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The Letters of E.A. Robinson: A Sampler

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The earliest extant letter of Robinson's was written to Fred W. Palmer, an older cousin who lived on a farm in nearby Pittston. Robinson was twelve years old, his cousin twenty-seven, when the letter was written:

Gardiner Jan 5/82

Dear Cousin,

I guess I will try to write a few lines to you to-night, but let me give you a description of the table; It is in the little room and it has got a pile of papers & books on one end and a dish of apple-skins and "chompings" on the other but I guess I will not talk about that any more, because you have been here enough to have it look natural to you. I want to ask a favor of you if you will do it that is, not to show this letter to anybody, and "I mean business and no joking" but don't be in such a rush I want to ask you another and that is: Please don't name any more branches of the Kennebec not at present at any rate. School commenced last Tuesday. We had about five inches of snow Sunday night and Monday morning it was blustering hard and we (please excuse that tall e) for it was an accidental slip of the pen.) had some large drifts to wade through. I suppose you got it bad up there. James I weighs between nine and ten pounds and is as black as your boots.

Herman got a watch Christmas and a few other things. The upper story and roof of Joshua Gray's office burnt off last Tuesday forenoon & came near burning some other buildings laying near it. It has been "bully" skating on the river all the week and good sleighing since Tuesday. Herman has gone skating this evening and Dean has gone to a party, mother is knitting and father has just got done reading a paper,—and I'm here:

So good bye
E. A. R.

In addition to its boyish charm, this is a curious letter in a number of respects. What is the occasion for the letter? Why would a twelve-year-old write to a cousin fifteen years his senior? If it is a thank you note for an unmentioned Christmas or birthday present, it is indirect to say the least. Why the request for secrecy? The letter starts off in a descriptive manner, a word-painting of the table in the little room. Then it breaks off, in embarrassment perhaps, as if fearful of ridicule for attempting to

Quotations from manuscript materials are by permission of the late Mrs. William Nivison.
portray so familiar a scene. But the graphic sense is there. We know that Robinson began writing verse at eleven. It is not too far-fetched to conjecture that the future poet had conveyed to his cousin an inkling of an aspiration to write and had struck a responsive chord.

Robinson's last letter, dated March 25, 1935, twelve days before his death, was dictated to Lewis M. Isaacs and addressed to his niece Marie Robinson, who was a nurse. Robinson's last concern, as always, was about other people, in this case George Burnham, his oldest and closest friend from Harvard days:

There is nothing especially new to report of my own condition, but I have been worrying lately about Mr. Burnham. I am very anxious that you should have a short talk with him, perfectly frank and confidential, giving him to understand clearly that you are an old friend of Dr. Legg's, and that an interview with him could be arranged with no difficulty or expense on his side. I have always suspected something wrong with the legs he is wearing now.

I seem to be a fixture in this place, until my rather obstinate phlebitis disappears. Perhaps I have never made it quite clear to you that I have been wrestling with a duodenal stasis, an inflamed pancreas, and phlebitis—which should be enough for one visitation.

I am sorry to trouble you with Mr. Burnham, but you can easily see how I cannot keep myself from worrying about him. It is desperately important that he should at least have some legs to walk on. If Dr. Legg’s bill is not too large, taken along with my present rather exorbitant expense, I should be glad to pay it and furnish the new pair of legs. If I am assuming too much, please find out as soon as you can, and let me know. And remember me to everybody.

Between these two letters Robinson wrote thousands of others. Most of the originals are scattered across the country in sixty or more libraries; some are in the hands of private collectors. A few are inaccessible. The letters to Rosalind Richards, for example, in the Houghton Library at Harvard, cannot be seen until 2007. A woman in New York, the daughter of one of Robinson's boyhood friends in Gardiner, has Robinson's letters to her father. "Only a meagre handful," she writes, "none that would be of any interest to the general public or the literary world." Some of Robinson's letters have been lost or destroyed. With the exception of a single letter written in 1896, the early letters to Mowry Saben were destroyed in a fire in Rochester, New York. The bulk of the letters that Robinson wrote to Dr. Alanson T. Schumann have never turned up. Nor have I been able to track down the nineteen letters Robinson is known to have written to W. H. Gerry. Undoubtedly there are others. Nonetheless more than four thousand letters have been preserved, silent testimony of the value the recipients placed upon Robinson and his work.

Publication of the letters, however, raises a different question. Ranging from lengthy outpourings of the soul and philosophic disquisitions on art and democracy to cryptic notes and the latest nostrum for constipation—of what value are these posthumous remains to posterity? In addition to three full-length biographies, as well as numerous articles
and specialized studies, three major collections of letters have already been published: *Selected Letters* (SL),¹ *Untriangulated Stars: Letters of Edwin Arlington Robinson to Harry de Forest Smith, 1890–1905* (US),² and *Letters to Edith Brower* (LEB).³ What further insight can be gained of Robinson the man and his work? In short, what’s new?

Generally the collected letters will establish a more detailed and accurate chronology of Robinson’s life and work. They will also establish a more accurate reading of letters previously published. More specifically, they will be helpful in ascertaining the dates of composition and publication of some of his poems. In addition, they will provide further insight into his methods of work, his artistic theories, and his philosophy; at the same time they will give us a fuller picture of Robinson the man and his world.

Although we cannot give a comprehensive report here of all of Robinson’s letters, it is possible, by sampling, to treat some significant aspects of the letters, with illustrations that convey both substance and flavor.

The letters published to date constitute approximately one-sixth of those known to exist. They are, consequently, limited in terms of the number of recipients as well as in terms of content. There are unfortunately numerous instances of serious misreadings.

The *Selected Letters* contains 181 letters to 41 recipients. Approximately one-third of the letters were written to four people, three of whom were the editors. These letters were selected and edited by a committee, all close friends of Robinson: Lewis M. Isaacs and Louis V. Ledoux (Robinson’s executors), Hermann Hagedorn, and Ridgely Torrence. Typescripts of the letters were read, initialled, and rated (A, B, or C) by each member of the committee. Occasionally one of them added a comment: “His opinion not too flattering of Moody’s unpublished poems.” “We must be careful that no one can say that we, as editors, are boosting our own poetry. H. H.” “Omit criticism of Miss Peabody’s work.” These men were highly conscious that they were dealing not only with a close friend but with a public figure whose image as the dignified patriarch of his poetic generation they wished to preserve. As a consequence they excised what they considered to be homely or vulgar or too personally revealing, anything in fact that might reflect a different image. The following two passages, for example, were omitted from Robinson’s letters to Arthur Gledhill:

I guess there is “no probable, possible shadow of doubt” but that Gustavus Edward has glued his nose to the grindstone. Is he to be pitied or congratulated? But there—there is no use in my beating about the bush (“stick to your bush!”) at this rate; I will make my confession and leave you to judge me as you will. When we look back into the past and recall all the old scenes and incidents and friendships, some particular light must naturally shine

brighter than others; some tender link that has joined the hearts of friends must take its strain in after days and the mighty question is at hand—will it yield? or will it remain firm? I will deceive you no longer;—it yielded. I have left off chewing tobacco! The last graduation & reception brought a train of thoughts into my head with the above result. Beats the devil, don’t it? (Letter to Gledhill, July 24, 1890)

Mr. E. Gustavus Moore is going to get married and wishes to know where you are. . . . I do not understand what has come over the man all of a sudden but I suppose he does. I do not expect to go down to see the operation performed . . . as I do not care for that kind of entertainment. If I were to get married I should not want anyone around but the persons necessary for the performance. Think I should prefer [Judge] Jim Larrabee to most of the ministers. But then, I do not see any prospects of getting myself into any such a situation, and you and Gus will probably be rearing brats while I am hunting for a "job." (Letter to Gledhill, May 23, 1893)

Not terribly significant omissions perhaps, especially in the light of later knowledge, yet both pathos and humor are here, and beneath the facetiousness there is an undercurrent of serious concern about the future and the question of marriage and a literary career.

Although Denham Sutcliffe did not cut passages from the letters to Harry de Forest Smith, he did not publish all of the letters in Untriangulated Stars. In 1892, while Robinson was a student at Harvard he wrote eight letters to Smith in which he related his "anatomical investigations" of the "midnight palaces" of Boston. These letters were suppressed. In addition, US omits twenty-two others, most of them subsequent to 1905. One of these reveals the sad end of Robinson and Smith's collaborative translation of Antigone: "I'm sorry to say that when I was in Gardiner in 1909, I tried in vain to find my Antigone. I remember boxing it up with some books of mine, but found that the box had been opened by the kids and its contents more or less scattered" (Letter to Smith, September 13, 1916). Another letter, dated November 19, 1920, at the time of the publication of "Mr. Flood's Party," provides the clue to the prototype of Mr. Flood: "I am enclosing a clipping from The Nation for November 24, in which you may detect the direct influence of a story your father told me [us?] once in Gardiner. It stuck hard in my memory, but I never thought of using it until last summer." Hagedorn, who could have known the source either from Smith or directly from Robinson, tells the story told by Smith's father "of old Johnny H—, who had a habit of returning from town with a little brown jug and, on the way home, conversing with the other half of his split personality." There is no doubt in my mind that Johnny H— is the same person, wonderfully transmuted, about whom Robinson twenty-five years earlier had written a prose sketch entitled "Saturday," of which, as he wrote to Smith at the time, Smith was "indirectly the father, as it is founded on the amiable portrait of one Mr. Hutchings in bed with a pint of rum and a pile of dime novels" (US, p. 202).

Robinson’s handwriting, which was fairly open and legible in the early letters, became increasingly tighter and microscopic by the turn of the century. William Vaughn Moody in exasperation chided Robinson on his “immoral fist.” If Robinson’s friends had difficulty reading his script, there is no reason to suppose that his editors would suffer less. It is difficult to tell “know” from “learn,” “any” from “my,” and “in” from “on” except, at times, by context. And it must be confessed that in some instances anyone’s guess is as good as another’s. Nonetheless many of the published letters contain clear-cut examples of misreadings that are significant and substantial. For example, in a letter to John Hays Gardiner dated November 2, 1898, Robinson wrote that he could never share Gardiner’s enthusiasm for the poetry of John Donne. In the published version of the letter, Robinson is represented as saying Donne “is both dogmatic and ancient, like my stationery, and hardly to be considered as apart from his period” (SL, p. 15). Although “dogmatic” satisfies the context of the Dean of St. Paul’s, what Robinson actually wrote was “He is both degenerate and ancient,” using “degenerate” in the specialized sense given it by Max Nordau in his book *Degeneration*, which Robinson had read and had commented on in earlier letters. This reading is confirmed in the next few sentences by Robinson’s reference to what he regarded as Donne’s “half-mystical sexual uneasiness” and his “appetite for symbols.” The manuscript itself clearly reads “degenerate.” I can only account for the change on the basis of sheer disbelief on the part of the editors.

Robinson’s letter to Edith Brower of February–March 1897 is largely a discussion of idealism and its application to literature. “When you come to recognize the Divine through your own spiritual reasoning and discovery,” he wrote, “you will begin to lose faith in local color. . . . There is only one religion, one faith, one substance; you may find it in the Gospels, in Emerson, in *Sartor Resartus*, and, if you will take the trouble to look for it—in a temple” (LEB, p. 22). “Temple” at the conclusion of the series may appear to be a fitting climax, with the suggestion even of a biting indirect comment on the failure of the organized church. What Robinson wrote, however, is vastly different in tone and intent. Instead of “temple,” he wrote “tadpole.” It may be that the editor rejected the reading as either ludicrous or incomprehensible or both. It is in fact neither. Rather it is a clarification of Robinson’s idealism at this time.

Ever since his return to Gardiner from Harvard, and while perfecting his craft, Robinson had been seeking a system of values that he could live by and that would inform his work with significance. This search, reflected in many of his letters, became intense during 1896, a crucial period in Robinson’s life. By November he had found what he was looking for. On the nineteenth he wrote to Smith: “I am just beginning to see what he [Carlyle] 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 mani-
ifestation of thought. . . . I do believe in idealism as the one logical and satis-
factory interpretation of life” (US, p. 263). Robinson’s idealism, we
know, was a modified transcendentalism, a composite of Sweden-
borg, Emerson, and Carlyle, with “some valuable suggestions,” as
Robinson once said, from “Mr. Jones and Mrs. Eddy.” We must now
add the name of Henry Wood to the list of crystallizing influences.
On October 14, 1896, Robinson wrote to his friend Joseph S. Ford:

If things go along with me as well as they are going now, I think I am pretty much done
with grouches. There is nothing in my life to give me any pleasure except the fact that life
is the mind. I feel that I am drifting every day toward something like “Christian Science,”
but I shall never be able to build my faith on Mrs. Eddy. Mr. Henry Wood of Boston,
who, by the way, seems to me to be one of the most sensible men in America is nearer to
my idea of an interpreter of life. I wish you would read his “Studies in the Thought
World” sometime, but I don’t imagine you ever will. As for my own ideas on the subject,
you will find them in a very concentrated form in “Two Sonnets” which were “fired
back” from the Boston Transcript after the publication of “Verlaine”—a thing which
struck me as just a little humorous. But I suppose they know what they want.

All I mean by the foregoing paragraph is that I have at last come to believe that the
mind is the man and that its powers are infinite.

Henry Wood (1834–1909) had earlier written Ideal Suggestion Through
Mental Photography, God’s Image in Man: Some Intuitive Perceptions
of Truth, Edward Burton [a novel], and The Political Economy of
Natural Law, all of which had gone through six or more editions by
1896, when Studies in the Thought World was published. The volume
consists of lectures and essays “metaphysical, psychological, or evolu-
tionary in character,” as Wood stated in his preface. Wood called
Emerson “the great idealist and philosopher of modern times” and on
the title page printed Emerson’s statement “Great men are they who see
that spiritual is stronger than any material force; that thoughts rule the
world.” Wood viewed evolution “as the divine method of continuous
creation. . . . all phenomena are the manifestations of some Infinite
Mind . . . . the same omnipresent divine life binds the rock into form
that thrills through the soul of an archangel. Mollusk, fish, reptile, and
mammal [and we might add “tadpole”] . . . form the rounds upon
which we have been climbing” (Wood, pp. 19, 22, 23).6 To Robinson
trying to find his place and to justify his existence not in terms of busi-
ness or industry or any ordinary job but as an artist, a creative worker in
and through words, there must have been a special appeal in Wood’s
statement that “Man is mind. He is an unconscious artist, dwelling in
the midst of an endless variety of mental pictures. . . . Thought is the
artist; and it is ever executing real, but intangible masterpieces with mar-

6. Robinson had also recently read Henry Drummond’s Natural Law in the Spiritual World, in which
the tadpole is cited as an example to demonstrate the correspondence between the natural and the spir-
ritual worlds.
vellous facility... Thought, the imaging artist, is perpetually designing and executing new works” (Wood, pp. 40, 43).

“Two Sonnets,” with the climactic line, “The mead of Thought’s prophetic endlessness,” I am convinced was precipitated by Robinson’s reading of Wood’s *Studies in the Thought World*. On June 18, 1896, Robinson wrote to George W. Latham: “My materialism is more shaky now than ever and I am beginning to conceive of great results being brought to pass by a persistent, and consistent, working out of life upon the hypothesis that the mind is the man.” A week later, on June 25, 1896, Robinson wrote to Ford to bring him up to date on his latest works, among them a poem “in the severe style in which I deal with the superstitious timorousness I find in the strange and unnecessary notion that we shall meet our friends again in another life. The lines are harder than quartz but they do not satisfy me.” The reference is clearly to “Two Sonnets.”

In addition to “Two Sonnets,” another poem written about the same time undoubtedly derives from Robinson’s reading of Wood. On June 24, 1896, Robinson sent a wedding present in the form of a sonnet to Chauncey G. Hubbell. “It is,” he wrote, citing the current rate paid for poetry, “worth about a dollar and forty cents. You will, as a student of Swedenborg, readily see what I am driving at, though you may not like my way of putting it.” The sonnet enclosed was “The Garden,” in which the poet views

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all the lives of humankind:
And they were like a book that I could read,
Whose every leaf, miraculously signed,
Outrolled itself from Thought’s eternal seed,
Love-rooted in God’s garden of the mind.
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Originally published as “God’s Garden” in *The Globe* for September 1896, the poem was reprinted in *The Torrent and the Night Before* under the title of “The Garden.” Since the original manuscript which Robinson sent to Hubbell was also entitled “The Garden,” we can safely assume that the change in title in *The Globe* was made by the editor, W. H. Thorne. In *The Torrent and the Night Before* “The Garden” immediately precedes “Two Sonnets.”

Robinson’s letters contain much new information not only about the composition of his poems and dates of publication but also references to lost or discarded material, including variants of published poems. Oftentimes these “shapes and echoes that are never done” tell us a great deal about the poet’s creative process.

Originally Robinson intended to call his first volume *The Tavern and the Night Before*. “I am going to write some ‘Tavern Songs’ this winter,” he wrote to Smith on October 7, 1894. He would attempt “to put a little mysticism in them, and make them worth while as literature; at the same time trying to make them musical enough in themselves to be
songs first and poems after.” He cited the following chorus as an example:

“There’s a town down the river
    Down the river, down the river,
    There’s a town down the river,
    By the sea.” (US, p. 170)

In December 1895 he was still working away at his songs. “My songs are corkers,” he wrote, “—particularly Edward Alphabet:

‘Look at Edward Alphabet
    Going home to pray!
    Drunk as he can ever get,
    And on the Sabbath Day!—’ ” (US, p. 238)

How many of these songs Robinson wrote we shall never really know, but there must have been quite a few of them. Shortly after sending the poems off in search of a publisher, Robinson wrote to Smith on March 7, 1896: “The book will contain something like a hundred pages and will be called The Tavern and the Night Before. You see I was bound to wring the ‘tavern’ in somehow, and I think I have done it fairly well” (US, p. 243). Since The Torrent and the Night Before as published contained only forty pages of text, it is clear that more than half the original volume was to have been made up of these “Tavern Songs.” His first attempt at publication “proved a fizzle,” apparently, he must have felt, because of the songs; for he discarded most of them before sending the projected volume out again. Something of his frustration over the songs and his reason for deleting them are contained in two letters to Joseph Ford:

... when it comes to the matter of songs, I have concluded that I was not born to write them. . . . Sometimes I can sing a little for a line or two, but it doesn’t hold out. In other words, I can’t make it “go”. The finished song, or rather doggerel, makes me think of something made by machinery. If this sounds odd to you, I advise you to examine the enclosed specimen (which I have long since disowned) and then judge the question for yourself. I may do a tolerable sonnet now and then, but I have come to the melancholy conclusion after some hundreds of hours of miserable labor, that my attempts at song writing are total failures. (Letter to Ford, September 27, 1896)

Despite Ford’s reassurances about the songs, Robinson in his next letter, dated October 14, 1896, continued in the same vein, referring to “Golden Hair to Gray,” the song he had sent with the previous letter, and enclosing “as curiosities” two more songs, “Barbara” and “Barney’s Coming Home.” They were, he said, “cancelled and dis­owned.” In a postscript he commanded: “The enclosed scraps are to be destroyed—with ‘Golden Hair etc.’ ” Ford apparently carried out his orders.

Robinson’s finale to song, however, did not take into account “Captain Craig,” that crazy-quilt of a poem, Robinson’s “rather particular kind of twentieth century comedy.” If Robinson was determined to
"wring the 'tavern' in somehow," here was his chance. In "Captain Craig" Robinson created a barroom scene, with Count Pretzel von Würzberger, the Obscene, "a poet and a skeptic and a critic" at the piano. After the recitation of his unique sonnet about poor Carmichael, the Count remarks:

The stars are singing *Golden hair to gray,*
*Green leaf to yellow leaf,* or chlorophyl
To xanthophyl, to be more scientific,—
So speed me one more stein.

Later we have Killigrew's poem, at once "Connotative, succinct, and erudite":

> Augustus Plunket, Ph.D.
> And oh, the Bishop's daughter;
> A very learned man was he
> And in twelve weeks he got her;

This was followed by Mr. Killigrew's performance of *A Ballad of London*:

> Say, do you go to London Town,
> You with the golden feather?

Capped by the Captain's comment:

> Now you have read it through, and you know best
> What worth it has. We fellows with gray hair
> Who march with sticks to music that is gray
> Judge not your vanguard fifing.

Toward the end of the poem Killigrew relates a dream about a sad man who came into his room, sat beside his bed, "Said not a word, but sang." He went on to say, "I have lost / The greater number of his verses now, / But there are some, like these, that I remember:

> "'Ten men from Zanzibar,
Black as iron hammers are,
Riding on a cable-car
Down to Crowley's theater.' . . .

Once Robinson had created something, he was reluctant to let it die. I have a hunch, indeed more than a hunch, that in "Captain Craig," Robinson’s phoenix poem, some of his tavern songs were reborn.

In May or June 1900 Robinson sent to Edith Brower "an irregular sonnet on Erasmus," which he asked her "to straighten as well as you can" (LEB, p. 116). He also requested that she return the manuscript, which she apparently did. "Erasmus" was first published in *The Harvard Monthly* in December 1900; it was subsequently reprinted with revisions in *Captain Craig*. However, about the same time that Robinson had sent the poem to Miss Brower, he had also sent a copy to Josephine Preston Peabody, which she kept. That manuscript differs
considerably from the two published versions. With three versions to compare we can see how Robinson “tinkered” the poem, filing and fitting his words until they took the shape he wanted. Here is the first version:

ERASMUS

When he protested, not too solemnly,
That for a world’s achieving maintenance
The crust of overdone divinity
Lacked aliment, they called it recreance;
When he preferred, good humoredly, to scan
Both pictures, and reduced, with learned glee,
The monk within the cassock to the man
Within the monk, they called it heresy;
And when he made so perilously bold
As to print some honest thoughts in black and white,
Good fathers looked askance at him and rolled
Their inward eyes in anguish and affright;
And there were some did shake at what was told,
And they shook best who knew that he was right.

When the poem appeared in *The Harvard Monthly*, lines five, six, and ten had been altered significantly:

And when he chose, through his own glass, to scan
Sick Europe, and reduced, unyieldingly,
And when he made so perilously bold
As to print some honest words in black and white,

The changes are in the direction of greater precision and tonal unity. Robinson intended a somewhat humorous treatment of a serious topic. The octave in the manuscript version, with its repetitive “not too solemnly,” “Good humoredly,” and “with learned glee,” overemphasizes humor to the point of caricature and destroys the underlying seriousness. The revised version as printed in *The Harvard Monthly* is still humorous but more subtle. In the sestet, the shift in line ten from “honest thoughts” to “honest words” is more precise but still flat in comparison with the final version as it appeared in *Captain Craig*: “As to be scattered forth in black and white,” with the powerful suggestiveness of the blended seed-truth-falsehood image.

So much for illustrations of some of the insights gained from a sampling of Robinson’s letters. The published letters will reveal a fuller and richer picture of Robinson the man, much more alive and interesting than the portrait of the conservative patriarch, and will provide a basis for a better understanding of his work. Even though after 1911 Robinson’s pattern of life, with the exception of his trip to England in 1923, was pretty much limited to New York, Peterborough, and Boston, he had more interests and activities than are generally known. There were, for example, music and theatre on a regular basis, as well as frequent social affairs and fellowship. Over the years he had responsibilities in
connection with the MacDowell Colony. For a time he was on the Board of Editors of The Book League of America. And throughout his life, there were his letters, his primary means of reaching out and keeping in touch with his many friends and acquaintances.

Robinson's correspondence was both diverse and extensive. We have, if not a daily record, certainly a weekly record covering a period of forty-five years. He was in more or less continuous correspondence over a long period of time with all of his close friends and with many associates, among them: Esther W. Bates, Craven L. Betts, George Burnham, Joseph S. Ford, James and Laura Fraser, John H. Gardiner, Hermann Hagedorn, Lewis M. Isaacs, George W. Latham, Louis and Jean Ledoux, Percy MacKaye, Mrs. MacDowell, Josephine Preston Peabody, Lilla and Thomas Perry, Laura E. Richards, Mowry Saben, Ridgely Torrence. In addition he wrote numerous letters to others, many of them writers and critics, such as Lucius Beebe, William S. Braithwaite, Witter Bynner, John Drinkwater, Arthur Davison Ficke, Herbert and Jean Gorman, Amy Lowell, Mabel Dodge Luhan, E. C. Stedman, Louis Untermeyer. With each one he played a somewhat different role. Here are a few samples:

Robinson the critic:

Anything can be done [with] words if we have the most proper patience and humility, meantime working like the devil. . . . I may as well say here that your new departure into chants and such like seems to me to be a dangerous mistake. They may be fun to write, but they are surely the devil to read—and a cruel waste of Oxford type. (To Hagedorn, 7/26/12)

Robinson, officer of the MacDowell Colony Association and confidant of Mrs. MacDowell:

I met Mrs. Elinor Wylie—one of the few real poets now writing in this country—and learned . . . that she wishes to go to Peterborough this year . . . . If you can possibly make room for her, I hope you will do so, both on her account and on account of the place. Anyone who knows about contemporary American poetry will recommend her, if you think any further recommendations necessary. (To Mrs. MacDowell, 3/11/22)

Robinson the investor and sudden capitalist (after Tristram):

I'll let you draw $9000 for me from the Bowery Bank, but you needn't be afraid of my doing anything wildcattish with it, unless you call NYC a summer wildcat. (To Lewis Isaacs, 4/10/32)

Robinson the humorist:

I am feeling pretty good for a fellow with so much of his future behind him. (To Hagedorn, 6/8/12)

English coffee is a pernicious curiosity, and the bread is used largely for building material. (To C. L. Betts, 9/24/23)

I . . . was delayed in Boston for treatment of a dying canine. . . . My mouth now is full of crowns and tombstones—a sort of Westminster Abbey—except that there aren't any crowns in W. A. (To C. L. Betts, 6/12/33)
Robinson, man about town:

Say Saturday evening, if you have nothing better to do. We will have deep brained sonnets for a couple of hours, and then go out to some hellish resort for a hot scotch or a dish of beer. Why not dish of beer as well as dish of tea? (To C. L. Betts, 3/15/00)

I will meet you on Friday, for dinner, wherever you say provided it isn’t at that infernal back yard in Tenth Street. After dinner we might go to some roof garden or may be to the brass band orgie at the Saint Nicholas. (To Ridgely Torrence, 6/24/02)

Robinson about to be Special Agent of the Treasury Department:

I bought a Derby Hat ten days ago, and I think that is the real cause of my apparent depression. When I paid for the damned thing I said to myself Is this the end? . . . All I am afraid of is the empty hours in an office. I had five months of that in Cambridge. (To C. L. Betts, 6/6/05)

Above all, what comes through in these letters, in the interplay of his various roles, is the picture of Robinson, man and poet, striving to use his talent to create the magic that makes great poetry unmistakable, poetry that is individual, contemporary, and timeless.

Bridgewater State College
Bridgewater, Massachusetts