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E.A. Robinson's Idea of God

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The problem of God in the poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson is to a large extent the problem of God in a modern scientific society where traditionalism remains vital to the way of life of countless of its members. Focusing on the idea of God, or Divine Force, in the work of a poet-intellectual like Robinson therefore not only provides a better awareness of the total worth of his verse; it helps to locate him explicitly in the growth of American thought. By the time of Robinson's death in 1935 American thought had been greatly influenced by an interaction of philosophical and scientific teachings and traditional ways of approaching the major human issues that had not achieved a stable synthesis. This interaction was a momentous one, and while Robinson's verse composed but a small segment of the total experience his art revealed something of the subtle uncertainty that featured it. Being wholly artist the poet was unaffectedly intellectual. He mirrored aspects of the contemporary American mind with an innocence, a directness, and an honesty that render his commitments and his doubts symptomatic of the America of his time, the years that witnessed the modern transformation of American thought.

In this regard Robinson's approach to God in his poetry was, perhaps, as illuminating as any aspect of his total poetic expression. His attraction to the God of his fathers and the ethical values that inhered in the ancient religion was inimical to his philosophical awareness and the instruction of science. This contention remained a feature of his poetry, unresolved quite as much as it continued unresolved in the larger context of the American mind. The endurance of a traditional religious concept of God and the appeals of philosophical and scientific assertions about the probability and the probable nature of some Divine Force created a tension in both the poet and his poetry. Without this conflict Robinson would be considerably less interesting as a poet, and also less important as an intellectual whose keenness to enjoy both the assurances of a scientific world and the reassurances of the old faith was an instructive detail in the larger canvas of American thought.
Three major influences were at work on Robinson, affecting his vision of the Divine, all of them intrinsic to the development of American thought in his lifetime. The Self of Idealism, the "no-God" of science, and the Father of traditional Christianity were all discernible in various passages of his poetry, explaining Robinson's reluctance, to his very last days, to be very specific about the nature of his deity. His penchant for philosophical Idealism is well known. Two of his best poems, "The Children of the Night" and "The Man Against the Sky" contain noteworthy evidences of his fondness for an Idealistic interpretation of life and of God. A letter to his friend, Harry DeForest Smith, in 1896, leaves no doubt of his Idealistic sympathies. In it he wrote:

... my ideas are getting to be so thoroughly ideal, that the collecting of anything but wisdom often seems like going back into ignorance and barbarism. Carlyle has given me a brush lately, and I am just beginning to see what he was driving at in his Sartor Resartus. If the book is anything it is a denial of the existence of matter as anything but a manifestation of thought. Christianity is the same thing, and so is illumined common sense.¹

The consequences of his contact with Idealism were persuasively present in Robinson's general reluctance to be definite about the nature and quality of God, while insisting on the actuality of the divine in various ways. He remained unwilling to submit finally to a pantheistic absolute, however. Knowing well the argument that the taproot of the subconscious went down to God, the one Self called God or the Absolute, he was not entirely convinced. He followed the line of argument without adopting its conclusions, reserving the right to interpret the existence and the function of God as accumulating thought and experience might suggest.

His enthusiasm for Idealism was stubbornly subdued by science, much as Robinson himself was subdued by life. His cosmic pessimism, his fatalism, his verging agnosticism—and his work shows signs of all these traits—perhaps were born as much of personal defeat as they were the products of a world scientifically measured. Yet the infiltration of scientific ideas

¹ E. A. Robinson, Untriangulated Stars. Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson to Harry DeForest Smith, 1890-1905, Denham Sutcliffe, editor (Cambridge, Mass., 1947), 263. All subsequent page references (US) are to this edition.
had important effects after all. The tenets of science struck hard at both an Idealistic and a religious conception of God. They also encouraged in Robinson’s poetry a recourse to scientific methodology that scorned first principles in favor of what the specific and individual facts might yield by way of wisdom in showing man why he must accept his lot. The realism of his verse he owed to the scientific temper, and in such poems as “How Annandale Went Out” and “Lost Anchors” life viewed as a quaint adventure of the protoplasm was an overriding feature. Turning again to his letters there is a passage written to Harry Smith in 1893 that conveyed his feelings.

This life is a curious mess, after all. Sometimes I sit here by my fire and wonder how it is all coming out. I look upon the millions who lived and died a thousand years ago and wonder if it makes much difference how it comes out, after all. I do not look pessimistically upon the matter. I am inclined to regard it more in the light of a big joke—whose joke it is, or whether it is a good one, I cannot tell (US, 80).

As late as 1934 Robinson found himself with much the same thought. To Laura Richards he observed:

I’m afraid, on the whole, that there isn’t much comfort in nature as a visible evidence of God’s infinite love. It [the world] appears to me to be a shambles and a torture-chamber from the insects up—or should we say down? The insects will have the world some day, and maybe they will eat everything that’s on it, and then eat each other. For some reason or other this makes me think of an epitaph by Thomas Hardy. You may know it?

“T’m Smith of Stoke. Aged sixty-odd,
I lived without a dame
From youth-time on; and would to God
My dad had done the same.”

In such moods even the stern God of his Puritan forebears enjoyed small place because the poet could find little meaning to life itself.

In many ways Robinson was a Puritan and therefore a Christian, and though he formally rejected the orthodoxy of early New England, strong evidences of its mark on him are everywhere in his poetry. The problem of sin, the weight of con-

science, the ultimacy of self-knowledge were all part of Robinson's thought. Preoccupation with such themes often led him to some of his best verse. In “Siege Perilous” the poet-moralist warned that men must not be seduced by the easy way of materialism, even though the world was replete with good men confronted by misfortune and men of indifferent virtue enjoying the world’s prosperity. Instead, man must trust his conscience and his God. If he does this, he can ignore the rest of men:

There fell one day upon his eyes a light
Ethereal, and he heard no more men speaking.\(^3\)

The power of conscience was the very marrow of the old New England theology and Robinson sang such songs of an inner necessity. His Christianity did not include a willingness or a need to define God metaphysically, or to discuss the nature of the Heavenly City. Rather it addressed itself to man in his moral relationship: to God and to his fellowmen. At times Robinson displayed an essentially religious conviction of man, and by inference, of God, espousing a kind of tendential Christian theology.

A degree of caution is in order in characterizing Robinson’s adherence to a traditional view of God, for the very reason that he declined to be specific very often about the subject. In his poetry God is not so much a person as a force, a Divine Force for Good, which motivates men and turns them in the direction of God. But for Robinson, man’s vision is not an awareness of the majesty of the Almighty but the need of man to know himself, and thereby to attain a meaning beyond himself. This is the Divine Force for Good that Robinson discovered and so often revealed in the tangled lives of men. His reluctance to personalize God is attributable both to philosophical Idealism, which tended to simplify the Divine Force for Good to the point where a single word, such as Self or Absolute, sufficed to identify the deity, and to the sway of scientific agnosticism in which God was unknown and perhaps did not exist at all. Occasionally Robinson’s verse personalized God, but more typically his deity remained “the great Whatever-it-is” (SL, 142).

\(^3\) E. A. Robinson, Collected Poems of Edwin Arlington Robinson (New York, 1948), 41. All subsequent page references (CP) are to this edition.
The interplay between the Self of Idealism and the God of traditionalism, with lingering evidence of the doubts about the existence of a deity at all, when examined in some detail spells out Robinson’s appreciation of the Divine Force for Good in the world of men. His shorter verse—his “songs with souls”—present an initial way of understanding this. Robinson retained an affinity for short verse throughout his career so that this particular poetic form encompasses the full range of his thought. So far it would seem clear that uncertainty about the “eternal verities” was a typical starting point for him:

We know not, dying, what we may be, dead;
We know not, living, what we are, alive.⁴

These lines, written in 1890, aptly pronounce this intellectual indecision. But it was the confusion that drove Robinson to sing of the need of belief and in his verse to delineate men who were seeking fulfillment. “The Children of the Night” is an example. The poem is a simple confession of faith in God undertaken by Robinson as an individual who is sure of man’s essential dignity and his eternal destiny. It is a destiny culminating in God, the Light, spoken of in the poem. To Robinson the Light and the Divine are synonymous. The initial use of the figure of Light is instructive in that it suggests the presence of both Idealistic and Christian versions of the divine. In one place the Light is identified with Self.

So let us in ourselves revere
The Self that is the Universe!

Yet the poet does not remain satisfied with the extent of this assertion. He seems drawn irresistibly to the God of his fathers. In sensing the futility of life he allows for the traditional God, from his own lonely station as a man and on the premises that men use with respect to God:

If there be nothing, good or bad,
But chaos for a soul to trust,—
God counts it for a soul gone mad,
And if God be God, He is just.
And if God be God, He is Love.

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Yet the apparent traditionalism of this profession should not obscure the fact that the poem proposes to endorse no finalized way of judging God, relying instead on the “common creed of common sense.” In “The Children of the Night” Robinson took occasion to flay formal religious confessions of God:

we have played enough  
With creeds that make a fiend of Him.  

This passage suggests not alone the influence of Idealism but the antagonisms bred by the failures of formalized religion and the pretensions of the Higher Criticism as well. In summary, “The Children of the Night” may well be called “the breakdown of the old belief and the endeavor to find life without it,” but enough of the traditional concept of God remains to render the poem a fine example of the interplay of the conflicting ideas that dominated Robinson’s version of God.

The tension arising from the interplay of conflicting principles served, at times, to bring Robinson closer to an agnostic position, as, for example, in “The Man Against The Sky.” In this poem was represented the whole human race in one man, a modern Everyman, in whom were cast up the doubts, the fears, and the aspirations of twentieth-century scientific man. The hero of the poem was real in that these feelings and convictions had been part of his earthly labor. In one man he is all men,

As if he were the last god going home  
Unto his last desire (CP, 60).

An indisputably religious piece, “The Man Against The Sky” nonetheless represented a diluted version (and vision) of God. God became only the Word, a final destination of humankind dimly realized. The deity of the poem is not so much ill-defined as undefined. It was not the Self of Idealism nor was it after the fashion of the Biblical God. At most Robinson chose to profess the divine in a negative manner, an Infinity defying human comprehension:

The Word itself, the living word  
That none alive has ever heard  
Or ever spelt (CP, 68).

5 E. A. Robinson, The Children of the Night (Boston, 1897), 12.  
6 Amy Lowell, Poetry and Poets (Boston, 1930), 26.
For "the man against the sky" the Word was sufficient. The foundation of the belief explored here was akin to intuition, its most tangible expression was the mainspring of an ethical code, that is, a Divine Force for Good in the lives of men.

The poem, "Captain Craig," stands out as an affecting delineation of this concept of a Divine Force For Good. Doubtful that he could know very much about God, Robinson was equally sure that he could recognize the divine elements in men. In "Captain Craig" he set forth his idealized view of a man, revealing how this Divine Force ought to play itself out in human affairs. The character of Craig becomes an epitome of man's dignity:

'Nothing is there more marvelous than man',
Said Sophocles; and he lived long ago (CP, 117).

And "What power a man has in him to put forth," marvels Craig (CP, 117). The poet has Craig relate how a soldier by his kindness saved a young man from suicide. Pondering the incident Craig speaks of the power for good that is in men that is not the result of wealth or worldly well-being. Does man's purpose terminate with advancing the brotherhood of man? The evidence in "Captain Craig" implies that above this brotherhood Robinson recognized a form of a divine Fatherhood. Craig is made to avow the existence of God and he tells something of His nature. The deity is termed God, or Truth. God is inscrutable and He is all-just and all-loving.

"There is no luck,
No fate, no fortune for us, but the old
Unanswering and inviolable price
Gets paid: God sells himself eternally,
But never gives a crust" (CP, 121-122).

This appears to be the same God as found in "The Children of the Night," whose make-up Robinson there chose to define as justice and love. God "sells" himself in his love for mankind, but men must be disposed to love God in return. This is presented as part of God's justice, He never gives even a crust unless men are willing to receive Him.

"Captain Craig" also contains a statement concerning the passage of man to God. The more obvious means was love for fellow human beings, yet in the poem Robinson asserted
that charity is best based on faith, a mystic supra-rational belief. This faith should not be conceived in fear, furthermore, but in a complete and utter trust in God, a

"wiser kind of joy that you shall have
Never, until you learn to laugh with God" (CP, 119)

Robinson probes the phenomenon of faith. He shows it to be a simple trust in God and a desire to carry out His will. Such a faith is not always a gratuitous gift.

"It is the flesh
That ails us, for the spirit knows no qualm,
No failure, no down-falling: so climb high" (CP, 151).

God is reached not "'alone through flesh contempt/Or through flesh reverence' " (CP, 153). This ascent to God is made easier by a firmness of faith. The stronger the faith, the more certain the salvation, a conviction movingly analogized in Craig's dream of his encounter with the Carpenter from Nazareth (CP, 141-142). "Captain Craig" demands action emanating from faith so that all men may be led to the Light (CP, 158). Clearly Robinson appears at home with the God of tradition in these passages. Yet it is well to remember that what he has to say about God is inspired not by the deity of Idealism or the God of the Testaments, but by his realization of the Divine Force for 'Good in men's lives. It is from the human situation that the poet implies a personal God that seems quite traditional at times; it is not from some a priori notion of the divine that Robinson deduces his judgment of man. This may be the same as saying that he admired the Christian ethic while resisting the accompanying concept of God. But it is the old God that we discover him in the process of resisting, and in some ways none too successfully. In any case, the Divine Force for Good was the everyday experience of God for E. A. Robinson.

Other of the poet's "songs with souls" tell of the conflicting elements in his approach to the divine. In "Credo" he wrote:

For through it all—above beyond it all—
I know the far-sent message of the years,
I feel the coming glory of the Light (CP, 94).
In such a passage the inscription of Idealism is convincing. Yet consider, in contrast, the fervent message, the agonized faith of "Calvary," with its final question:

Tell me, O Lord—tell me, O Lord, how long
Are we to keep Christ writhing on the cross! (CP, 83).

If read out of the context of his total poetry "Calvary" appeals to us as a poem worthy of one who confessed the Father in the Son. Is it fair to suggest with respect to the kind of God Robinson believed in sufficiently to include in his verse that there were times when he could only accept "the Self that was the universe," and that at other times nothing else would satisfy him than a belief in "The Master who toiled along to Calvary?" Neither the Idealistic vein nor the Christian mood dominated, however; neither was as consistent as Robinson's acknowledgement of the deity as a Divine Force for Good.

Two of Robinson's Arthurian pieces, Merlin and Lancelot, afford some further exemplification of his idea of God. Though they are set in abstracted medieval surroundings the poet does not portray in these poems anything resembling the medieval Christian view of God. Much of medieval religious sense is present but with an ethical and not a theological accent. The characters whom Robinson develops in the poems are not the stereotypes of chivalry but men and women highly individualized yet with a universal projection. They are at home in the moral quandaries in which Robinson places them while at the same time they manage to suggest in their moral dilemmas a dimension larger than life itself.

Merlin tells the story of the doom of Camelot. Robinson used this well-known theme to examine the consequences of sin, the sins of Arthur the King. His intention is not to condemn the sinner; the consequences of the sin as these are observable in life seem sufficient for him. In Merlin the effects of Arthur's sins are the ruin of Camelot. The quality that pervades the story is Fate. As Merlin himself says: "On Fate there is no vengeance/ Even for God." But Fate in the poem is based on an abstracted concept of fate as the wages of sin which are inescapable, saving Robinson from the necessary imputation of fatalism and making it consistent with his implied traditionalism in the poem with respect to God.
commented once that in *Merlin* he was not simply an evangel of ruin as he proclaimed an end to Camelot. "When you have read it," he told Mrs. Louis Ledoux, "... you mustn't forget the redemption—even if you don't see it" (*SL*, 97). Something of the same thing can be observed of *Merlin* with respect to Robinson's idea of God. By utilizing a medieval setting he could draw upon the Christian estimate of God with no need on his part to be very precise about it. But the traditional God is there, even if it is not readily visible.

*Lancelot* emphasized the Light as *Merlin* did Fate. Once again the figures in the work are not wooden characters whose attraction to the Light is a studied conclusion merely to be chronicled. Robinson left his subjects free to reject the Light, if they so desired, in a very human way. *Lancelot* was allowed to elect either the Light or his love for Guinevere, and the knight faced his choice like any ordinary mortal,

A moth between a window and a star
Not wholly lured by one or led by the other (*CP*, 415).

And in an all too human fashion he laments that he can not have both the Light and his love for Guinevere. What was the Light that led Lancelot away from the world to personal sacrifice in order to achieve it? Guinevere says, and Lancelot agrees, that it was not a Light of any worldly kind, nor was it the Light of Rome. It appeared, rather, as a unique and ethereal Gleam from "another state," "nor one that we may name." The Light is the Grail of the *Morte d’Arthur* given a psychological figure. But it is still mystic and still miracle-working. Robinson wrote to Hermann Hagedorn that the Light of Lancelot was "simply the Light of the Grail, interpreted universally as a spiritual realization of Things and their significance (*SL*, 113)." His distaste for metaphysics permitted him no more concrete statement of it than "one we may not name." To understand Robinson's traditional God in *Lancelot* requires an emphasis on values. The thrust of the poem is not so much the nature of the Light, though it was clearly a spiritual Something, as it is the absolute merit of faith as the practical means of achieving a higher spiritual condition. As in *Merlin* the explicit medieval setting enables Robinson to execute a combination of varying views of God. Where else but in the medieval world could the nature of the
traditional notion of the divine be more naturally assumed, yet allow the poet to be true to his own personal uncertainty about God? He is content to term God the Light. Nevertheless, the final determination by Lancelot to follow the Light strikes us as very similar to medieval man's passage to God and so reinforces the image of the Christian deity in this example of Robinson's poetic thought.

A major portion of Robinson's later work, poetry completed after Merlin and Lancelot, took the form of dramatic narratives. These poems reaffirmed a moral foundation to life, but they were notable as well for a hesitancy to avow an absolute God, or immortality. The spiritual message of the dramatic narratives was oftentimes obscure. Of the significance of human values these poems spoke with an immediate and an experiential certainty; of the nature of God or of the existence of God at all, doubts were simultaneously raised. What emerged most consistently in these poems was a sense of the weight and power of conscience, the tool of self-knowledge. The age-old faults of man—pride, hatred, lust, spiritual complacency—were all incisively portrayed along with the varying efforts to achieve salvation on the part of the characters involved. In this collection of poems there were some amazing variations with respect to Robinson's estimate of the nature of God. For example, the deity of Fernando Nash in The Man Who Died Twice, as often as he was described, was verily the God of Revelation. At the other extreme, The Glory of the Nightingales lacked altogether any affirmation of God.

Roman Bartholow was one of the first of these studies exploring the spiritual state of the times and reiterating the lesson of Lancelot that man of his nature seeks a spiritual goal. The sense of sin symbolized in Merlin also figured prominently, bringing the total human dilemma into focus. Simply told, Roman Bartholow was the story of modern man's saturation with materialism and his attempts to overcome this condition. The poem revealed in an important way Robinson's grasp of values in that it narrated the personal triumph of a morally sick man. Bartholow faced a spiritual impasse:

Like one above a dungeon where for years
Body and soul had fought futility
In vain for their deliverance (CP, 733).
He was able to find himself and rise above his weaknesses because he came to a belief in God. The figuration assigned to the deity,

Power

That filled him as a light fills a buried room
When earth is lifted and the sun comes in (CP, 733).

delimited knowledge of the divine nature. Yet in thanksgiving for his deliverance through faith Bartholow invoked God, hinting at some form of a personal deity. Roman Bartholow had three important ingredients that were consistent in Robinson’s religious verse: a sense of sin or failure, a need to believe in Something, outside of man, and a passage to God on the strength of faith. But the poet hesitated to personalize the deity, save by faint implication, preserving his preference for a Divine Force for Good as the essence of his awareness of the goal of man’s spiritual desire.

“Avon’s Harvest” was another poem in which Robinson’s moral intention was not projected in a highly symbolic form but told as a simple tale of the reality of sin in an average life. The sin of Avon was one of hatred. In the end the remorse of conscience he felt for his misdeeds killed him. He was unable to find any healing medicine.

“I’m witness to the poison, but the cure
Of my complaint is not, for me, in Time.
There may be doctors in eternity
To deal with it, but they are not here now” (CP, 559).

Much of Avon’s doubt about God was traceable to the influence of science. In pondering the possibility of an afterlife he alternated between the unknowable God and the “no-God.” Referring to divine knowledge of those aspects of life inexplicable to men, Avon remarked:

“If such an one there be. If there be none,
All’s well—and over. Rather vain expense,
One might affirm—yet there is nothing lost.
Science be praised that there is nothing lost (CP, 567).

Such was the tone of Robinson’s statement of the nature of God in “Avon’s Harvest.”

In The Man Who Died Twice the notion of God was more
clearly expressed, better defined in fact than in most of Robinson's poetry. His definition was indirect for he was concerned primarily with the sins of his protagonist, Fernando Nash; but the drama of redemption recounted was very close to the traditional experience of man's salvation by God and because of man's free belief in Him. For Fernando Nash God was a personal being, offended by sin; divine justice required a complete dedication of the sinner if he were to overcome his faults and come to God. This passage to God is what gave meaning to life for the repentant. In Robinson's poetic phrase man became "God's too fallible image." Man was crushed by remorse because he was given to see his actions as an offense to the all-high Person; God was a being to whom Nash prayed for help, for he came to understand that he was of God, "a half-hatched bird of paradise." After a long inner struggle Nash at last found God and saw the wisdom of forsaking the world. While not defining God as such, Robinson has left an indelible impression of God, as Western men have often viewed Him, in \textit{The Man Who Died Twice}. It has been argued that in \textit{Cavender's House} Robinson emancipated himself from the Christian theme of salvation, forgiveness and redemption, by resorting to "natural justice," "the inevitable consequences of sin." Certainly the conception of God was far less developed and meaningful than it was in \textit{The Man Who Died Twice}. The existence of God, or Purpose or Law, the poet was ready enough to affirm, but it is equally plain that the nature of the deity was not considered very important or very relevant. The traditional and the agnostic elements both received enunciation so that no firm insistence on the nature of God, even by indirection, is likely. Yet the God, or Purpose or Law, which binds men was real enough in \textit{Cavender's House}. The sin of Cavender was traditionally conceived, his "tower of self," an unexceptional form of pride. Furthermore, he was willing to accept the moral sanctions that men are wont to attach to sin. There was simply no redeeming God at work. The absence of a Divine Force for Good in the lives of the people in \textit{The Glory of the Nightingales} enables us to appreci—

\textsuperscript{7} Estelle Kaplan, \textit{Philosophy in the Poetry of Edwin Arlington Robinson} (New York, 1940), 102.
ate the humanistic morality Robinson at times so much favored. In all his dramatic narratives the problems were entirely human ones. The resolution of such a problem in *The Glory of the Nightingales* was in these same human terms. The greed of the wealthy Nightingale, which encompassed the ruin of his physician-friend, Malory, was the human fault around which the poem was structured. Nightingale atoned for his misdeeds through his confession to Malory that he had failed to act with appropriate human dignity. In order to recover his true stature as a man he told Malory of his willingness to endow a hospital, affording himself human expiation for his life, wrongly spent. His salvation was discovered in an exclusively human way. The absence of God in the poem does not suggest at all that the human resolution utilized by Robinson to demonstrate salvation or healing has any less meaning for the people involved because there is no God directly or indirectly part of the drama. To Robinson human redemption could be fully satisfying. The purpose of God is further denied in that part of the power of the poem came from Nightingale's inability to understand or to accept the conventional ideas of sin and divine redemption.

What conclusions may be drawn about Robinson's idea of God? A consistent awareness of man’s frailty and his struggle against that condition in order to achieve some kind of self-mastery and self-fulfillment are the starting points for recognizing Robinson's acceptance of a divinity. Usually for him human fulfillment is explained by reference to the Divine Force for Good in the lives of men. There is some power and purpose that form part of the universe, accounting both for man's desire for self-satisfaction of a high moral order and imparting to him the stamina to achieve his special dignity. At this level of definition Robinson’s belief in a deity is not open to question. Beyond this definition, however, conflicts must arise about how far he went to the direction of defining God. Perhaps some useful distinction can be made between Robinson’s traditional, well-limned God and his ill-defined deity of Idealism and the scientific temper by distinguishing between what Robinson wanted in God and what he was able to accept intellectually. That he wanted (and in ways, needed) the God of Revelation seems practically certain. That is why he wrote,
subconsciously perhaps, as though there was such a deity and his belief in him was quite real. But the positive thrust of philosophical Idealism and the negative effects of scientific thought prevented him from enjoying the anthropomorphic consolations for humanity that belief in a personal God held out. His heart and his mind were at war. Nor did the fully mature artist move finally in one direction or another. All three major sources of his idea of God he continued to draw on throughout his total verse; the passing years witnessed a retention of an indefinite idea of God. Like his own generation of Americans, Robinson in his poetry revealed a need for God, whether out of historic habit or something deeper that had given rise to that habit. Yet he remained puzzled as to God’s existence and knowability according to any worldly form. He struggled with this difficulty to the end of his life, not unlike the man in one of his poems, walking up “Wood Street from Cheapside” in search of an answer.

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I cannot speak of E.A. Robinson’s admirable work on such short notice; it is delicate, firm, profound, exactly sincere,—better critics than I have praised its qualities and will again. Let me notice instead the debt that we owe him for the qualities of his life; for the dignity with which he wore his fame, for the example of his reticence and steady concentration, for the single-mindedness with which he followed his own sense of direction, unbewildered and undiverted. He had something of the quality that he felt in Lincoln: “The calm, the smouldering and the flame of patience.” We are grateful that he was not what they call “a good showman,” but gave himself to his work, not his audience, and would have preferred complete failure to any success with the least taint of charlatanry in it.

ROBINSON JEFFERS