an earthly hell and thereby “merit all grace that God can give.” His sense of guilt, in consequence, is intellectual and does not arise from the emotional depths of conscience. What he has found mostly in those depths is a motivated passion to kill, and after the deed, a relative indifference toward his victim, indeed almost an indifference toward himself and his fate, for he has never told anyone but the priest why he killed the man (as interesting an attitude on his part as any in the poem, for his crime would probably have been judged differently had his motive been known: presumably he wished to protect his wife’s name, though one must wonder whether it is not worse to be married to a murderer than to have cuckolded him). The condemned man’s confession, then, for which he is never absolved, is a plea not for forgiveness or mercy, but for understanding and enlightenment in his confusion:

But tell me,
What does the whole thing mean? What are we,—
Slaves of an awful ignorance? puppets
Pulled by a fiend? or god, without knowing it?
Do we shut ourselves from our own salvation,
Or what do we do! I tell you, Domine,
There are times in the lives of us poor devils
When heaven and hell get mixed. Though conscience
May come like a whisper of Christ to warn us
Away from our sins, it is lost or laughed at,—
And then we fall. And for all who have fallen—
Even for him—I hold no malice,
Here, as in many of Robinson’s later characterizations, understanding of self, which is the same as wisdom, comes too late, if indeed it comes at all. But in “The Night Before,” self-understanding is only half achieved—the murderer’s despair does not result from his failure to accept what he knows about himself but, rather, from his inability to understand whether or not he is fully responsible. Though Robinson referred to the poem as a “tragic monologue,” the murderer, without such understanding, can be only a pathetic figure, for tragedy implies both the power and exercise of a will not confused about the moral implications of its actions.

Whatever its merit as a poem, however, “The Night Before” stands as Robinson’s earliest extended effort to achieve an effective dramatic presentation of the enigma of human character that was to him the artist’s first concern. While his understanding of what was “dramatic” must have been influenced by Greek tragedy with its broad and sharply defined effects, and perhaps by the melodramatic effects of Wagnerian opera of which he was always fond, his tendency to invent plots and characters of considerable color had already been exhibited in some of his early prose sketches. How bizarre some of his situations were and how conscious he was of the artistic problems such invention posed, may be illustrated by his remarks to Smith about “Levy Condillac,” one of his sketches in the mid-90s:

It is not an easy task to kill a woman in childbirth with nervous prostration brought on by excessive clarinet playing on the part of an over-enthusiastic young husband, without bordering on the ridiculous. This is what I have been trying to do, and I have had the satisfaction of proving to myself that the thing can be done provided sufficient skill is exerted. Whether I can do it or not remains to be seen. Sometimes I fear that I am trying to straddle to the stars in this scheme of mine and may be obliged to come down a little before I realize anything. This will be hard, but not impossible when I set my reason to work (p. 130).

Robinson’s problem from the beginning, then, had been to express his narrative impulse through an effective structure and
thus to allow his invention the range and depth that his increasingly complex conception of human character demanded. He had been aware in “The Night Before” of the limitations his inexperience posed for him in moving an original character through a purely imaginary situation. And although he did not receive the constructive criticism he had hoped for in publishing the poem, and accepted it as a failure, it was the beginning of the extended character studies that were to culminate in the book-length narratives that occupied him almost exclusively for the last twenty years of his life. Unfortunately, those longer works are all but unknown to the general reader who comes to Robinson through the anthologized shorter narratives, among which “Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford” is apt to be the longest representative.

How much Robinson had learned from the failure of “The Night Before” and how assiduously he had applied his talent to the extended characterization may be inferred from Captain Craig, published six years later (1902). While the volume’s shorter blank-verse narratives—“Aunt Imogen” and “Isaac and Archibald”—exhibit the sure touch that the poet had exhibited in his more restricted portraits, many of them only sonnets, the longer narratives of the volume—“The Book of Annandale” and, particularly, the striking if uneven title poem, “Captain Craig”—clearly exemplify the directions in which Robinson’s impulse for narrative was moving: the increased depth and complexity of the characterization and its supporting structure in “Captain Craig” is a clear forecast of the great characters Robinson was to move through the book-length blank-verse narratives that Ellsworth Barnard has aptly called “verse novels.”

Robinson’s experiments with the play would delay his beginning those productions for more than a decade, but after “Captain Craig” there could be no doubt that his impulse for narrative had found the right genre in which to express itself. The gallery of great characters that people the major narratives from Merlin (1917) to King Jasper (1935) is the measure of his success.