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E. A. Robinson Unbends for Academe

by LOUIS J. BUDD

The reticence of Edwin Arlington Robinson was well known though, it more and more appears, his friends and protectors may have overstated the strength of his aloofness, his habit of presenting an impassive face to the public. In February 1922 two strangers found it fairly easy to thaw him out and even entice him into talking about his own poetry. The record of their “warm” visit casts a doubt also on the judgment that after 1920 Robinson’s life had become “prematurely gray and autumnal.”

To be sure, this particular visit as well as the report of it had features that limit its typicality. Its details were set down by A. Gayle Waldrop, a graduate student in journalism at Columbia University who was also trying to carry off a set of interviews with leading New York City preachers. Furthermore, he may have been tempted to accent the positive for his mentors back home. As for Robinson he may have been softened up by a worthwhile and dignified chance to help his reputation—a matter he had lately come to regard with a practicality that almost looked like ambition. In fact he was probably opening up not to Waldrop but his companion, Albert Shipp Pegues, Chairman of the Department of English and also Dean at Southern Methodist University and, still more important, colleague of Professors Jay Broadus Hubbell and John O. Beaty. Whatever the motives involved, the happy result was that Robinson commented on some of his poems that still interest us and confided his opinion of several of his “popular contemporaries.”

Robinson had already been forthcoming when Hubbell first approached him for permission to reprint some poems for the purpose of discussing them in An Introduction to Poetry, which Hubbell and Beaty would publish in September 1922. In giving his approval on 20 December 1921 Robinson had demurred: “I can not swear that ‘O for a poet’

2. From Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas, Waldrop had come to do graduate work at Southern Methodist University in Dallas and had served as an instructor in the Department of English. He would later join the faculty of the School of Journalism at the University of Colorado. The part of Waldrop’s letter that I omit states that he expects to publish his interviews with New York preachers in the Dallas Morning News. My efforts to get in touch with Professor Waldrop and his family have failed. I am grateful to Jay B. Hubbell for many factual details.
3. Published by Macmillan it went through at least ten reprintings before the revised edition of 1936, which in turn was reprinted at least five times and as late as 1945. In “Robert Frost,” (Duke University) Library Notes, No. 47 (1977), pp. 8-9, Hubbell observes that An Introduction to Poetry was “at once an anthology and a treatise on the art of poetry” and that it “included a large number of poems by

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appears to me as representative. It is one of my earliest experiments, and therefore I shouldn't be sorry if you were to find something that you like better." Also, his letter would close with characteristic humility: "Whatever you may do, I should appreciate very much your interest in my work, and your apparent faith in it—or in some of it, which is all that one can ask. I am particularly glad that you like The Dark Hills."

Presumably, Hubbell had indicated his very high estimate of Robinson's art. An Introduction to Poetry would acclaim "The Dark Hills" as "perfect in conception and phrasing" and "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford" as "not only one of the finest dramatic monologues ever written" but "also the best characterization of Shakespeare ever written in verse." Hubbell and Beaty's text would go on to generalize, "Edwin Arlington Robinson is the pioneer of living American poets and the greatest of them all. He is, in our opinion, a more painstaking artist than any other living poet" (p. 462). As yet Robinson had heard few such superlatives from university circles, if only because American literature and contemporary writing got little show in the curriculum of departments of English.

So Pegues and Waldrop had special entree into Robinson's privacy. Gratefully and promptly Waldrop set down a long account of their visit:

Monday 2/5/22

Dear Mr. Hubbell:

Thanks to your including Mr. Robinson in your anthology, and to the publication of his letter in the Campus, which Miss Hemke was so kind as to send—Dr. Pegues and I enjoyed an hour in his company last Wednesday. And now I can delay no longer writing you the long intended letter.

Somehow I can't think of Robinson without thinking of Browning's How It Strikes a Contemporary. He seems aloof, reserved, just a bit lonely in the isolation of his nature; he has a piercing set of eyes, how they seemed to drill into my mind as he took his time to answer a question—I could not help feel that there was depth in the probing, yet not unkindly eyes; he lives in an apartment sorely in need of re-papering, of general housecleaning—and what a glorious room he had, all topsy-turvy, books, cigarettes, pipes, clothes, an oil stove, various incongruous pieces of furniture. But he, with a poise few of us could attain in such circumstances, precise in his dress, and in his thoughtful speech. He looked exactly like the portrait of him, save only for the presence of a vest.7

living poets... quite an innovation" in 1922. Also, he confesses that "we did not at first realize just how important the book would seem to living American poets who were trying to overcome both the indifference to poetry on the part of the general reading public and the hostility of older literary critics and professors of English." Robert Frost, for example, was sensitive about the fact that it included only two of his poems as against six (and part of a seventh) for Robinson.

4. The letters to Hubbell are in the Jay B. Hubbell Center for American Literary Historiography, Manuscripts Division of the Duke University Library. Hubbell and Beaty did not include "Sonnet" ("Oh for a poet—for a beacon bright") in their book. Indeed, Robinson's letter to Hubbell of 12 April 1922 thanked him for the "changes you have made in your selections from my poems."

5. Waldrop scrambled his dating; the first Monday in February of 1922 fell on the sixth. His letter is in the Hubbell Center; I have omitted the last part, which has no bearing on Robinson. Probably, Robinson was still living with Seth Ellis Pope in Brooklyn at 810 Washington Avenue.

6. The "Preface" of Introduction to Poetry refers to Marie D. Hemke as a member of the English Department at S.M.U. The Campus was the student newspaper there; the Robinson letter which it published may well have been the one to Hubbell dated 20 December 1921.

7. Assuming that Waldrop intended to say that Robinson was not wearing a vest, the portrait referred to is probably not that used in the first Collected Poems (Macmillan, 1921). Perhaps Waldrop
It was slow work starting out—but soon the talk was warm and living. He talked of other American and of English poets, he told of his own work when questioned, and was interested in hearing Dr. Pegues’ experience in reading his poems aloud.

At one time he was spontaneously retrospective—after autographing our volumes of his poems. (Yes, we haven’t grown beyond that—we remember our Jo’s Boys.) He talked in a wistful, winning way of how he felt when he saw the volume of collected poems—representing thirty years of his life. And then again, his writing for fifteen years for about fifteen persons. Perhaps he thought me impertinent when I asked him if he was not greatly discouraged at times—but I am glad that I asked. Here is his answer—No, I was not discouraged. There was a faith within me that made me believe in my work.—I can’t forget that part of our talk, and were I to write up the story for a paper, I think I would feature that reply.

The Shakespeare poem was in his mind for eight or ten years—and what we think a remarkable work he says is a “first draft.” Dr. Pegues asked if he had not been influenced greatly by Browning in writing his dramatic monologues—to which he said in substance—The poet is least of all able to tell. I leave that to my critics.

After saying that he often told people that they might accept their own interpretation of his poems as well as his, he said that The Man Against the Sky meant this—Life cannot be explained on materialistic grounds.

From inference I do not think he regards Amy Lowell highly—or for that matter any of the popular contemporaries. Edna St. Vincent Millay, he sees real promise in. Masefield’s early works, Dauber, The Everlasting Mercy, The Tragedy of Nan, he loves. But of the later work,—let this story suffice. He has heard that Mrs. Masefield shuts John up, locks him in his room each morning until he writes so many lines. And Mr. Robinson is inclined to agree that this is the case.

Just now Mr. Robinson is working on a “novel” in blank verse, to be about four thousand lines long. We hung expectantly silent, hoping for more details but he only told us that after it was finished he was going to get away from the worry of editors and publishers who expected poems written to order!

I think Mr. Robinson appreciates greatly an acknowledgment of the value and the beauty of his work. He said in half a laughing way that he supposed were he Edgar A. Guest he would receive many letters of appreciation—but that the people who read his work were not given to expressing their feelings. I liked him for the way in which he said this as well as for what he said. So much for the attempt to convey. the intangible, the inapprehensible. At least, I hope I have made known that I was charmed by the spirit of the man.

Robinson stayed cordial toward the outlying camp of his admirers. In 1924 when the Texas Review turned into the Southwest Review and Hubbell became its editor, he was quick to send Robinson its first (or October) number. Despite Waldrop’s report that Robinson yearned to “get away from the worry” of persons who “expected poems written to order,” Hubbell tried his luck. On 3 November Robinson answered: “I have at present nothing that you could possibly use and . . . I have long since given up trying to write to order—as I have had to say recently to several other editors who have been good enough to ask for

had in mind the photograph later used as a frontispiece in Emery Neff’s study (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1948); it is labeled as “at the time of Collected Poems” and is signed as Copyright 1920.

8. Much of Chap. 3 of Louisa May Alcott, Jo’s Boys and How They Turned Out! A Sequel to Little Men (1886), is devoted to the ways in which the public intrudes upon authors; heaviest reproof is directed at the “autograph-fiend now rampant in the land.”

my work.’” Going beyond his habitual courtesy he recalled “our corre­spondence in regard to the poems . . . used in your Introduction to Poetry [which Hubbell had sent to him late in 1922]—a book that I have enjoyed greatly.” After apologizing for not having expressed his appre­ciation much sooner and also protesting that he could not “imagine my not doing so,” he closed, “With many thanks, I am / yours very sin­cerely.” It seems clear that he had found his dealings with the academic critic, at least when personified in Jay B. Hubbell, to be both pleasant and gratifying.

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