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Conrad Aiken

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For the Centennial

of

Edwin Arlington Robinson

Maine's most illustrious poet

Born: Head Tide, Maine, Dec. 22, 1869
Died: New York, N. Y., April 6, 1935

* * *

There is no music in the world like this,
No character wherewith to set it down,
No kind of instrument to make it sing.
No kind of instrument? Ah, yes, there is;
And after time and place are overthrown,
God's touch will keep its one chord quivering.

* * *
ROBINSON'S WORKS

1896 THE TORRENT AND THE NIGHT BEFORE
1897 THE CHILDREN OF THE NIGHT
1902 CAPTAIN CRAIG
1910 THE TOWN DOWN THE RIVER
1914 VAN ZORN
1915 THE PORCUPINE
1916 THE MAN AGAINST THE SKY
1917 MERLIN
1920 LANCELOT
1920 THE THREE TAVERNS
1921 AVON'S HARVEST
1921 COLLECTED POEMS
1923 ROMAN BARTHOLOW
1924 THE MAN WHO DIED TWICE
1925 DIONYSUS IN DOUBT
1927 TRISTRAM
1927 COLLECTED POEMS
1928 SONNETS 1889-1927
1929 CAVENDER'S HOUSE
1929 COLLECTED POEMS
1930 THE GLORY OF THE NIGHTINGALES
1931 SELECTED POEMS
1931 MATTHIAS AT THE DOOR
1932 NICODERMUS
1933 TALIFER
1934 AMARANTH
1935 KING JASPER
THREE MEETINGS WITH ROBINSON

By CONRAD AIKEN

In an interview, or statement, not long before he died, T.S. Eliot remarked that he had never (if I remember it correctly) discovered any American poet of such stature that a young American poet could possibly be influenced by him. I must say, this statement astounded me. Before my freshman year at Harvard, I had heard from a cousin of mine, Harold Tillinghast, a line of Robinson's, or part of a line, "a slight kind of engine" (I don't know from what poem it comes, or the title, or if I have it right). He asked me if I thought it was poetry. (The reference, of course, being to a hypodermic syringe.) And, naturally, I said yes. 1906? 1907? About then. And Robinson was very much in the air: we all knew it. I think this was one of my dear Uncle Tom's innumerable mistakes and misremembrances! Who didn't know Miniver Cheevy? We all did. In fact Robinson WAS the first American thing, the old oak, the first with a classical firmness, that we could, like young mistletoe, live upon. And we did. We owe him an immense debt, which we can never repay.

This is not the occasion for a discussion of the poetry (which, anyway, I have already done elsewhere), but I would like to say that it was my privilege to meet him early and late, and that I loved the man. Early, for I was at Camp Merryweather, in Maine, run by Laura Richards and her family, who, coming from Gardiner, Maine, had known Robinson all their lives. Up he came for a weekend: and for the first time in my life I met a poet. And what a poet. And what a man. I've never forgotten that meeting with the tall, shy, elegant, soft-eyed poet, nor, either, my own brashness on the occasion; for, Laura Richards having brought up the subject, about the treatment
of the skylark in English poetry, what should I do, being aged seventeen or so, but tell them: that Shelley was all right, but for Wordsworth to describe the lark as a “pilgrim of the sky” had a “connotation of weariness” which destroyed the image. Enough said.

He came to visit me in Winchelsea, Sussex, about 1923. I’d been told to put in some Scotch: being poor, I put in one bottle. He finished it, and began quoting Plato in Greek. Two days later we went to Canterbury together—I met him in London—and this was an alcoholiday: we stopped at every pub, from and to Victoria Station, and in Canterbury, going and coming. We missed nothing in Canterbury, except one drink, which he spilled. An enchanting day. Then, he was to show me the way to eat a lobster: he had chosen a special lobster restaurant, near Leicester Square, but we HAD to have one final drink. We did, in Wardour Street. And here were two bonny lassies Of the Trade, one of whom came up to me, kissed me, and said, “Why not take us to dinner?” Robinson, abashed, stood back and said simply, “I perceive I am in the way.” But I said to the nice gal, “I’m afraid we can’t. We’re poets, and we’re poor.” They retreated, and we went round the corner to our lobsters.

He knew it all. Ordered “hen” lobsters, with oil and vinegar. Then proceeded to excavate every mortal morsel—little claws, big claws, tomalley, all the meat, even to the flippers, piled it in a luscious pyramid, added a little seasoning, and went to work. It was delicious. Unhappily, I mentioned this day to Lucius Beebe who reported some of it in a magazine. Then came a sad letter from Robinson: he didn’t like it to be said that he drank. What to do? I answered that I thought it was fine, and one of the best days of my life, or words to that effect. I never heard from him again. Mind you, though EAR and I never corresponded further, I did see him often at Lock-Ober’s restaurant in Boston, and he was always cordial. I suspect he blamed Beebe more than he did me!